



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday afternoon, May 27, 2020

Day 21

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Cooper, Hon. Nathan M., Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills (UCP), Speaker
Pitt, Angela D., Airdrie-East (UCP), Deputy Speaker and Chair of Committees
Milliken, Nicholas, Calgary-Currie (UCP), Deputy Chair of Committees

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Allard, Tracy L., Grande Prairie (UCP)
Amery, Mickey K., Calgary-Cross (UCP)
Armstrong-Homeniuk, Jackie,
Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UCP)
Barnes, Drew, Cypress-Medicine Hat (UCP)
Bilous, Deron, Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview (NDP),
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Ceci, Joe, Calgary-Buffalo (NDP)
Copping, Hon. Jason C., Calgary-Varsity (UCP)
Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (NDP)
Dang, Thomas, Edmonton-South (NDP)
Deol, Jasvir, Edmonton-Meadows (NDP)
Dreeshen, Hon. Devin, Innisfail-Sylvan Lake (UCP)
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Glubish, Hon. Nate, Strathcona-Sherwood Park (UCP)
Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP)
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Kenney, Hon. Jason, PC, Calgary-Lougheed (UCP),
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Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UCP)
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Luan, Hon. Jason, Calgary-Foothills (UCP)
Madu, Hon. Kaycee, QC, Edmonton-South West (UCP)
McIver, Hon. Ric, Calgary-Hays (UCP),
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Turton, Searle, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain (UCP)
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Williams, Dan D.A., Peace River (UCP)
Wilson, Hon. Rick D., Maskwacis-Wetaskiwin (UCP)
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UCP)
Yaseen, Muhammad, Calgary-North (UCP)

Party standings:

United Conservative: 63

New Democrat: 24

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Dach
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Singh
Smith
Yaseen

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, May 27, 2020

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Good afternoon, hon. members. *O Canada* will be performed by Brooklyn Elhard, a member of the Minister of Transportation's team. In observation of COVID-19 public health guidelines outlined by Dr. Hinshaw, please refrain from joining us in the language of your choice.

Ms Elhard:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: I think we can all agree that perhaps we should never sing again.

Please remain standing. Hon. members, I'd like to take a moment to pay tribute to former members who passed away since we last met.

Mr. Ralph Sorenson
March 27, 1927, to May 15, 2020

The Speaker: Ralph Sorenson served in the 17th Legislature, from 1971 to 1975, as an Alberta Social Credit member for Sedgewick-Coronation. In his maiden speech Mr. Sorenson spoke of the importance of developing and enhancing rural life. This commitment was reflected in his years he spent organizing an annual charity auction in support of numerous local charities and foundations. In recognition of his service to the community Mr. Sorenson was awarded many honours, including the Queen Elizabeth II diamond jubilee in 2012 and the Senate of Canada's 150th commemorative medal in 2017. Mr. Sorenson was the father of former Member of Parliament for Battle River-Crowfoot from 2000 to 2019, the hon. Kevin Sorenson. Mr. Sorenson passed away on May 15, 2020, at the age of 93.

In a moment of silent prayer and reflection I ask you to remember Mr. Sorenson as you may have known him. Rest eternal grant unto him, O Lord, and let the perpetual light shine upon him. Amen.

You may be seated.

Statements by the Speaker

Clerk of the Assembly

The Speaker: Hon. members, I would like just to take a very brief moment. It's my honour and privilege to make a brief announcement today. Our very own Clerk has recently and officially been designated as a member of Queen's Counsel. Please join me in congratulating the ninth Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, Ms Shannon Dean, QC, on her achievement.

Legislative Assembly Response to COVID-19

The Speaker: Hon. members, you may have noticed as you entered the Chamber today that there are some additional tables at either side of the Chamber. They are part of our continuing social

distancing practices here in the Chamber. There are baskets for tablers to deposit their tablings in.

Prior to continuing with the daily Routine, I'd like to just lay out some of those changes for you. I want to just inform you of these modifications of certain practices that are going to be implemented in light of the COVID-19 emergency. The following measures are being implemented to reduce the handling of House documents.

With respect to tablings I would ask that members bring their tablings to one of the two tables that have been positioned here at the doors of the Chamber. Upon the completion of your tabling you can place it into the basket on your own, and that will prevent the LASS from needing to do that.

Concerning bills, following introductions, copies will continue to be delivered to myself, the Speaker, and the table. Additional copies will be placed on the two tables that are at the rear of the Chamber. Should you wish a copy delivered to you, I ask that you do so by indicating a show of hands, and the LASS team will be happy to provide you with that.

Regarding amendments moved in Committee of the Whole, at second reading and third reading, and in any other instance, a security staff member will continue to retrieve the original amendment and copies from the member and deliver the amendment to the Speaker as well as the table and the respective House leaders. Should you require an amendment upon its introduction, please do so by indicating a show of hands, or the additional copies will be split on either side of the House should you require them.

I hope that these will assist us in the ongoing debate and deliberations here in the Chamber.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North has a statement.

Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Eid Mubarak. I rise today to recognize the festival of Eid al-Fitr, which was celebrated by Muslims across Alberta this past weekend. As Ramadan came to a close, Muslims across Alberta and around the world bid farewell to the holy month and prepared for Eid, the festival of breaking the fast.

COVID-19 has changed how we celebrate, but that did not stop people from participating in Ramadan and Eid festivities. Over the past month I attended virtual iftar events with a variety of groups from Calgary and Edmonton. Just last night I had the pleasure of joining my colleagues and community members for an online Eid al-Fitr celebration. Mr. Speaker, these festivities and communal gatherings are essential for communities of faith. As we pass new milestones in Alberta's relaunch, more and more people can start to safely come together.

Last week stakeholders from many faiths joined a telephone town hall with the Premier and Dr. Deena Hinshaw to hear how our strategy will impact their ability to gather and pray. People are eager to join once again with their brothers and sisters in prayer and in worship. For many worshippers the highest priority is protecting each other. Faith leaders and their congregations can find more information in the Guidance for Places of Worship document, which is available online.

Thank you to everyone who respected the public health recommendation and kept Albertans safe. I hope that next year Eid will include communal prayers at our local mosque and traditional food and sweets shared amongst friends.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and Eid Mubarak to everyone here.

The Speaker: Eid Mubarak to you as well. I hope the sweets will be back next year myself.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Government and Official Opposition Policies

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently while out for a ride, I ran into two men who recognized me and told me that they were both occupational therapists and had been deeply demoralized by the announcement of cuts and layoffs in health care late last year, but when they saw a video of a statement I made in this House standing up for health care workers, it gave them hope. “We just wanted to let you know,” they said, “that what you do matters.”

That meant a lot, Mr. Speaker, because that’s exactly why I ran for office. I’d watched a Conservative Party in power for over 40 years become arrogant and dismissive of the public. I’d seen how demoralized so many Albertans had become, disengaged, feeling they had no way to be heard or power to effect change, and I wanted to change that. I wanted to show that politicians could represent constituents over party, that the voices of Albertans could be heard and represented in this House, and I believe that in the four years that we were in government, we proved that true.

1:40

But in less than a year this government has brought entitlement and arrogance roaring back, going even further than any government before them in seizing unchecked power to grind Albertans under their heel. They’ve acted swiftly and brutally, with a condescension and antagonism that’s made it clear their intent is to confuse, intimidate, and demoralize Albertans into silence and compliance.

But, Mr. Speaker, we in the Official Opposition are here to make sure that does not happen. For a year now we stood in this Assembly to represent the voice of those Albertans, to counter this government’s misinformation with truth, to remind Albertans that they don’t have to knuckle under in compliance while this government attempts to dismantle everything they value about this province, to affirm that no government is above accountability, to demonstrate that Albertans can fight back.

And while this government tries to dismiss its critics as irrelevant, says that they mislead Albertans, and uses its power to silence them and sends waves of overpaid issues managers to shout them down, we’ll continue to stand up for Albertans and let them know: you don’t have to take this, you don’t have to accept it, you have every right to speak up and criticize your government. *Illegitimi non carborundum*: don’t let them grind you down.

Ralph Sorenson

Ms Lovely: Mr. Speaker, I’m saddened to rise in the House today and tell you about the passing of former Social Credit MLA Ralph Sorenson. It happened on May 15 at the age of 93, after his battle with cancer. Ralph Sorenson served in the Legislative Assembly of Alberta from 1971 to 1975 and as a member of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Speaker, this hurts as Ralph was a good friend of mine and a solid supporter. I remember the night before the election. Ralph was instrumental in putting together a breakfast for me in Killam. Spirits were high that day, including Ralph’s. Those who knew him enjoyed his dry wit. He rarely let out a laugh, but it was clearly displayed in the twinkle of his eye. Our thoughts are with his son, former Conservative MP Kevin Sorenson, Ralph’s wife, Jean, and the rest of his family.

Mr. Sorenson grew up working hard on the farm, and he enjoyed playing baseball and hockey. Ralph attended Prairie Park school

and Killam high school. All of his free time when he was young was spent outdoors hunting, trapping, and playing sports. At an early age he put his trust in Jesus and was baptized in Sylvan Lake. Mr. Speaker, the Sorenson family was awarded the century farm award in 2007. This achievement was a proud moment for Ralph and his family.

Politics was a lifelong passion. Ralph was a founding member of the Reform Party and served on the local constituency board for many years. Almost every day he faithfully tuned in to watch question period as he had a keen interest in Canadian politics. Writing was a pastime that he relished. Unbelievably, he wrote daily in a diary for the past 50 years. He left a legacy of history, news, weather, and anecdotes in those journals. His final entry was on May 12.

Mr. Speaker, I’m so honoured to celebrate the life of my friend Ralph Sorenson. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford has a statement to make.

Bill 1 and Indigenous Relations

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I heard it in February first and now again, that the government decided to bring back Bill 1. Indigenous people in Alberta feel unfairly targeted by the bill and rightly believe that it will impact their rights. The government did not consult Alberta’s indigenous peoples when hastily putting forward this piece of legislation. Now with this bill back before the House, those indigenous partners don’t even have the ability to come here to express their concerns given that this building is closed to the public because of the COVID-19 state of emergency. I will raise their concerns for the public record.

Marlene Poitras, the regional chief for Alberta for the Assembly of First Nations, has said, quote: this bill will serve to erode individual rights, unfairly target indigenous peoples, and has no place in a democratic society. End quote. Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde stated, quote: people should never be criminalized for standing up for their rights; the use of force against peaceful people is a violation of human rights, First Nations rights, and our rights under the United Nations declaration of the rights of indigenous people. End quote. And he said, quote: we will never achieve reconciliation through force. End quote. Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation chief Allan Adam said that the bill will turn Alberta into a, quote, police state province. End quote. Undemocratic legislation, police state: these are serious concerns, Mr. Speaker, being expressed by important partners, and I’m sure they’re merely the tip of the iceberg.

When I was Indigenous Relations minister, I was proud to work together with these very same individuals in the true spirit of reconciliation. The UCP appear to be posed to move away from commitments made by the Premier and the minister in this House to involve our indigenous partners in all matters that affect them. This is clearly unacceptable. The government needs to rescind Bill 1 and start by consulting with Alberta’s indigenous peoples. If not, I fear the damage that will be done for many generations to come.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Cross.

Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I’m proud today to rise to recognize the end of Ramadan and the celebration of Eid al-Fitr this past Sunday for more than 1.6 billion Muslims world-wide. During the month of Ramadan Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset and

practise discipline, self-control, sacrifice, and patience. The practice of fasting encourages compassion to those who don't have the same blessings that many of us do as we sit each night to a full dinner table with our families.

In years past, Mr. Speaker, the month of Ramadan was spent with family, friends, and neighbours. It was an opportunity for observers to strengthen their faith through family gatherings and group prayers. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way that Muslims across the planet celebrated Ramadan this year, but the spirit and intent of the celebration remained intact. This pandemic has meant so many things for Muslims in Alberta. It meant there would be no large gatherings. It meant there would be no group dinners. It meant that for the first time in modern history the mosques were closed to the public.

All was not lost, however. Despite the challenges of COVID-19 it brought Albertans together. We learned that Albertans are resilient and highly adaptable. We learned how to entertain our children in new and creative ways while keeping them safe. We took more time to check on our elderly parents and call on our neighbours. We took the time to deliver groceries to those who were unable to get them for themselves. We took time to self-reflect. We learned how to be humble. We came to terms that life is precious, that life is fragile. In a lot of ways, Mr. Speaker, the united sacrifices of Albertans embody the elements of what this holy month is really about. Self-sacrifice, reflection, and charity are all fundamental components of Islam and goals that all Muslims strive to achieve.

As Eid and Ramadan come to an end for the year, I'd like to take a moment to recognize the contributions of Muslims in Alberta. Eid Mubarak to all.

Thank you very much.

Provincial Parks

Mr. Schmidt: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's parks and recreation areas are special places for my family. I fondly remember camping with my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins at Buck Lake and in Kananaskis when I was a child. We enjoyed fishing and boating as well as hiking and biking. My own children have enjoyed similar experiences at Wabamun Lake and Pembina River. Our time spent in parks has been some of the best time that our family has spent together.

Thousands of Alberta's families are like mine. They enjoy spending time at their favourite provincial park or recreational area, and this summer many Albertans were looking forward to enjoying the parks with their families because parks are some of the few places that are open during the pandemic. But when the people of Alberta arrive at their favourite park this summer, instead of seeing a sign that says "welcome," they're seeing signs that say "closed" or "for sale." Why? Because this UCP government is intent on destroying our public spaces to save a pittance.

Mr. Speaker, one of the things that the pandemic has highlighted is the lack of public spaces for people to enjoy. With nowhere else to go for fun and exercise, our parks and trails are very crowded spaces. With a pandemic that will likely be with us for a long time, now more than ever we need to expand our park system, not reduce it. By investing in parks, the government of Alberta could create much-needed jobs now and provide an enduring legacy of protecting Alberta's beautiful natural areas for the enjoyment of our people for decades to come.

I've heard from thousands and thousands of Albertans that this move to close or sell off our parks is wrong. We will always fight to protect our parks because we owe that to the people of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-East.

Local Businesses

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to talk about the importance of supporting our local businesses. Airdrie-East is home to many business owners and their employees, and now more than ever they need our support. Our city has faced tough economic times before, but nothing like the simultaneous onset of a global pandemic, recession, and the crash of oil prices world-wide. As we enter the phase 1 of Alberta's relaunch strategy, it is important in all corners of the province to rally in support of our local economy. Airdronians and Albertans are hard-working and entrepreneurial, and if we continue to pull together and support local businesses, that spirit will never relinquish.

1:50

Local businesses play a significant role in supporting Airdrie's, Rocky View county's, and Wheatland county's economic development and maintaining the well-being of our community. Mom-and-pop shops have demonstrated great resilience during this pandemic, but they are certainly suffering. They need our support, and we need them.

Mr. Speaker, in many cases local entrepreneurs are our families, our friends, and our neighbours. They are the backbone of our communities. Companies often support our sports teams, schools, and community events. They have wholeheartedly given their support to us in the past, and now it is time for us to pay it forward. These enterprises are finding new and innovative and safe ways to serve the community, and they will do whatever they can to accommodate you.

I am very proud to say that there have been a number of local initiatives coming out of my constituency such as Shop Local: Airdrie on Facebook and Things that are Open, that was spearheaded by the city of Airdrie. Wheatland county hosts a weekly call with their local businesses, sharing ideas. These campaigns will have a lasting impact on the success of small businesses throughout Alberta and the livelihoods of those employed by them. Let's support them by buying their goods, using their services, and promoting your favourite local spot on social media.

Next time you're out and about, remember to stay safe, stay healthy, and shop local.

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition has the call.

Environmental Monitoring and Reporting

Ms. Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Alberta Energy Regulator suspended environmental monitoring across the oil and gas industry. This suspension came as a shock to many, including the former chief scientist of the AER, who described the changes as risky and unjustified. She said, quote, this could affect environmental health and human health. Can the Premier please explain to Albertans why he thinks that it's safe enough to give a haircut or serve food to 50 people or, say, work in a meat-packing plant, but somehow it's too risky to protect the very health of Albertans and their environment?

Mr. Kenney: Well, as is so often the case with questions from the Leader of the Opposition, that was embedded with falsehoods, Mr. Speaker. The truth is that the Alberta Energy Regulator is an independent quasi-judicial regulatory body that makes its own decisions without direction from government, as was the case in this

particular instance. I would direct her questions to the AER. My understanding is that all of their environmental standards remain in place. The professionals at the AER felt there was apparently a conflict between some public health orders and some regulatory mandates. They therefore provided for a period of flexibility in terms of reporting, but all the reporting requirements and regulatory standards are still . . .

The Speaker: The Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Premier knows full well that there are multiple tools that the cabinet can use to direct what the AER is doing.

Now, in their directive the AER cited public health orders as part of the reason to make these changes, but when the media followed up with our chief medical officer, she had no idea. Dr. Hinshaw wasn't consulted. The indigenous people who desperately rely on this monitoring were not consulted. Mr. Speaker, this safety double standard defies logic, and Albertans can see right through it. Why is the Premier using this pandemic to abandon his obligation to protect our air, our land, and our water?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, first of all, my understanding is that, according to the AER, they believed that there was an apparent conflict between public health orders generally, not particular public health orders but public health orders generally, and certain reporting requirements. But monitoring continues. For example, water monitoring continues completely unaffected. It's unfortunate that the NDP would try to give the public a misinterpretation of that fact.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, this Premier is the king of misinterpretations of certain facts.

This lack of environmental oversight is exactly why major firms like BlackRock and Norges Bank are pulling their investments. Here's Morningstar's analysis: "The Alberta government has become the oil patch's own worst enemy." Not Warren Buffett, not the so-called green left zealots. The Premier is the problem, Mr. Speaker. Why won't the Premier tell the AER to reverse this decision, put people back to work, protect our environment, and restore our reputation?

Mr. Kenney: Let's be clear. What the opposition leader is asking is for the government to violate the independence of a regulatory body, which operates under its own enumerated statutory authority. She's asking for us to politicize the process, just like she asked us to ignore the advice of our regulatory bodies and our chief medical officer multiple times in the last several months. The NDP is all about politicizing everything all the time rather than respecting the judgment of our independent agencies and expert officials.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Official Opposition for her second set of questions.

Support for Small Businesses Affected by COVID-19

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our economy is reopening, and I know we're all anxious for things to get back to business as usual, except business as usual is a long, long way out. Surveys show that over half of Alberta's small businesses are struggling to get back on their feet, but so far all this government has offered is more debt and more deferrals. By the end of this month they'll even be on their own for PPE. Why won't the government do what so many other provinces have done, step up, and provide small businesses with the support they need to survive, not debt, not deferrals but real help?

Mr. Kenney: Again, Mr. Speaker, the NDP leader's question is based on a number of false assertions. In fact, the government has provided overall close to \$13 billion in support for Alberta families and job creators, including, for example, paying half of the WCB premiums for small and medium-sized enterprises this year, reducing the property tax burden, providing for billions of dollars of additional liquidity measures being delivered in part by Alberta Treasury Branches for small and medium-sized businesses. We're looking at additional measures to take in the days to come.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, increased liquidity measures is a code for debt, as I said. With the WCB deferral what we know is that this helps small businesses the least, and the Premier knows it.

Now, businesses have been asking for help reopening, help buying PPE, help with utilities, help paying insurance, help making rent. The jobs of more than 750,000 Albertans depend on the survival of these businesses. To the Premier. You talk about being open for business, yet you're one of the few Premiers who's refusing to step up with anything other than debt and deferral. Why is that?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, I have to correct the Leader of the Opposition. In fact, the WCB action taken by the government is not simply a deferral. Actually, the government is absorbing half the costs of premiums specifically for small and medium-sized businesses at a cost to the Treasury of some \$350 million. I know that for the NDP a third of a billion dollars is barely walking-around money, but that is real relief for job creators. I think, most importantly, this government took the lightest touch in North America with respect to public health measures, and we're getting back to work more quickly than anywhere else.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, they also took the lightest touch in terms of actually consulting with small-business owners. Instead, all we seem to have here is the Premier waiting for Justin Trudeau to come to his rescue. Ironic.

Businesses need help with commercial rent, but instead all they have is a broken program that both commercial tenants and landlords say is broken, and rent is due in just five days. The CFIB, the Alberta Chambers of Commerce, Restaurants Canada, the Retail Council of Canada are all calling for a commercial eviction ban. To the Premier. We need you to bring forward a ban on commercial evictions before June 1. We'll work with you to make that happen. Why won't you do that?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, the government of Alberta has announced that we will participate with the federal government in the federal-provincial commercial rent subsidy program. That constitutes a \$67 million fiscal commitment on our part. We understand that the program is flawed and that the criteria need to be broadened. We're working with the government of Canada on that as well as additional measures to support small and medium-sized businesses, but we would call upon commercial landlords to show smart flexibility at this time. There's no point in closing the doors of a business if they can't rent it out to . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has a question.

Paid Sick Leave during COVID-19 Pandemic

Ms Gray: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier this week the federal government highlighted the need to work with provinces to offer 10 days of paid sick leave to all Canadian workers. Here in Alberta we have seen first-hand the devastation that can happen when workers don't have access to the supports that allow them to stay home when

sick. The ability to stay home when sick protects the person, their colleagues, and the community as a whole. We got no answer from the Premier today when asked by our leader the same question. To the Premier: do you or do you not agree that paid sick leave provides protections for both workers and the community?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Labour and Immigration has risen.

2:00

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. As the hon. member knows, this announcement was made just earlier this week. We are now looking into what the details are of what the federal government is proposing so that we can determine whether or not we want to go along with this. I'd like to point out that we took action early on, in the beginning of this pandemic. We provided changes to the employment standards for job-protected leave. Then we came out with the emergency isolation support, which was exactly for the same purpose that the member is asking for, so that people can get some money when they stay home, and we used that as a bridge for the CERB, which was in place shortly thereafter.

Ms Gray: I remember this minister's announcement. He announced 14 paid sick days and then didn't deliver on that.

COVID-19 has put all Albertans' lives at a standstill. However, rent, groceries, bills, and insurance still need to be paid. No one should have to choose between taking a day off work due to illness or paying those mounting bills. This government needs to remember the Albertans doing essential work, like maintaining our food supply. Many of them do not have paid sick days. Can this government make their stance clear on the 10 days of paid sick leave proposal from the federal government, or will we continue to see it drag its heels?

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

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are putting measures in place and continue to put measures in place to support all Albertans through this pandemic. As indicated by the Premier earlier, we have committed over \$13 billion to support Albertan families and businesses. As indicated, we will assess the federal program, and then we will be thoughtful about our response. We'll get back to all Albertans and the member opposite in the coming weeks.

Thank you.

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, the solution that is currently being discussed on a national level is to have the federal government help offset the cost of paid sick leave, especially during the pandemic. Our caucus has repeatedly argued that we need more supports for business as well as workers if we're going to successfully keep the curve flat. There's a proposal in front of us today that supports workers and supports business. There is money on the table for our province. What is this Premier's hesitation?

Mr. Copping: Mr. Speaker, as indicated, we will take a thoughtful approach and understand what the federal government has put on the table. Again, this was just announced earlier this week. We are supportive of Albertans and workers. Our \$13 billion commitment demonstrates that, and we'll continue to look at various options as we move forward through this pandemic.

Bill 202

Ms Ganley: Mr. Speaker, last year this Premier and his government fired the very Election Commissioner who was investigating his

own leadership race. This was a gross attack on the rule of law. The Premier never had the opportunity to speak to the bill, so I would like to give him the opportunity to speak to a bill that I have put forward, Bill 202, that will prevent such an abuse of power from ever happening again. Premier, for the record, will you support this legislation?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, it's ridiculous to continue to watch the NDP practise this politics of fear and smear. That party and that member were part of allegations associated with the issues that she raises, that they brought all the way to the Ethics Commissioner and asked for an investigation, an investigation that then took place, and the Ethics Commissioner then reported back to this place and cleared everybody that was involved and said that those allegations were completely false. That hon. member continues to then come to the Chamber and try to bring forward those false allegations. Shame on her, and shame on the NDP for continuing with that behaviour.

Ms Ganley: The bill, Mr. Speaker, is intended to correct problems with the Conflicts of Interest Act that resulted in that finding.

I intend to go before the committee tomorrow night on Bill 202, where I will make the case that it is necessary to prevent further misuses of power by this Premier. I believe the committee would benefit greatly from the Premier's perspective on this bill. Premier, I intend to send you a letter to attend this committee as one of my stakeholders. My question here and now is: will you attend and answer before Albertans?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, at the start of that question that hon. member then asked the Premier of Alberta to interfere with a standing committee of this Legislature. Our government does not do that. We respect the role of private members of this place within that process. We have a committee that is in place, and that member asking the Premier of Alberta to interfere in that process is ridiculous, something that he would never do and something the leadership of this caucus would never do. I look forward to seeing the debate that takes place in that standing committee tomorrow and the results of the recommendations from the standing committee to this Legislature and, ultimately, the debate that will move forward on that piece of legislation.

Ms Ganley: Mr. Speaker, Premiers and ministers are regularly called before committees of the Legislative Assembly. That allegation is absurd.

Premier, the rule of law is a concept you claim is important to you. You rely on this principle on a number of matters, but a principle has no value when we only ascribe to it at a moment when it's convenient. Premier, if you're unwilling to come before the committee and discuss this fundamental breach of the rule of law, then I have to ask: how do you intend to rely on this principle in the future?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member continues to bring forward the falsehood that there has been some sort of breach when it comes to the rule of law. In fact, that member and that caucus continue to abuse, from my perspective, the Ethics Commissioner's and other officers of this Legislature's time even though they have been repeatedly shown to be false allegations. It is ridiculous that they continue to do that. It is completely inappropriate, a waste of time within this space . . .

Ms Ganley: Point of order.

Mr. Jason Nixon: . . . something that I fundamentally reject. We will let the committee of the Legislature do their work because we

respect democracy in this place, and, unlike that member when she was a cabinet minister, we don't interfere in standing committees of the Legislature.

The Speaker: Hon. members, a point of order has been noted at 2:06.

The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont has a question.

Edmonton's NHL Hub City Bid

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we know, Edmonton has been shortlisted to be chosen as a hub city for the 2020 NHL playoffs. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic this possibility has raised a lot of excitement but has also raised a number of questions from the public and members of this House. As this House knows, Alberta has led both nationally and internationally in our pandemic response. Can the Premier tell this House why the government is in support of Edmonton being chosen as the hub city?

Mr. Kenney: I thank the member for the important question. Mr. Speaker, we have worked constructively with the Oilers Entertainment Group on a joint proposal to the National Hockey League to have Edmonton designated as one of the hub cities for the balance of the NHL playoffs. This would help to create hundreds of jobs that are desperately needed in Edmonton's hospitality sector. It would also provide incalculable free marketing opportunities to rebrand Alberta for the relaunch of our tourism industry in the future. It would also highlight the tremendous success of Albertans in having had the best public health response to the pandemic of any NHL city in North America.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Premier. Mr. Speaker, COVID-19 is still a very real threat faced by our province and health care system. There has been continued guidance from the chief medical officer of health to follow physical distancing guidelines to prevent further outbreaks or spread of COVID-19. What action will this government take to ensure that the health and safety of Albertans remains the highest priority?

Mr. Kenney: An important question, Mr. Speaker, and we only support this bid because it's been offered in close collaboration with the chief medical officer of health, who has written to her federal counterpart, Dr. Tam, as well as to Commissioner Bettman endorsing the Oilers' proposal, in part because we have the unique infrastructure amongst NHL cities in the Ice District, where we could accommodate hundreds of players and support personnel in a quarantine zone around the most modern and best NHL arena in the league with two ice surfaces and a perfectly secure environment.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are many Albertans and businesses that rely on sports and entertainment to drive their business. With public health measures in effect, how will the Premier ensure that there is economic opportunity for businesses to be successful within our new normal?

Mr. Kenney: An important question. That's another reason why I think this bid is important. It would, I think, give people a sense of renewed optimism. Not only would it create hundreds of service industry jobs in the short term and an enormous brand opportunity for Alberta in the long term, but I think part of what we need to do now is to rebuild people's morale and a sense that we are moving back to something more like normal. Edmonton hosting this major

international sporting event, I think, would be a critical message of renewed confidence, particularly for businesses here in downtown Edmonton.

The Speaker: I think the real question for the Premier is: will he be cheering for the Flames or the Oilers?

COVID-19 Outbreaks at Meat-processing Facilities

Mr. Dach: Mr. Speaker, the tragic loss of life and the worst outbreaks of COVID-19 at meat-packing plants in North America have made it clear that worker safety needs to be the number one priority. The workers at Cargill and JBS took every precaution to keep their co-workers and families safe. It's a tragedy that their employers failed to do the same, and it's a tragedy that this government assured workers that their workplace was safe when it clearly was not. Will the minister of labour and the minister of agriculture stand in this House and admit that they failed the workers of Cargill and JBS, and will they apologize?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Labour and Immigration has risen.

2:10

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First, I'd like to express my condolences to the families that were impacted and who lost loved ones due to COVID-19 in Brooks and also to all Albertans who have lost loved ones during this pandemic.

I can say to the hon. member across the way that we take health and safety extremely seriously. Within days of the letter arriving in my office indicating concerns about meat packing, particularly at Cargill, we had inspectors on-site. Those inspectors were on-site prior to the shutdown, during the shutdown, and we've had three inspections since then. We're focusing on keeping workers safe.

Mr. Dach: Mr. Speaker, given that Benito Cassada, a worker who tragically lost his life at Cargill, told his family after becoming sick that there was no distancing between workers and many other measures being advised by the chief medical officer were not being followed and given that even five days after Benito was admitted to the hospital a minister told Cargill workers on a telephone town hall that the work site was safe, can the minister explain to his family why he ignored and dismissed the concerns being raised by the workers rather than taking steps to address them?

Mr. Copping: Mr. Speaker, we took steps to address that. As indicated previously, within two days of concerns being raised by the UFCW, we had inspectors on-site and not only inspectors from occupational health and safety; Alberta Health Services and Alberta Health were looking at the measures in place. We've done two inspections during the close-down period to ensure that it was safe when it was reopened, and since that point in time we've had three inspections there. We worked with the UFCW locally, with the local health and safety committee, and we also brought the health and safety committee with inspections to be able to ensure that they're working well.

Mr. Dach: Your goal is clearly to sell hamburger, not protect lives.

Given that this government's shameful failure to protect workers at meat-packing plants led to hundreds of infections and given that JBS saw hundreds of infections and is currently being investigated by occupational health and safety and given we've heard that some JBS workers have been sleeping in their cars because they fear they might bring the virus home to their families, what specifically is the minister of agriculture doing to address the safety concerns of these

workers? If he can't be specific, is it because he plans on ignoring their fears again?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, the chief medical officer of health has reported that one of the key learnings from the terrible outbreaks at the meat-packing plants is that, in many cases, the workers live in relatively dense housing arrangements with others and that people were unable to self-isolate. That is why the government, through the advice of the chief medical officer, provided support for hotel housing at government expense for people who had to self-isolate either because they were symptomatic or had tested positive, and that support continues to be available.

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

COVID-19 and Seniors' Housing

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What we have seen unfold over the past few months is heartbreaking: 104 continuing care facility residents have died due to COVID-19 in Alberta. That's three-quarters of the deaths in our province. It's so tragic. This UCP government took more than seven weeks to listen to our call to provide surge funding for struggling seniors' facilities operators. To the Minister of Seniors and Housing. The families of seniors in these facilities are left to wonder: what if? Minister, why did it take you more than seven weeks to act on our call for surge funding?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes. Both the hon. Minister of Seniors and Housing and I met with many of the folks who are involved in congregate living facilities, everyone in the continuing care spectrum from long-term care all the way to the seniors' lodges throughout the province, for us to be able to meet with them and understand what their cost pressures were. As we were understanding from them, after they started to understand the March actuals and where the cost pressures were, what the difficulties were with the staffing, what the difficulties were with sourcing PPE, we worked with them and provided that package then that fit their needs.

Ms Sigurdson: Given that it took this government seven weeks to act on our call for surge funding and the deaths that I spoke of were preventable and given that the UCP has been slow to act on this and many other recommendations put forward by our opposition, to the Minister of Seniors and Housing. It is my sincerest hope that there are no further delays getting these funds to seniors' facilities. When will the long-awaited funding be in the hands of seniors' facilities? Please be specific.

Mr. Shandro: Well, I understand, Mr. Speaker, that it's this week. Actually, our office spoke to some of the folks in the continuing care spectrum as recently as today for us to understand whether the money was getting into their hands. I'd remind the House as well that on top of the \$170 million that we announced, we also previously announced \$7 million a month to increase the staff levels and to top up the wages of the health care aides throughout the province. This was done because we met with and continue to meet with often the operators of these facilities to understand their cost pressures and meet their needs.

Ms Sigurdson: Given that staff shortages were identified as one of the many challenges in fighting the spread of COVID-19 and given that the UCP dragged its feet in acting on our call to provide hazard pay for workers in seniors' facilities, again to the Minister of

Seniors and Housing. Health care aides say that they have not seen any wage top-up or increased staffing yet. It's been over a month. What's the delay, or is this just another UCP broken promise?

Mr. Shandro: Maybe because the hon. member is reading, she didn't hear the answer that I provided in the second question, but this week, Mr. Speaker, the health care aides are receiving those top-ups. It's retroactive to April 20. They're receiving it for the top-ups, to be able to address the absenteeism issue for the HCAs as well as their retention recruitment issue. That top-up of the wages is being received this week, and I understand as well that the \$170 million that we announced to be able to support the facilities throughout the system – they are receiving it this week as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drumheller-Stettler.

Fair Deal Panel Report Citizens' Initiative Referendum Legislation

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On May 16 the Fair Deal Panel submitted its final report to the government. While it is understandable that our government has had to delay the release of the report, Albertans need to know: what are the panel's findings and recommendations? Given that my constituents and many Albertans are very eager and invested in the conclusions of the report and given that western alienation has continued, even heightened during COVID-19, creating a greater sense of urgency for a fair deal, to the Premier: can you please inform this House when the Fair Deal Panel report will be released?

Mr. Kenney: I thank the Member for Drumheller-Stettler for the thoughtful question, and I'm glad to see so many Albertans are keen to see the contents of the Fair Deal Panel report. Let me thank the tens of thousands of Albertans who participated in the extensive public consultations about Alberta's role in the federation and how we can maximize our leverage to get a fair deal within the federation. I am pleased to inform the House that the government will release the full Fair Deal Panel report as soon as the state of public health emergency abates. That will be on June 15. The government does not intend to renew the state of public health emergency and will then proceed to release the panel report.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drumheller-Stettler.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta has been a major net contributor to the federation through equalization for decades. One would have thought this would have been an opportune time to help support the very industries and province that have been supporting all Canadians, yet there's been a disappointing, almost insulting response from Trudeau on supports for Alberta's oil and gas and agriculture industries. To the Premier: how will our government stand up to Ottawa and ensure that Alberta gets a fair deal in Confederation and that our industries receive the supports that they need?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, let me just offer the rationale for why the report was not released immediately upon receiving it a couple of weeks ago. The government remains single-mindedly focused on the public health crisis and the twin economic crises which we are facing. As we begin to return to our normal pace of dealing with a broader range of issues in this place, we think it will be absolutely appropriate and necessary to release the report. In the meantime we are taking measures, including the motion before the House to create a chief firearms officer for Alberta, the creation of an Alberta parole board, and the work that the Finance minister continues to

undertake to get a lifting of the cap on the fiscal stabilization program.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Premier. Given that our government was partly elected on the basis of giving back a voice to the people and given that our government has as recently as February talked about introducing a citizens' initiative referendum law, giving Albertans a process and opportunity to have the question most important to them on a ballot regardless of the position of any government, to the Premier: when and how can Albertans expect the citizens' initiative referendum law to be introduced?

2:20

Mr. Kenney: These are important democratic reforms that will ultimately put grassroots Albertans in the driver's seat when it comes to major issues, also empowering them through recall to hold members of this Assembly to account. Mr. Speaker, we will keep our platform commitment to submit to a standing committee of the Legislature the issue of recall, to come back with sensible thresholds to trigger recall petitions to require by-elections for MLAs who've broken their word or lost the confidence of their constituents. As well, we will bring forward to that committee a draft citizens' initiative referendum law and in the fall of next year hold a Senate election here in Alberta.

The Speaker: I might just provide some caution to the hon. Member for Drumheller-Stettler. There may have been some difficulty connecting the third question to the first question. Perhaps we can have the supplementals be more associated with the question that they are initially asking.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Postsecondary Education Funding

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday we revealed that since taking office, this government is tracking nearly 3,600 job losses from the postsecondary sector in what is turning out to be one of the largest mass layoffs in Alberta's university and college history. This number is 1,000 per cent larger than what the government predicted in Budget 2020. Can the minister please explain why the actual number of layoffs is tracking to be 1,000 per cent larger than what he said that it would be in the first place?

The Speaker: The hon. the minister of postsecondary education.

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I actually won't comment on how the member opposite came up with the numbers, because who knows how they did? I can assure you that those numbers that they've presented are completely wrong, and I'm not sure exactly how the members are coming up with those figures. That is to say, though, that we are working on improving our postsecondary education system. We have to ensure that we have a sustainable model for not just now but, more importantly, for the future so that we can continue to ensure that we are educating a competitive workforce to keep our economy strong.

Mr. Eggen: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that indeed the numbers we presented yesterday were very low considering that we excluded COVID-related temporary layoffs and that these are layoffs that came from Budget 2020, when this government went on a full-bore attack on postsecondary education here in this province for the second budget in a row, and given as well that universities and colleges will have to implement reopening guidelines that were set

out recently without an infusion of emergency funding, will the minister please explain to the House how he expects universities and colleges to undertake restructuring when staff has been laid off . . .

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the member opposite will know, we have one of the most expensive postsecondary systems in the entire country, and we are working very closely with our presidents across our universities and colleges to get the cost of our system down because, as I mentioned a moment ago, it is critical and essential that we ensure that we have a sustainable postsecondary system. We can't just look at the problems of today; we need to be future minded. We need to ensure that we are educating a highly skilled workforce and that we have appropriate access and space for future generations, and we need to make difficult decisions now to ensure we get there.

Mr. Eggen: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that the performance-based funding model is now based on unrealistic economic expectations and is based on pre-COVID conditions and the economic downturn and given that, really, this performance-based mechanism is just a thinly disguised way to cut funding to postsecondary colleges and universities, would the minister like to perhaps do what his Conservative counterparts in Ontario are doing and immediately shelve his plan to impose this new performance-based funding model for postsecondary education?

The Speaker: The Minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. During these difficult times it's essential that we give our institutions flexibility, and we've already done that. We were slated to introduce the performance-based model on April 1, and we are now looking at a June 30 implementation because we wanted to ensure that our institutions have the flexibility that they need to respond to the pandemic, can ensure that students are completing their semester on time. That's the priority. And, yes, we have to continue to remain focused on the future and continue to work on developing a model that will drive enrolment, that will help to ensure that we're building a sustainable system, and that's exactly what we're going to do.

Campus Saint-Jean Funding

Ms Renaud: This government is cutting Campus Saint-Jean's funding to the bone, which poses a severe risk to Alberta's vibrant francophone community. As a direct result of the vicious cuts from this Minister of Advanced Education, the campus is looking at reducing the number of courses offered in September by 180, which equals 44 per cent. Will the Premier explain why he's standing by this attack on the francophone community by not protecting the funding of Campus Saint-Jean?

Mr. Kenney: M. le Président, évidemment ce gouvernement appuie entièrement la communauté francophone en Alberta, y compris les services postsecondaires. C'est vrai que nous faisons les économies dans toutes les institutions postsecondaires, y compris le Campus Saint-Jean. Ce n'est pas à cibler la communauté francophone mais à trouver les efficacités pour les impératifs budgétaires.

Ms Renaud: Given that the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta president said that these cuts would lead to the community being unable to instruct their children at the primary or secondary

level, est-ce que le gouvernement soutient, avec la communauté francophone, inverser les réductions énormes, et sinon, je veux savoir pourquoi le gouvernement ne valorise pas la cotisation des communautés francophones en Alberta?

Mr. Nicolaidès: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite I think needs to do a little bit more work and get some of the facts straight. The government of Alberta does not provide direct operational funding to Campus Saint-Jean. The government of Alberta provides operational funding to the University of Alberta, and the University of Alberta, of course, makes the operational decisions with respect to its individual campuses and its individual faculties. We're working very closely with the French Canadian Association of Alberta and, as well, Campus Saint-Jean and the University of Alberta to work through this situation.

Ms Renaud: Ce n'est pas vrai.

Campus Saint-Jean est la seule institution de langue française en Alberta où la demande a sauté 40 pour cent depuis 2014. L'histoire américaine française en dit que forcer les réductions énormes, comme l'UCP sont en train de faire, va compromettre l'existence de la faculté Campus Saint-Jean. Est-ce que le premier ministre de l'Alberta va soutenir la communauté francophone en Alberta et inverser les réductions avant qu'il soit trop tard?

Mr. Kenney: M. le Président, à nouveau, comme le ministre a dit, le gouvernement ne décide pas le budget du Campus Saint-Jean. C'est décidé par l'université de l'Alberta. Évidemment, nous exigeons les économies de toutes les institutions postsecondaires, qui dépensent beaucoup plus que les autres institutions postsecondaires partout au Canada, parce que nous faisons face à une crise fiscale en Alberta, mais c'est tellement important pour ce gouvernement à continuer les services en français, y compris ceux du postsecondaire Campus Saint-Jean.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-South East.

Calgary Board of Education Review

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On May 21 Grant Thornton's financial cost management and governance review of the Calgary board of education was released. Given that our government is committed to ensuring that school boards provide high-quality educational programming to their students and given that Albertans are spending record amounts on education, can the Minister of Education explain why she felt the CBE warranted a third-party review and touch on some of the key findings and areas of concern identified by this review?

The Speaker: The Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. The reality is that regardless of whether it was the PCs, the NDP, or the UCP in government, this board has the systemic inability to prioritize the students. One of the most notable concerns in the audit is that the CBE's board places more of an emphasis on protecting themselves than on focusing on their broader mission of supporting our students. This is unacceptable, and the CBE has six months to get their house in order.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-South East.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister. Given that the report on the CBE made 19 recommendations on areas including board procedures, governance practices and decision-making, effectiveness of financial management and

internal control processes, funding and allocation of resources, control of public information and specific cost centres, can the minister comment on some of the key recommendations made in this report?

The Speaker: The Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member is correct. I have issued 19 recommendations that the CBE must fulfill. I believe that all are equally important, but for the sake of this House I want to highlight the need for the CBE to hire a governance instructor. There are systemic issues plaguing the CBE, including a significant lack of trust that led to the resignation of one of their board members. By hiring a governance instructor, the CBE will have an opportunity to work with them to sort out their priorities and ensure that they start putting our students first. The ball is in their court.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again, Minister. Given that on May 21 the minister also issued a ministerial order directing the CBE to improve its governance and financial management by implementing the 19 recommendations contained in the report, can the minister comment on further actions that she is considering and that may be taken if the board is unable or unwilling to prioritize students by implementing these recommendations by November 30?

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. I want to be crystal clear. The CBE has six months to get their house in order. I believe this is a fair and reasonable timeline for the CBE to fulfill all of the 19 recommendations. If the CBE is unwilling or unable to prioritize their students and implement these recommendations, I will be left with no other choice but to dissolve their board of trustees.

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

Education Funding for Students with Special Needs

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Education continues to dismantle supports for students with special needs. As school districts begin passing their budgets, we see the true impact of the UCP's heartless cuts. Calgary public schools are collapsing their special-needs early education programs from 16 locations to only three. That means long bus rides to and from school, struggling families getting less support, and it looks like this will be the end to inclusive education. Why did this minister cut funding for kids with special needs, destroying decades of progress towards truly inclusive education?

The Speaker: The Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the question. This is absolutely not so. Program unit funding remains a vital part of our new funding model, and the kindergarten students that have special needs continue to receive supports under the new specialized learning supports grant. We continue to recognize the importance of early intervention. Alberta continues to have the earliest intervention program in all of Canada, supporting children two years of age and eight months. Under the old model students

saw a decline in their supports as their education progressed to the higher grades. This does not happen in the new model.

Ms Hoffman: Given that cutting supports for six-year-olds to instead cutting supports for five-year-olds makes no defence and no logic, in my mind, Mr. Speaker, and given that this minister loves to pass the buck in Calgary, let's talk about Edmonton Catholic. Edmonton Catholic is collapsing their 100 voices program from 63 locations to only nine. Given that these are real cuts that are affecting 850 students and their families, the minister's talking points aren't changing reality. Will the minister stand up and finally admit to these families that she's cutting supports for students with special needs? We all know it. Just admit it.

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, the reality is that our changes close the gap, ensuring that no child will fall through the cracks as they transition from kindergarten to grade 1. Eligibility for PUF has not changed, and the funding cap remains at \$25,000 per student. Students with severe learning delays will continue to receive the funding that they need at the same level as they do today. All students with special needs will receive supports.

Ms Hoffman: It's way, way less, then, Mr. Speaker.

Given that these cuts are just the beginning of the attack on funding for our youngest learners with special needs, cutting wraparound services like allied health supports in schools and other supports that make inclusive learning possible, and given that families understand that this government and this Education minister are destroying inclusive education, not the school districts that she keeps trying to blame, will the minister drop the spin for once and admit that students with special needs are the target of many of her cuts and reverse them immediately?

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, as a former rehabilitative practitioner who also had a brother who was born with Down syndrome, I totally understand the value of early intervention. What I have said all along is that we are going to continue to support our most vulnerable in our schools, including with PUF funding and the specialized learning supports grant. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre is the only one with the call.

Alberta Health Services Review

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Now, on February 3 the government released the Ernst & Young performance review of AHS. It's a 220-page plan to tear down the public health care system, which served Albertans so well through this pandemic, and replace it with a much more American-style system like that which has failed our neighbour to the south so badly. Regardless of one's opinion of the report, the government gave AHS 100 days to come up with an implementation plan. I imagine the pandemic may have caused some delay. We're seeking clarification. Has the government received the AHS plan, and on what date will that plan be released to the public?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Here we are in the middle of a global pandemic. We've been spending months responding to this pandemic, and here in question period today we've had two questions on this pandemic. Instead, the hon. critic is using his time, his 35 seconds, to say things that are completely untrue.

We campaigned on working with AHS to do a performance review, and we did that throughout 2019. It was our ability to work with AHS, to make them a higher performer because we know that high performers are going to be more cost-effective. This is our way of working with AHS, and AHS was happy to have this review and happy to receive the recommendations.

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

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Now, given that the question was on when the report will be released, I'd appreciate if the minister would answer it.

Given that on page 98 the report calls for 77 emergency departments to be considered for closure and given that the Premier has been busy chasing dozens of rural doctors out of emergency rooms in communities like Sundre, Stettler, Rocky Mountain House, and Pincher Creek, will the government abandon this idea, and if not, when will it table its plan to reclassify and consolidate rural ERs and emergency services and let us know which communities will be seeing reduced hours or loss of services?

Mr. Shandro: Mr. Speaker, we have not yet received the report. The report was due to come back to us – sorry. Not the report, but an implementation plan. After the report was received by the end of 2019, AHS was given until May 13 to be able to provide their implementation plan to us. That was delayed because of the response to COVID. AHS needed to take the time to worry about how many hospital beds we had dedicated to COVID rather than the implementation plan. The plan is due to us on August 13. Again we hear the hon. member saying things that are not correct at all. I would note, by the way – sorry.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for that answer.

Given that the Ernst & Young report also calls for the mass privatization of continuing care facilities that are currently owned and operated by AHS and given that not only here in Alberta but across Canada we've seen far more COVID-19 outbreaks and far more severe outbreaks in private facilities than in public ones, will the member opposite commit today to abandoning this awful plan to trade Alberta seniors' health and safety and sell it to the highest bidder for one-time cash to put on the government's books?

Mr. Shandro: Mr. Speaker, again, let's talk about facts. The report came back and recommended that 20 per cent of our beds in continuing care – these are the beds that are operated by AHS and by Covenant – that AHS at least look into whether or not the two subsidiaries of AHS, CapitalCare and Carewest, should be something that was sold from AHS. We're waiting for AHS to do that work, for them to look at that recommendation and come back to us with their recommendation on whether or not that should be something that they proceed with. I look forward to that report.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie has a question.

Economic Relaunch Strategy

Mrs. Allard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans' efforts in adhering to public health guidelines have helped limit the spread of COVID-19 and flatten the curve of infection in our province. Because of their efforts we've been able to start gradually reopening the economy, which is welcome news to many Albertans. Further,

Alberta business owners and employers play a significant and important role in the success of our relaunch. However, some businesses may need additional guidance to navigate this unprecedented reality they face. To the Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Tourism: what resources are available to businesses that are unsure of the requirements and may be worried about the potential consequences of an oversight in their operations?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Tourism.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Member for Grande Prairie for the question. Our government launched biz connect, a website that has a variety of resources available to businesses, as part of relaunch, including general workplace and sector-specific guidelines for every industry that is able to open as part of stage 1. We also have a constantly updated, commonly-asked-questions section on the website and have provided a link for businesses to submit questions if they continue to be unsure after reviewing the guidelines.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Mrs. Allard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister. Given that employee and customer safety is a top priority for employers and small-business owners across our province and given that the Canadian Federation of Independent Business found that 53 per cent of businesses want assurance that it is safe to both work and shop again, and further given that the biz connect e-mail has been overwhelmed with questions and requests for clarification from business owners, to the same minister: what plans does your ministry have in place to ensure regular communications with businesses regarding safety and risk level as they operate during the COVID-19 pandemic, and where can businesses connect with assistance if they have an urgent issue that requires immediate attention?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Tourism.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again to the member for her question. I have participated in, moderated, and spoken at round-tables and town halls attended by thousands of businesses since we announced our relaunch. As part of the upcoming stage 2 of relaunch, I am continuing to reach out to businesses and industries to keep them updated and seek their input. As for the biz connect website, we have more than doubled the number of staff responding to questions on the website in order to address the high demand, and we expect to have all inquiries answered soon.

2:40

The Speaker: The Member for Grande Prairie.

Mrs. Allard: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker and to the minister. Given that the physical distancing requirement of two metres between people continues to be in place and given that some businesses in phase 1 of our relaunch, like dentists or hairdressers, need to work in closer proximity to their clients in order to provide the service, which further underscores their need for personal protective equipment such as face masks, and further given that some businesses are operating with reduced cash flow and reduced capacity and may not be able to afford the PPE or source adequate supply, to the same minister: does the ministry have any recommendations for these businesses to ensure timely procurement and affordable PPE?

The Speaker: The minister.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and once again thank you to the member for her question. The biz connect website contains guidelines for the use of PPE, both for specific sectors and in the general workplace. It also has links to PPE suppliers, which provides businesses with a centralized location to order PPE for their business. What is most important for businesses to remember is that, ultimately, ensuring physical distancing within their locations and ensuring that proper sanitation takes place are the most important steps that must be taken to ensure safety.

The Speaker: The Member for Calgary-Currie.

Calgary Flood Resilience

Mr. Milliken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In light of the recent flooding in Fort McMurray and increased water levels in the Elbow River, protections against flood disasters are top of mind for many Albertans, including myself. Several of my constituents in Calgary-Currie have expressed concern over the preparedness of the city of Calgary and, honestly, our government to respond to flooding. Can the Minister of Environment and Parks please update this House, my constituents, and all Calgarians on the status of the Calgary flood resiliency upgrades?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, we've committed \$69 million to the city of Calgary through the Alberta community resilience program to complete high-priority projects, including the downtown and Bonnybrook waste-water treatment plant flood barriers, the Sunnyside stormwater project, the separation projects, and the upgrades to the Glenmore dam. We are stepping back and having a look at how far we've gone with flood mitigation and where the next work should take place. However, to ensure that approved projects can see their way through to completion, Budget 2020 includes \$10 million in the ACRP program for Calgary alone in this coming fiscal year.

The Speaker: The Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Milliken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister. Approval for projects at any level of government can take time, and there are often many regulatory loopholes that projects have to jump through, especially at the federal level. Given that there is an obvious need to build flood protection infrastructure in Alberta and to preserve the integrity of our rivers and our waterways, to the same minister: what is our government doing to advocate for the Springbank reservoir project to ensure it gets federal approval and finally gets built?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, the province remains committed to building the Springbank dam. We have appointed an independent expert to assess the regulatory process and provide regulators with the information that they need. We are also undertaking significant consultation with First Nations and indigenous communities as well as the city of Calgary and the county of Rocky View. It's a complex process, as the hon. member said, but this government is working hard on that, and we can assure Albertans, through you to Albertans, Mr. Speaker, that unlike the NDP, we won't fail at the process. We'll continue to work hard and get it done.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Milliken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that high-priority flood mitigation projects are important to Calgarians, especially after the devastating 2013 Calgary flood, and given that certain

projects such as the Springbank off-stream reservoir are caught in a boondoggle of federal decision-making or lack thereof, to the same minister: what is being done to keep Calgarians safe from flooding before the Springbank reservoir project gets federal approval and is built, or in the event that perhaps federal approval is never even given?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, flood resilience continues to be a top priority of this government. In addition to the provincial grants I already talked about earlier as well as the new higher gates on the Glenmore dam for the city of Calgary, the province is continuing with its plans to build, of course, the Springbank dam, Mr. Speaker. We're also moving forward with assessing the feasibility of a dam and water storage on the Bow River going forward, and just recently we've provided the city of Calgary with updated flood maps to continue to work together, the province and the city, to be able to protect the people of Calgary and southern Alberta when it comes to floods.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in 30 seconds or less we will return to Members' Statements, but before we do that, a very happy 40th birthday to the hon. the Government House Leader.

Members' Statements

(continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview has a statement.

Seniors' Social Inclusion and Access to Technology

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Physical distancing is keeping us safe from the deadly coronavirus; however, social isolation is a significant problem for seniors at the best of times. Many seniors are unable to receive the supports they once did and engage in the activities that they enjoyed. Inclusion and social connectedness are key to good health. Albertans with robust networks of social and community support have better physical and mental health outcomes. Sadly, about a quarter of seniors report that they don't have someone to count on.

Socially isolated seniors have an increased risk of cognitive decline, depression, anxiety, suicide, falls, increased blood pressure, and cardiovascular disease. They also experience a reduced quality of life and well-being. There is a way to mitigate these negative incomes, especially during the pandemic. Supporting seniors to have access to the Internet as well as devices such as iPads is essential to being connected to loved ones. Being able to see friends and family goes a long way to creating a sense of belonging and inclusion. Seeing a grandson play, chatting with friends, and problem solving an issue with a compassionate loved one is a much richer experience with both visual and auditory aspects.

Many seniors have access to the technology I'm talking about, and they're better able to manage their well-being during the pandemic. However, other seniors, about 25 per cent, do not have this due to limited financial resources. In 2020 all citizens, and certainly seniors, have a right to this access. So much of our world is online that if we don't have access, we're missing out on a lot. Being included is a key element of connection with society. This connection enhances our well-being. It is time for the UCP to include funding for Internet and devices for all seniors. The Ministry of Seniors and Housing has a special needs assistance

program which funds many needed supplies for seniors; however, eligibility for funding does not include these devices.

The Speaker: The hon. the Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Tourism Week

Ms Rosin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to rise today to commemorate national Tourism Week. Alberta is blessed to encompass some of the most beautiful lands on the planet. There are many places that support the tourism industry, but there are few to whom it comes so naturally. While most locations pride their tourism industry on infrastructure, skyscrapers, shopping malls, museums, or other man-made attractions, here in Alberta our tourism industry is founded on the mere existence of our natural God-given beauty.

Being the MLA for Banff-Kananaskis, I know this full well. Between Banff, Canmore, Lake Louise, and Kananaskis Country, my riding welcomes millions of tourists every year. In fact, these towns welcome more tourists every day than they have permanent residents living within. Individuals, families, and dogs of every breed travel from near and far to witness first-hand the breathtaking scenery of the Rockies. Looking at the numbers, tourism contributed 127,000 jobs to Alberta's economy from 19,000 local tourism businesses and over \$8.5 billion in visitor expenditures. Tourism is an industry we should all be proud of.

COVID-19 has brought with it unparalleled difficulties. We've seen a loss of business and an economic downturn that rivals the Great Depression. The tourism industry has been disproportionately affected. This summer we won't see an influx of international travellers; instead, we'll need to rely on showcasing Alberta's beauty to our own citizens as we plan stay-cations. We'll remind each other that Alberta is our home, but it's also a province filled with wonder. So whether you celebrate from the mountaintops of Banff or the badlands of Medicine Hat, gazing up at the northern lights in Peace River or down at the fish below in Lake Minnewanka, from the Nikka Yuko Japanese garden or standing in the gulf of the big dinosaur, I hope that all members of this Assembly can join me today in honouring Alberta's vibrant tourism industry and the thousands of workers, employers, small-business owners, and entrepreneurs who support it. This year more than ever Alberta's tourism industry needs your support.

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to give notice of Government Motion 21 to be put on the Order Paper, that says:

Be it resolved that despite Standing Order 13(7), 16, and 32(4)(b), for the duration of the spring sitting of the Second Session of the 30th Legislature and to allow for the appropriate physical distancing within the Chamber during that time, all members may sit, speak, and vote in any seat that has not been assigned to them provided that they immediately relinquish that seat on the request of (a) the member who has been assigned that seat or (b) the Speaker, and be it further resolved that this motion take effect immediately upon passage.

2:50

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Transportation on behalf of the Minister of Energy.

**Bill 7
Responsible Energy Development
Amendment Act, 2020**

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to request leave to introduce Bill 7, the Responsible Energy Development Amendment Act, 2020, on behalf of the hon. Minister of Energy.

This legislation helps deliver on our government's promise to ensure that energy development in our province occurs in an efficient and environmentally responsible manner. It is vital for our government to restore predictability to the regulatory process without sacrificing rigour.

If passed, Bill 7 will strengthen the accountability of the Alberta Energy Regulator's application process by providing government with the authority to establish maximum timelines for the regulator to complete necessary reviews. Our government has consistently heard concerns from industry stakeholders about existing timelines and processes. These unnecessary delays leave industry searching for answers, Mr. Speaker, and discourage investment in the province, something we can ill afford at a time like this.

At the same time, this legislation will also help to ensure that the AER fulfills its obligations regarding fulsome consultation. It will help increase predictability across the review process, including for industry, indigenous communities, and other Albertans participating in AER-led consultations.

Bill 7 will be an important step towards enhancing our reputation as a leader in predictable and effective regulation. Mr. Speaker, this legislation will provide greater clarity and stability to our investment climate, which in turn will help attract much-needed new investment and further our province's economic recovery efforts.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 7 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there tablings?

Seeing none, I do have three tablings today. I have the requisite six copies of the following memos: from the Government House Leader, a memo regarding the revised 2020 sessional calendar dates, received in the Clerk's office on May 20, 2020; from the Clerk, a memo with the revised sessional calendar, sent to all members on May 20 at 5:10 p.m. with the calendar as enclosed; and a memorandum from my office, also dated May 20, to all members regarding the resumption of sitting, with the revised projected sitting date calendar for May 27 to July 2020.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the Assembly that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Mr. Copping, Minister of Labour and Immigration, pursuant to the Agrology Profession Act the Alberta Institute of Agrologists 2019 annual general meeting report; pursuant to the Engineering and Geoscience Professions Act the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Alberta 2019 annual report.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we are at points of order. At 2:06 the hon. opposition deputy House leader raised a point of order.

**Point of Order
Parliamentary Language**

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to begin as well by wishing the hon. Government House Leader a happy 40th birthday. Since I have rarely met an individual who seems to enjoy a good argument quite as much, I will consider this his birthday present.

Mr. Speaker, the point of order was called on the words support the "falsehood." I think that much ink has been spilled and much said in this place on the difference between lie and liar or saying that something is a lie versus saying that an individual is a liar. I feel that support the "falsehood" definitely seems to be walking that line. To set the context around this particular situation, this was on the third response to the third question, and it was my question. I had responded to the second response, in which the Government House Leader, who, I believe, is very familiar with the procedure in this place, had indicated that it would be somehow interference for a minister or Premier to be called before a committee as a guest or a witness. I don't think that's the case. I think we see that all the time, and, in fact, it estimates it occurs quite regularly prior to the government having changed that process, which actually was not an interference. It was a very open and transparent process.

I do intend still to invite the hon. Premier to appear at that committee. I hope that he accepts my invitation for reasons that I am obviously not permitted to mention in this place. The Premier did not have the opportunity to address Bill 22 in this place or at all in the media during the time which it was on the floor, Bill 22, of course, being the bill which in addition to relieving some folks of their pension also fired the Election Commissioner. I certainly don't think that was a falsehood.

The remainder of the question, Mr. Speaker, just so we understand the context, was about the rule of law. Specifically, it is, in my view, a concern that the rule of law has been violated in this case, and the bill is intended to address that. Now, certainly, the hon. Government House Leader has waxed philosophical about the decision of the Ethics Commissioner, which is true, but in this place it is the work of bodies such as this, the legislative body, to write laws, and in instances in which something which is mischief, something which upsets the public greatly, and clearly in this case the firing of the Election Commissioner did upset the public greatly and did upset a number of members of the legal community greatly, I think that that is an instance in which if that mischief – if something that we all look at and say, "That act was wrong" – is not caught by the legislation, then it is our job as members in this place to alter the legislation so that that mischief is in fact caught. And that is exactly, in this instance, what the bill intends to do.

The question was about that bill . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Official Opposition House Leader will know that *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, 494, would prevent a member from continuing debate through the use of a point of order. Sounds to me like that might be happening right now, but I'll allow you to get back to the point of order.

Ms Ganley: Mr. Speaker, I am perhaps simply anticipating what it is the Government House Leader is about to present. I anticipate that he is about to present findings from the Ethics Commissioner, and what I am simply trying to circumvent is his attempt to put forward an argument that that somehow makes it okay for him to refer to the statements I made or refer to me specifically as supporting falsehoods in this place.

Thank you.

The Speaker: I also anticipate that the ongoing debate will take place in this point of order, which, of course, would not be the proper use of a point of order.

But let's give the Government House Leader his birthday gift with the opportunity to continue that debate.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will refer briefly to the Ethics Commissioner's ruling, but not in the context that the hon. deputy House leader for the opposition seems to be referring to. My answers to the questions to her during that process were in regard to the fact – in fact, I'll even back up. Even in her point of order arguments she continued to present to the Chamber that some sort of mischief, I believe was the word that she used, had taken place or some sort of inappropriate process had taken place.

Mr. Speaker, I will just point out again that the Official Opposition did submit to the Ethics Commissioner several serious allegations – which are not up for debate today; I would agree with you on that – but the Ethics Commissioner did report back that 50 out of the 62 members that the NPD made serious allegations against had never even had any interaction whatsoever with the Election Commissioner and certainly should not have been drug through the mud during this process, and then of the remaining members that she says did have some interaction with the Election Commissioner before that bill was introduced, all were for insignificant matters.

The reality is that the Ethics Commissioner also reported on several other reports, to my point during that question, and I'll just use her words and then move on with the rest of the point of order. She says at the conclusion of another, from my perspective frivolous, investigation that was brought forward against the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, she says at the end of that, after she cleared that individual. She then goes on to say, "As well, given that Alberta is having a general election within the next year, I want to make it clear that I do not want Members filing complaints against other Members for the purpose of scoring political points," Mr. Speaker.

My points during the question: it's unfortunate that the NDP continues that behaviour was one; and, two, that by in any way saying that a member of this Chamber or a member of the government had done something inappropriate when it came to Bill 202, as she continues to allege inside the Chamber – that was a falsehood because the Ethics Commissioner has already cleared those members.

3:00

I also do not have the benefit of the Blues, but my recollection is that I was referring to the NDP in general and not specifically to the hon. member. But the hon. member is right. I am fairly familiar with procedure in this place. It would not be my intention to call the hon. member a liar but to point out the falsehoods. In fact, Mr. Speaker, even if I thought she was lying, it would not be my intention to call her a liar but to point out that the falsehoods of those allegations have already been proven false. You have the benefit of the Blues. If I in any way directly referred to the hon. member in a way that was lying, I will trust your judgment and be happy to withdraw that comment. My point again is that the NDP should stop with their frivolous investigations and allow the Chamber to move forward.

The Speaker: I appreciate you making the point. That's very clearly an ongoing continuation of debate.

I might just say that what I think we have here is a dispute of the facts around whether or not what was said or what wasn't said is a falsehood. I have provided caution in the past with respect to the use of the word "falsehood" and that the context of it may in fact be unparliamentary. I would agree with the hon. Government House

Leader that that was not his intention. However, he did say, "the hon. member continues to bring forward the falsehood," in which case I'm not sure that he needs to apologize, but he has said that he would, so he can do so now.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, I didn't say that I would apologize, but I did say that I would withdraw. But I'm also happy to apologize if my answer in any way implied that the hon. member was not telling the truth. I'm happy to withdraw that comment.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I consider the matter dealt with and concluded.

As a result, we are at Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

The Speaker: Hon. members, according to Government Motion 19 that was passed earlier today, we are in the middle of a debate on COVID-19, and there are a number of officials who have been invited into the Chamber. I would just ask for a brief set of patience from members as we get the officials situated, and we will proceed with the remaining 26 minutes that are allotted to the Minister of Health.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Legislative Assembly Debate on COVID-19

[Debate adjourned May 27]

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In anticipation as we work through the COVID-19 debate process, my sense from the opposition is that they would be in agreement with this, and I would like to test the House to see if I could receive consent from the Chamber for us to proceed past our normal closing time of 6 p.m. until the end of the COVID-19 debate.

The Speaker: For clarity's sake, hon. Government House Leader, the request that you're asking for is only to proceed past 6 o'clock to complete the COVID debate. We would not go to any other form of debate past 6 o'clock other than the COVID debate?

Mr. Jason Nixon: That is a hundred per cent the request that I'm asking of the Chamber.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: We are back on the COVID debate. There are 26 minutes remaining based upon the hon. Minister of Health's statement that he provided. I will offer the opportunity to the hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre to ask a question. [interjection] It might be your birthday, sir, but you're taking some liberties. I'm just teasing.

Every member only has up to two minutes to speak at a time. There are 26 minutes remaining. The hon. member for the Official Opposition will have his question, followed by a private member of the government caucus.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to start with discussing some issues around continuing care with COVID-19. Now, the single-site staffing rule: it was announced on April 10 that it would be put in place to begin on April 23. It was then put on hold on April 22, and to the best of my knowledge we still have not seen the full implementation of that single-site rule.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Now, I recognize that the minister has mentioned several times that there's been 95 per cent compliance on that. Recognizing that AUPE, for example, represents 13,000 HCAs across the province of Alberta, by those numbers alone 95 per cent compliance still means hundreds of workers that could still be working at multiple sites. So my question to the minister is: can you clarify, according to your own numbers, your own knowledge, how many care workers are in fact still working at multiple sites?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. As far as we are aware, the number is 100 per cent as of today. That's our understanding.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Minister. Just to clarify, then, you believe that you're at about 100 per cent compliance based on that. What is that based on? Is that based on reporting from the facilities, reporting from the unions? How has that information been acquired?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's reporting from within our own ministry. We have all of the employees in our own database. It's our own numbers from what we see in our own database, all the employees that are in the continuing care spectrum. That would be the folks, everyone from long-term care, the DSL 4s, who are in these contracted facilities, are in our database, and that's our understanding from our own numbers.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that clarification.

Continuing on questions around continuing care, we know that roughly 75 per cent of all of our COVID fatalities so far have been in continuing care facilities. I think that is something of reasonable concern to Albertans. I appreciate the clarification that was given earlier today, that you intend to broaden the review of the continuing care acts and the other attending pieces of legislation and regulation. Could you give us some clarity, I guess, as to: will there simply, then, just be a small addendum to that review, will there be a specific focus simply on the COVID-19 response, and will that be a clearly separate section of the report or simply something that the committee may touch on?

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, there are about 23 minutes left in this exchange.

The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The answer is that even before we decided to expand the scope of the review to include the system as a whole, we definitely did know, even during our response to the pandemic once it began in March and April, that we wanted to use this as an opportunity for us to learn from what has happened in our response to the pandemic in our continuing care facilities. Definitely. As well, I've spoken to the ministry as well as the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek on our opportunities to be able to work with those within the system to learn from our response to the pandemic and what we can do to be able to best protect the most vulnerable Albertans.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you, Minister. I can assure then, I guess, that our members from the

Official Opposition that have the opportunity to participate in that committee will certainly then look for the opportunity to have some specific focus on the response to COVID-19 and call appropriate witnesses and folks to help provide perspective on that.

Now, I just wanted to follow up, Minister, on your recent announcement of \$172 million to help enhance staffing, provide more cleaning supplies, and address lost accommodation revenue at long-term care facilities, designated supportive living facilities, and seniors' lodges across Alberta. You indicated this would break down to about \$14.2 million a month. Can you provide some detail on how you will be calculating the amounts that will be going to each specific facility? Will that be based on their numbers of current staff, numbers of staff vacancies, number of residents, or the overall capacity of the facility? Can you give us a sense of how those transfers will be calculated?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

3:10

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. Maybe just to clarify, the review began in 2019, so there is a committee that's already been appointed by the ministry. They've already begun their work starting in 2019. We have asked a government member to chair, and that is the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, but I'm sure that that hon. member would be very happy to sit down with the hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre to be able to get his submissions as well or that of his caucus.

When it comes to the specifics about how the \$170 million is going to be distributed to our contracted facilities throughout the system, it is on the basis of, first of all, the needs of each of these sites. They have let us know the PPE that they purchased and, for us to be able to help them, the PPE that they would have purchased on their own as they were starting to begin a response to the pandemic and their response to the pandemic in all of these sites. It starts with the PPE. It starts with their needs regarding staffing levels and the cleaning supplies that are needed for these facilities to be able to meet the guidelines and the orders that were provided by the chief medical officer of health. It's on a needs basis. They're working with the ministry and advising us on what each of these sites would have had in their cost pressures, and it will be on that basis that we will be providing the further funding to each of these 300 sites that are contracted in our continuing care system, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Orr: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the minister for providing many of these helpful answers. I would just like to ask briefly maybe if I could get his comments with regard to the modelling that was used as we began to approach the entire COVID reality. Many people have felt that it was very different than the reality that turned out, and, of course, models, even the scaled back ones, have been quite far removed from what actually occurred. Models are, in reality, 100 per cent predetermined by the data that's fed into them in the input, so many constituents have questioned those models to me.

I think it's led to somewhat of a loss of confidence, maybe even moral authority and the credibility of government and of officials when the models are so far out of touch with what actually happened. In some respects I think it has led to fear on the part of some people. For others, quite tragically, I think it's contributed to conspiracy theories. For sure, it's created a great deal of economic and social pain that has been sort of exercised as a consequence of some of these models. I guess my question is: how can we ensure that the models in the future will be a little bit more realistic to what

actually should happen or will happen, and what can be done to reduce the growing sentiment that future models will not be believable and therefore government will not be trustable? That's my real concern, I guess. How do we ensure the credibility and the moral authority of government in relation to models and the decisions that are made consequential to those models?

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would say this. Look, we're in the middle of a pandemic that none of us have ever seen before and a virus that none of us have seen before, including many of the medical and health professionals who are helping us with our response and developing a model, which we asked the ministry to develop at the beginning of our response. I guess it may have been mid-March. As we worked on developing this model, it did require a lot of different questions to be answered.

Just to use it as an example, how many days would a patient have to be staying in an ICU? How many days would a patient have to be in an acute-care bed for us to be able to determine what the capacity is that we're going to need? How many people are going to be as sick as that? We didn't know what would actually be the case here in Alberta.

As we tried to answer well over 100 different questions, we tried to start with the data that we had coming out of China because that's where the data was at the time, at the very beginning of our response to the pandemic. Then as the epicentres of COVID started moving west and went into Europe and then even, finally, into Canada, we started getting better and better data that we could use to develop the different scenarios that we had: the probable, the elevated, and then the reduced probable as well.

As we got data coming to Alberta, we saw Albertans responding to the pandemic much quicker, and I think that actually saved us. Dr. Hinshaw has said many times in her press conferences that if Albertans had not responded as quickly as maybe even another province in Canada like Ontario, like Quebec, we would have seen our probable or our elevated scenario. So it's actually because the health measures worked that we saw the reduced numbers that happened actually in Alberta.

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

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'd like to talk a bit about Bill 10, which was a bill brought forward by this minister to address issues under the COVID-19 pandemic. When we had the debate on Bill 10, we said clearly that we felt the bill was unconstitutional and undemocratic. Since then the government has been sued because of its unconstitutional nature by one organization, and another, Samara, a leading voice for good governance in Canada, has defined it as a poster child of government overreach during the pandemic. Now, we know the Premier has said that it will be modified at some point, but I want to know about your decision-making process, Minister, as this is your bill.

My first question. During our technical briefing with officials we asked them point-blank whether in their professional advice this bill was constitutional and whether it infringed on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Your officials refused to answer, invoking solicitor-client privilege. We then asked your ministerial staff, who could waive that privilege, whether the advice from officials told you this bill violated the Charter. Your staff froze. They wouldn't answer, and they promised to follow up in writing, and when they did, they invoked solicitor-client privilege. So here we are in this House. I want to ask you, the minister responsible and the client who

received the legal advice in question: did you ever, in any way, shape, or form, get advice from officials that Bill 10 was potentially unconstitutional and against the Charter of Rights and Freedoms?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The answer is no. Look, let's talk facts. Let's talk about Bill 10. Bill 10 did not substantially add any new powers to the government. The concerns that many Albertans have had that arise from our response to the pandemic arise from, for the first time, this province having to declare a public health emergency. This has not happened before.

Sorry. Is it part 2 that is communicable diseases in the Public Health Act? Part 3. Most people don't pay attention to part 3 of the Public Health Act at all. And many of the powers that are included in part 3 and in the Public Health Act, a lot of Albertans finally, when we did declare a public health emergency and they became aware of what was in the Public Health Act – some of those concerns that Albertans had with those sections in the Public Health Act stem from even before the Spanish flu. Some of these sections date back to even 1910, Madam Speaker. The clarification that we provided in Bill 10 was actually on the advice of the lawyers in the ministry who provide us with the advice, and it was actually on that advice that we proceeded with this very minor change.

But we do take the feedback of Albertans that they have a concern of what's in the Public Health Act, in particular in the communicable diseases part, in part 3. That's why the Premier has announced that there would be a select special committee of this Legislature, an all-party committee, for folks to be able to review in its entirety the Public Health Act and to be able to bring in witnesses and be able to report back to this Legislature on any future changes that this Legislature and that committee may be recommending this Legislature make. We look forward to being able to proceed with that committee being struck and those folks getting on with their work, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you, Minister, for your perspective on that. If I understand what you are saying, you are saying that lawyers within the Ministry of Health came to you and said that all of the changes which you put forward in this bill, including the change which took it from merely allowing you – well, I shouldn't say "merely." It's a pretty significant power you already had to amend or change any existing law. They came to you and said that you needed to change that to allow yourself and indeed any minister to have the power to create entirely new legislation without ever setting foot in this House, simply by a stroke of your pen, which is what outside legal opinion has said is precisely what that bill does. You are saying that that was a suggestion that was brought to you by your department and that you would not have proceeded with this if they had not suggested to you that that needed to be done.

3:20

Perhaps while you're answering that, Minister, you can clarify for us what precisely you have been able to do or you needed to do that you were not able to do or perhaps your lawyers came to you and recommended that you needed to do or would need to be able to do that you currently were not enabled to do by that specific piece of the legislation, not the other broader pieces that you spoke about from previous pandemics and that sort of thing. Let's be clear about this very specific issue, which again is not the conspiracy theories and other things which I have seen about this bill and, I agree, are

entirely false. There's nothing in here that provides for you to be able to force people to get vaccinated or anything along those lines. But you are facing a constitutional challenge specifically on this piece, so can you clarify that that's, in fact, what you were instructed that you needed to do by lawyers within your department and why? Specifically, what did you need to accomplish by giving that power to yourself?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I just want to clarify, first of all, that it was not advice from my ministry. It was advice by lawyers who are embedded in the ministry, but they are lawyers who work for the Justice minister and Solicitor General. They are within JSG. They report to that minister, not to me. But every ministry has lawyers from JSG who are embedded within each of our ministries.

Those lawyers did work with us. They pointed out to us that what the act previously said was that in a public health emergency a ministerial order could either delete or modify. Quite frankly, you can't modify a clause without actually changing something – sorry; adding something. Words have to be added to modify it. My interpretation actually was at that time that “modify” implicitly includes adding. But the advice of those lawyers was to make it more clear, to be able to make it more clear and, quite frankly, that some of the ministerial orders that we actually even proceeded with before Bill 10 actually passed in this Legislature actually needed to add to legislation for that legislation to be amended.

I would use as an example within my own ministry ministerial order 625. That was on April 17. That one in particular amends section 52.6(1) of the Public Health Act such that there would be legislated employment protections for individuals who are required to be absent pursuant to order 10 from the chief medical officer of health from the threat of termination or restriction . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just wonder if the minister could clarify. I think it would be helpful for Albertans. I understand that the Alberta medical emergency expires after 90 days or has a legal life of 90 days. At the end of that time how would things change for Albertans, and what measures would cease to exist, and what would be appropriate for Albertans to continue to practise and expect once those emergency measures are withdrawn? Just clarify what happens when those emergency measures are withdrawn and what authorities and regulations cease to exist at that point in time.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Hon. member, if I can come back to your question and maybe just finish with the previous hon. member's question.

I'd also point out that there were ministerial orders that did amend legislation very quickly, especially at the beginning of our response to the pandemic. As the hon. member and you yourself, Madam Speaker, will remember, in March we were quite worried about whether we would soon be unable to sit in this Legislature. We had a number of Albertans who were unable to go to work. We had a number of businesses that were having to close as a response to the pandemic. There were a lot of tenants throughout the province who were unable to be able to pay for their rent, so we had to take measures to be able to protect those tenants. That also included a ministerial order from one of my colleagues, the hon. Minister of Service Alberta.

Those are some of the examples, Madam Speaker, that wouldn't – if somebody took an interpretation of the Public Health Act that prohibited the word “modify” from including “add,” many of these measures that we took to protect Albertans wouldn't have been permitted to actually protect those Albertans throughout this pandemic.

I'm not sure how much time I have left, but I would say to the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka, Madam Speaker, that we do have some options to be able to continue to take care and protect the well-being of Albertans if the public health emergency is terminated on June 15. As the hon. member notes, there would be 90 days. I think that would take us to August 15, and many of these orders would be terminating. All the CMOH orders would continue until they are rescinded. She could continue to issue orders under section . . .

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

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'd like to ask the minister a few questions about the Sprung facility. Now, the Sprung pandemic response facility: I was wondering, Minister, could you give us some clarification on how that project came about? Did AHS go out and solicit donations for temporary structures, or did Sprung make an unsolicited offer which you decided to take up? Along with that, could you clarify, then, at this point how many patients have been treated at that facility? Let's start there, how that came about and how many patients have been treated.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you. My memory from when I did a tour of the Sprung PRU: the folks from the Peter Lougheed hospital had walked through with me and talked a little bit about what their plans were going to be on an ongoing basis throughout the pandemic. I think that within a week or so they were planning on, until the capacity in the system – and you'll remember, Madam Speaker, that we had a plan for a number of beds throughout the system to be dedicated to COVID-19. We did know at that time that we weren't going to be reaching capacity immediately. We didn't know when or if we were going to get to that capacity. But the Sprung structure, in my understanding, was planned to start being used and commissioned by the Peter Lougheed hospital for other opportunities within the emergency room department there. AHS did not seek out donations of that kind. Sprung had already donated in other jurisdictions in North America, and then because they do have a headquarters here in Alberta, they did reach out to AHS and provide that offer for that unsolicited donation.

Going back to the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka's question, the CMOH orders could continue to be issued under section 29 of the Public Health Act, but all existing MOs, ministerial orders, that are issued under 52.1 would cease to have effect, and then the law would revert to its original state on August 15. I'm happy to take any further questions from the hon. member if that doesn't answer his questions, Madam Speaker.

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

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you, Minister, for that clarification. I take it at this point, then – it sounds like perhaps there have actually not been any patients that have been treated at that facility. Not a criticism there, just clarifying, because I appreciate that we had to prepare for a number of scenarios and that we wanted to ensure that we had additional capacity. I am aware that at the Peter Lougheed they do have 83,000 square feet

of shell space, empty space, that was sitting available at that facility. I'm just wondering: was there any consideration, to your awareness, by AHS of making use of that space as opposed to putting up an additional structure outside of the hospital?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you. The answer is yes. Again, when I had my tour of the PLC, employees at AHS did walk me through. You'll remember, Madam Speaker, that we had announced significant investment in the Peter Lougheed hospital arising from our capital investments in Budget 2020, so a lot of that shell space is now – construction, I think, is going to be or was planned to soon be started, even during COVID, to be able to proceed with expansion of the emergency department. So the PLC staff, I think, did consider what could have been done to address or help with their response during the pandemic.

I think we also worked elsewhere throughout the system in the Calgary zone as well, including at the PLC, to be able to find new beds, to get our capacity from what it was up to 2,250 COVID-dedicated beds. That included a lot of innovation, including at the PLC. My understanding is that, arising from all of that innovation that AHS did, there wasn't a need to be able to add to that capacity of our COVID-dedicated beds. There wasn't a need for us at that time to use that shell space.

3:30

When the opportunity arose with the unsolicited donation from Sprung – as well, there were many other vendors who stepped forward and provided their materials and their labour and donated that to us to help set up and commission the Sprung PRU. Thank you to – for example, I think Stantec had helped as a general contractor. Many other folks: WestJet had donated quite a bit to the PRU as well, and AHS had worked to be able to . . . [Mr. Shandro's speaking time expired]

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I hesitate to interrupt. We'll take a moment to swap officials. We have now concluded the Health portion of this question-and-answer period.

We will now move on to the Finance portion once the officials have been swapped out. Hon. members, I will call on the hon. Minister of Finance for his opening 10-minute statement.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. Before I start this afternoon, I would like to acknowledge the hardship that so many Albertans have experienced during this COVID pandemic and during the economic fallout as a result of the pandemic and the global oil price crash. There's been hardship, there's been great loss, and I just want to acknowledge that before I start.

I would like to start by looking back a few months. Early economic indicators this year were showing 2020 to be a turnaround year for our economy. When I take a look at StatsCan indicators and metrics, I see that drilling rigs were up between 10 and 20 per cent between January and February year over year, building permits were up over 20 per cent year over year in February 2020 compared to February 2019, goods exported were up approximately 20 per cent, retail sales were up, vehicle sales were up almost 10 per cent year over year, and even home sales were up approximately 10 per cent, Madam Speaker. Our economy was improving, and investment was returning to Alberta.

COVID-19, however, changed that. It changed our world in a matter of weeks. As governments around the world implemented measures to keep citizens safe, these measures also significantly reduced output and activity. The global economy contracted

severely, and Alberta's economy was not spared. Demand for our exports diminished, and stock markets experienced massive declines.

Then, of course, we were hit with the second black swan event, and that was when basically an energy price war drove the price of oil to depths not seen in modern times and with it, of course, the loss of thousands of jobs in this province. Madam Speaker, Alberta was and is facing its most severe economic challenge since the Great Depression.

I want to take a few minutes this afternoon and describe the response of this government to Albertans and to Alberta businesses in the face of this great challenge. To manage the COVID-19 health crisis, we immediately added half a billion dollars to the Health budget, giving Alberta's public health officials adequate resources to respond to the pandemic. Community and Social Services also provided \$60 million to charitable and nonprofit social service organizations to support vulnerable Albertans.

Madam Speaker, many Albertans would be required to self-isolate, some businesses would have to close or limit their operations, and many across our province would experience financial insecurity and loss. That is why our government initiated a number of relief measures to support Albertans in their time of need. For Albertans that were unable to make their utility payments on time, the province worked with service providers to offer a 90-day deferral on payments and to ensure that service would not be cut off. The emergency isolation support program alone provided \$108 million to more than 94,000 Albertans who had no other income source and were required to self-isolate as a result of public health directives. For students or past students facing employment difficulty, our government is providing a six-month interest-free moratorium for Albertans currently repaying student loans.

Many Alberta businesses have had and are experiencing incredible hardship during this public health and economic crisis. Our government has responded. One of our first measures was to defer the collection of corporate income taxes until August 31. This provides Alberta businesses with access to \$1.5 billion to pay employees, pay rent, and continue operations. Madam Speaker, we are providing immediate financial relief for businesses by deferring WCB premiums for all private-sector employers to the end of 2020. We're also paying half of small and medium-sized businesses' 2020 premiums. This will provide \$350 million in direct and immediate relief to Alberta businesses.

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. We deferred education property taxes for businesses by six months, providing access to \$458 million in additional liquidity. Our provincial financial institutions have stepped up, and 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 cash needs. To date ATB Financial has provided deferrals on customer loans with balances totalling \$9.4 billion and keeping \$244 million in Albertans' pockets.

I can't think of an industry that's been hit harder by COVID-19 than the tourism sector, and while it's impossible for governments to cover all of the losses, our government is taking measures to support hotels, lodges, and other service providers by abating tourism levy payments for the rest of the year. Effectively this provides a grant to these businesses of close to \$20 million.

For Alberta's energy industry government is paying the AER levy for six months, with a value of \$113 million.

Madam Speaker, Alberta's agriculture sector is also facing extraordinary challenges, and our government is implementing program support that will assist the sector. Alberta is providing up

to \$17 million in ag recovery funding in addition to the \$26 million provided by the federal government for a co-ordinated set aside program for fed cattle. We are also increasing AgriStability advance payments for the pork and potato industries, getting cash into the hands of producers immediately.

3:40

Madam Speaker, I'm in regular contact with the federal Finance minister, advocating for Alberta's interests and ensuring that our challenges are well understood. Our advocacy efforts resulted in the province receiving \$1 billion to fund our site rehabilitation program. The program provides grants to oil field service contractors to perform well, pipeline, and oil and gas site reclamation work and will put thousands of Albertans back to work.

We've also partnered with the federal government on the Canada emergency commercial rent assistance program to provide rent relief for small businesses, nonprofits, and charities that have experienced significant revenue declines. Our government has advocated to ensure liquidity is available for Alberta businesses of all sizes, and programs, including the business credit availability program and the large employer emergency finance facility, have been created through Export Development Canada and the Business Development Bank of Canada. While we're pleased with these announcements, we understand that many businesses are having trouble accessing the funds, so we will continue to press for improvements where required. I want to be clear. We will ensure there is an adequate liquidity facility available for our energy industry.

In response to the significant economic difficulties our province is facing, we're doubling the budget for capital maintenance and renewal projects to get Albertans back to work. This \$1 billion accelerated spend on maintenance and renewal is in addition to new construction announced in the capital plan. By focusing on capital maintenance and renewal projects, work can begin right away and with it ensure additional job opportunities for unemployed Albertans.

We also made an important investment for our economy with the Keystone XL pipeline. For years Alberta oil has been significantly discounted because of the lack of pipeline access, and Alberta has lost billions of dollars. We know, Madam Speaker, that additional pipeline capacity is essential for Alberta to fully realize its economic potential. That's why our investment in the KXL pipeline, ensuring that it goes forward, is an important component of Alberta's recovery.

Madam Speaker, I'll conclude with this. Governments do not create wealth or prosperity. A robust economy and real wealth creation is built on the effort, investment, and ambition of its citizens and businesses, and government's role is to provide a business environment that is competitive, predictable, and one where there's a high correlation between effort and risk and reward. As a government we will continue to create the most competitive business environment in the country, and when we begin the recovery, Alberta will be well positioned to attract a disproportionate amount of investment back into the province.

Madam Speaker, in spite of the incredible challenges we face today, I'm confident that Alberta has a bright and hopeful future because I'm confident in the resilient, resourceful character of Albertans.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, we will now proceed with the question-and-response period, which will last no longer than 50 minutes, at two-minute increments. I see the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm going to begin my comments today – I have a number of topics I'd like to cover, some of them more interesting, probably, to the public than others. We're going to talk about things like financial reporting schedules and that sort of thing.

I'm going to start with what I am sure every member in this Chamber has heard over the last couple of months, and that's concerns from small business. Small businesses have come to me, and they have said that the deferral programs are not adequate. All that those deferral programs are really doing is deferring their Zoom appointment with a bankruptcy lawyer. Small businesses need direct support, and they need it from this government. That is why we as an opposition have put forward ideas on ways that we can help small business, in particular fixing the commercial rent program, which we know is a deeply flawed program, and small businesses are saying that it isn't going to help them.

Two, is the minister willing to take us up on our offer of a \$5,000 grant for small-business retailers and a \$10,000 grant for restaurants to help those businesses through the pandemic?

Third, will the minister institute a 50 per cent reduction of business premiums so that businesses don't have to pay hefty premiums to insure risk that doesn't exist because of the public health measures?

I am looking for some direct and tangible help for the small businesses in my riding and for every other member's riding who are coming to us very worried and very, very scared about what the future brings and what the future is for their business and their families and their workers.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. I share her concern about the challenges that are faced today by small businesses. It's significant for many of them.

Now, Madam Speaker, when we first reached out to the business community, the first concern articulated by that community was the need for cash, was the need for liquidity, was the need for an immediate injection of cash so that they can continue to operate. That's why we immediately moved forward with a number of key deferrals, deferrals that ultimately amounted to billions of dollars being, you know, very available to Alberta businesses.

But we know that there are additional pressures, and those pressures have been mounting. That's why we also moved forward with a very significant program of basically covering small and medium-sized enterprises' WCB premiums, which provided an immediate \$350 million of relief.

And, Madam Speaker, we also are participating in the commercial rent program. I appreciate the challenges with that program, so I have been in contact with my federal counterpart, Minister Morneau, recommending some key changes to the program which will make it more available for Alberta's small businesses that are paying rent.

Of course, we've also, as I noted, gone forward with the tourism levy abatement, which provides \$20 million of full relief – not just liquidity; full relief – to accommodation providers.

And, Madam Speaker, we are continuing to monitor the needs out there. We're continuing to take a look at the federal programs that have been provided to understand what more we may need to do.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I didn't quite hear an answer on the topic of insurance. I think what we want to talk about here is: will the Minister of Finance use his powers to modify the premiums businesses pay for insurance?

Our caucus has called for a 50 per cent reduction in premiums, retroactive to the beginning of the public health measures. Universally, this policy that we have proposed was supported by small business. Even many in the insurance industry, not normally known for their magnanimity, Madam Speaker, thought it was a reasonable proposal. So to the minister: why has there been no action taken yet on business insurance premiums? Will there be action taken in the future? And why is it okay for cash to be raining down on insurance companies but no help for the little guy? I think that the minister can agree that small businesses are right to be asking which side government is on if they don't get a break.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. We're certainly aware that insurance costs in many cases are high for businesses, and I will say this: in terms of property insurance, that's an area that we don't regulate directly in terms of premium costs. We have a free-market system where we have willing providers and willing customers, and they conduct business. I have reached out to the insurance industry not many weeks ago requesting that they do all they can to provide as much relief to property owners as possible.

And I will say this: in terms of the auto industry, we've done the same there, recognizing again the high automobile insurance premiums in some cases. While we're waiting for our insurance panel report for auto insurance, again we've reached out to the insurance industry, strongly encouraging them to provide all the relief possible. We have been pleased to hear that many companies, in fact, are offering automobile insurance premium relief where driving patterns have changed because of COVID-19 behaviour changes. So we're pleased with that.

We recognize that insurance is a significant part of many small businesses' expenditure lines, and again we're doing what we can to ensure that insurance providers provide the most competitive products available.

3:50

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Glasgo: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Many Albertans have had a variety of different experiences in dealing with this pandemic, and from the outset our government has responded to their most pressing needs in the forms of direct funding and deferrals. To help our job creators weather the storm, deferrals for utility payments and corporate tax filings were offered. Help also came in the form of holding education property tax rates to last year's levels as well as covering 50 per cent of WCB premiums for small and medium-sized businesses for 2020, with the option to defer payments until next year. Our government also encouraged lenders to arrange for loans for deferrals so that businesses can maintain a healthy balance sheet, something that we know is very important.

As we all know, small business is the economic driver of our economy, both nationally and provincially as well as in my riding of Brooks-Medicine Hat. Small businesses account for more than 160,000 jobs in Alberta, and they contribute around 30 per cent of Alberta's GDP. As we begin to open our economy, there's great optimism among these struggling small businesses, but I have to say that I have been blown away by how job creators, both large and small, have come up with new and innovative ways to keep their businesses afloat and keep their customers safe and provide these services to Albertans.

While the full impacts of reduced operations will not be understood for some time and will likely be to varying degrees across all sectors, there's still uncertainty among many business owners, including the ones in my own constituency of Brooks-Medicine Hat. Much of this uncertainty lies with how these businesses will fare when the costs they deferred come due and how the public will respond to the relaunch strategy. For example, I've heard these questions repeatedly: "Will customers feel safe to come back? Will they be able to afford to come back? What is the possibility of a second wave? Will my business survive another shutdown?" These are all valid concerns, and like I've said, I've heard them many times from my constituents.

So my question is to the Minister of Finance. What sorts of options is our government exploring to assist Alberta's small businesses through our relaunch strategy so that they can be partners in our province's economic recovery?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member for that really thoughtful question. Again the member alluded to the fact that Alberta business owners are innovative and creative and resourceful, and I couldn't agree more. In fact, that's really, I believe, what has driven wealth creation in this province, those character qualities which can be summed up, you know, in the definition of entrepreneurial culture.

Again, our expectation is that this economic challenge is not going to be resolved immediately. We believe, unfortunately, that this will be a prolonged challenge for weeks and some months ahead. Again, we have rolled out a whole series of measures, a combination of liquidity relief and direct relief from expenditures for small businesses, and we continue to monitor what may be required in the future with respect to small businesses.

We are also of course considering what the federal government has provided because we believe that it's also important to be very mindful and respectful of taxpayer dollars, and to simply double up on what the federal government is doing, in my view, would not be a good use of taxpayer dollars.

But because there is likely to be a prolonged downturn, we know that we have to keep some powder dry to be able to respond to small business needs here in the upcoming weeks and months. For that reason, we're listening to small businesses. We're receiving expert advice weekly from the Economic Recovery Council. That's one reason as well why we rolled out a very significant capital maintenance and renewal program, so small businesses can participate in what will be an increased capital spend in 2020.

The Deputy Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Madam Speaker. We have heard a number of times that the government is spending billions on the pandemic response. We've heard \$10 billion, \$13 billion, \$15 billion. The question that I get from my constituents, in particular small business, is: where specifically is the program spending for small business and for individuals? If the minister could provide us that global figure, an exact amount, on economic response programs. Specifically, what amount has been direct government spending? What amount is deferred revenue to government? What amount is loan guarantees made by government? With all of that, what is the projected deficit? We know that that has been prepared by officials. We've seen Scotiabank out with I believe it was a \$20.3 billion projection, for those watching at home. With all of that rolled in, what is the Minister of Finance's projection for the deficit at this time?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: All right. Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. I think those are questions that many Albertans and Alberta business owners would have at this point in time.

With respect to our projected deficit I will say: stay tuned for our fiscal update. What I can say for sure is that the Alberta government's revenues will be down by billions this year simply because of the incredible economic shock that our economy is dealing with head-on right now. It will reduce government revenues very, very significantly, so we will be rolling out a fresh fiscal update so that we can be transparent with Albertans. Right now it's a very dynamic time as well, of course, with energy prices still incredibly volatile, the COVID pandemic, in fact, and the relaunch creating lots of uncertainty in terms of, you know, how quickly economies can reopen, how quickly economies can start to use energy products again. All of that is weighing into volatility. So what we're going to look forward to: presenting Albertans with an updated fiscal plan.

In terms of going through all the programs, firstly I'll say that our total programs touch on right now just under \$17 billion. Now, I have to say right off the bat that included in that very large number is approximately \$9 billion of liquidity relief that's provided by the Alberta Treasury Branches, so that's the principal portion of the loans that have had some deferral activity.

In terms of direct financial support for businesses – and this is direct financial support – that amounts to \$607 million. What I can say there is that, again, I've identified the WCB premium abatement.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Glasgow: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just wanted to follow up on my previous question to the Minister of Finance. I really do appreciate his response as well as the response of our entire government in dealing with small businesses. I know I was very happy to be on a call with the Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Tourism with small businesses as well, and her responses were very helpful.

But one thing that I did want to highlight, too, is just how innovative and resourceful our small businesses really are. I've seen so many different small businesses in Medicine Hat adjust their operations, improve their online presence, and do other things to make sure that they can continue to provide services to Albertans as well as continue to weather the storm of this COVID outbreak. As the Finance minister alluded to: yeah, government is not the answer to this. The answer to this is allowing Albertans the opportunity to expand and create and do exactly what they know how to do.

One thing that I have heard from my constituents, especially small-business owners, in Medicine Hat and Brooks and beyond is how concerning it would be to add further costs onto our small businesses; namely, the 10 days of paid sick leave that the Trudeau government has been talking about. If the minister could elaborate on this and answer this question: what other costs will be put on small businesses, and how is our government responding to small-business needs in that way?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member for that very thoughtful question. At this point in time, with the challenges that our business community is experiencing – I know this for sure – many, many of them would simply be unable

to provide two weeks of paid sick leave for their employees, not because they wouldn't want to do it, but they would be unable. For many of them it would probably tip them over, and in fact you would have individuals that were employed that would then not be employed as those businesses would fail. We are going to work with the federal government and understand the options around providing support in this area. You know, with that, I would say: stay tuned.

One thing: again, I agree with the member completely that we simply cannot add any additional regulatory or cost burden on our businesses at this point. So we're working hard. I know that Associate Minister Hunter, the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction, and other ministers . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. minister, I'd just remind you that we don't use names in this Chamber moving forward.

4:00

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would just point to the fact that red tape reduction is a key priority for this government, and it's never been more important than it is today as we work to ensure that all small businesses have the most competitive business environment possible in order to succeed and flourish and restart as our economic recovery begins.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm now going to move on to a question with respect to education property taxes. This is one that perhaps the minister will not have a readily available answer for, and I'm happy to receive correspondence from ministry officials or the department afterwards. I'm compelled to ask this because I think it's a very big question when it comes to municipal financing and taxes.

The government has set up a number of deferrals on taxes, which could be creating some cash-flow problems, but let's set those issues aside for the time being. What is the province's position as the beneficiary of property taxes in the event that there are significant defaults on payments when the deferrals run out? Let me ask specifically: if defaults vastly exceed the education property tax requisition allowance for defaults, then what happens? We have heard virtually nothing about what happens when property tax debt goes bad, what that means for homeowners paying taxes, what that means for municipalities that we requisition taxes from. So can the minister share with Albertans what the province's position is and what the plan is?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: I'll let him go first.

The Deputy Speaker: Okay. The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and, again, thank you to the member for a good, pertinent question at this point in time. You know, I think we understand that uncollectable property taxes will increase in the upcoming months. I can commit that we will work closely with municipalities to deal with that challenge in the upcoming months. Again, we know that many businesses are struggling at this point in time, and even during normal economic times there is an ebb and flow. There are some businesses that fail, and there are new ones that start up, and there is an uncollectable portion of property taxes. We know that in upcoming months that will likely be greatly increased, and we commit to work with municipalities to ensure that we can find the best way forward, firstly, to minimize the amount of failures but, secondly, to ensure

that we are dealing with that challenge in the most effective, appropriate way and in a way that doesn't disproportionately hurt municipalities. We also need to make decisions relative to the well-being of Alberta taxpayers.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise just briefly. Sorry to interrupt. I know that as my long-time deputy House leader you'll be very excited about what I have to announce, and that is that it is my pleasure to inform the House that there will be no evening sitting tonight.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just want to get back very quickly to these matters of financial reporting, building on the fact that, of course, in the ministry mandate and in the business plan continual improvement of transparency and accountability in financial planning is, in fact, a goal of the ministry. There's a key performance indicator associated with it as well, and there are a number of legal requirements under the Financial Administration Act. There is a requirement to produce the annual report by the end of June, so I'm asking for a clarification on whether that will be happening as scheduled.

I'm also looking for a commitment to providing a first-quarter fiscal and economic update by the end of August, that, of course, the minister is required by law to produce as well. We're wondering if that update will be similar to the one last year, which was criticized for being a thin update, or if it will be a more fulsome update given the change in circumstances and the fact that, you know, the budget, when it was introduced, was colouring outside the lines of reality, and now it is sort of wildly orbiting outside any known universe of common sense. Will that be the commitment that the Premier made earlier around the financial update? Is that the update that is required by law at the end of August and the first-quarter update, or is it something different entirely? So the extent of the first-quarter update so that we can know the extent of our multibillion-dollar deficit – it's looking like it's going to be in the \$20 billion range – the annual report timelines as well, and if there's going to be any additional information contained in the first-quarter update, simply because the budget that was rushed through in March did not at that time at all conform to reality.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I certainly would speak in opposition to the member's assertion that, you know, Budget 2020 at the time that I delivered it in this House did not conform to reality. It did. The real reality is that during the days and weeks that followed – again, as I noted in my introductory comments, the global economic world shifted cataclysmically, and as a result of that, I absolutely acknowledge that our economic assumptions and thereby our revenue projections particularly are going to be off significantly. We will come forward with a fresh fiscal update.

In June we are planning to come forward with an economic statement and an economic recovery plan, and that statement will basically be a summary of the various measures that we've implemented to date.

In August we will be coming forward with – again our intention is to come forward with an updated fiscal plan. We've heard from the Auditor General that – publicly the Auditor General has made the statement that they're concerned that they would not be able to actually complete their audit work before June 30 for the annual

report related to March 31, 2020, so we're looking at legislative options to extend that reporting date to likely August 31.

In November we plan on delivering the mid-year fiscal economic update. That will be a comprehensive update in November, which will include, really, an updated three-year fiscal plan.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. That was a quite helpful update. Thanks to the minister for that.

I just want to get back to a couple of things on the small-business piece that the minister alluded to. He indicated that there might be new programs into the future as we respond to the length of this economic crisis and potential risks of future outbreaks of COVID-19 and so on. I think it is wise, Madam Speaker, to plan for some of those contingencies, so I'm asking the minister, then, again, to commit to examining and commit to engaging small business in grant programs: direct cash in hand for things like the personal protective equipment that they need to keep themselves, their workers, and their customers safe; direct assistance for the kinds of physical modifications that need to be done to the floors of a number of retail, personal services, and restaurant establishments. Those are the folks that are really hurting right now. Commit to using his powers as minister – it is not true that he doesn't have the power to regulate business insurance; he does – to commit to examining that and make a commitment to small business that their business insurance premiums will be reduced during this crisis.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: All right. Good. Thank you, Madam Speaker. I will again reiterate my comments with small businesses. We do commit to continue to listen to small businesses, the small-business community. We're certainly also happy to hear any suggestions the opposition might have with respect to identifying need and proposed programs. Right now we're considering, again, if there should be a further response and what that response should look like. You know, should it be prospective in nature? Should it be more reactive? Should it be a targeted response or more broad-based? Again, we are considering those questions, and we are taking advice from the Economic Recovery Council, which, I will say, is a group of very experienced and distinguished individuals that bring deep business and leadership experience.

4:10

I appreciate the member opposite's, I think, indirect request, recommendation to consider the small-business expense needs related to personal protective equipment and extra costs related to some of the public health guidelines that they will need to follow. We will certainly consider that extra cost as well as we, again, consider whether an additional response is needed and, if so, the timing of that response and what the measure will look like.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the minister for that answer.

I want to shift gears a little bit and talk about nonprofits. We've talked a lot about small business, but nonprofits, of course, benefit from a number of different initiatives that are funded by the AGLC, for which this minister is responsible. I've heard from a number of nonprofits, in particular those who are missing their casino dates while the public health orders are in place, and I've also reviewed the correspondence that the Minister of Finance has sent to these

nonprofits. It's been fairly thin gruel, honestly, Madam Speaker. You know, their casino dates will be rescheduled, and best of luck.

I'm wondering if I can ask the minister to give an update directly to nonprofits, who are watching, on how that casino revenue is going to be replaced and how the transparency issue of the dissolution of the lottery fund will be dealt with so that nonprofits can see that the same amount of lottery funding that was coming in is going out to those nonprofit and charitable initiatives as before.

Number three, given that we're in a public health emergency, it seems to me a good time to have an online gaming platform. Indeed, our government came out with this in early '19, I believe, and then we saw in early 2020 AGLC advising the media: oh, it's going to be another year. Can the minister, then, share with this House and with the nonprofits his plan to light a fire under AGLC to get that online gaming platform happening so that these nonprofits can continue to see those revenues and deliver their services to Albertans, whether it's in sports, charitable endeavours, advocacy endeavours, whatever the case may be? Those revenues are really important to people, and we can get a hold of some of them if we just move forward quickly with that online platform.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the questions. With respect to the online gaming platform, I can say that we're proceeding with that, and AGLC is moving forward. It's fair that that should be expedited. That effort should be expedited, and I know they're working quickly to roll out their online gaming plan and program and platform.

With respect to the lottery fund changes, basically the dissolution of the actual fund, again, we absolutely commit to nonprofits and charities who benefit from this fund and who benefit from working casinos and sharing in the take that they will continue to receive the same amount going forward even though that fund, which was really, again, just a technical accounting measure – they will continue to receive the same take as they did before. I believe that's 15 per cent. That will continue to happen.

I recognize that like businesses, like individuals, many nonprofits and charities are very challenged right now. Their world has been disrupted. The things they used to do to generate revenue have been interrupted, and for many their revenues are down. We also recognize the incredible value of so many of our nonprofit organizations, so we have provided additional support to a number of nonprofit organizations that serve in our community. We provided \$30 million for community-based organizations through the Community and Social Services ministry. We included, of course, an additional \$25 million for homeless shelters and \$5 million for women's emergency shelters.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Might I suggest, then, that perhaps keeping the House updated with some timelines on the online gaming platform would be a really good idea because this is forgone revenue for the province. I think some clarity to nonprofits around the dissolution of the lottery fund and so on would be helpful from this ministry because there's a great deal of, I think it's fair to say, suspicion and distrust on this issue, and I think it can be dealt with by just a little bit more communication.

I'm moving on now to another piece of something that we all hold in common, and that's the heritage savings trust fund. We've heard a lot about AIMCo's volatility-based trading strategy, the significant losses that were incurred, into the billions, so I have a

few questions for the minister on this topic. This was extraordinary and outside of the normal losses that many investment funds and pension funds and others found themselves experiencing in March. The first concern I have is that Albertans heard about these losses at the fund, our own sovereign wealth fund, through a magazine called the Institutional Investor and the *Globe and Mail* and not via the minister responsible.

Second, I think Albertans are right to ask: how much was lost specifically in the heritage trust fund? I can appreciate that other clients should get their own reports, but this minister is responsible for AIMCo and the heritage fund to this House, so Albertans deserve to know how much was lost in this fund. If the minister could provide that update, I would appreciate it.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Madam Speaker. With respect to the heritage trust fund what I would say there is: stay tuned for a full reporting of returns for that fund. Listen, given the incredible global economic challenge there's not been a sovereign wealth fund, an asset management fund around the world, I believe, that hasn't experienced incredible difficulty, hasn't experienced what I would suggest would be significant losses in Q1 of 2020 due to the economic contraction in the world.

With respect to the bold strategy that AIMCo had implemented, AIMCo is conducting a full review of that strategy. I'll be very interested, obviously, in the results of that review. One thing I might remind the member opposite of is that that strategy was in place when the member and, in fact, her team over there were governing, and quite frankly the government of that day was one global economic crisis away from experiencing the same outcome that we are today. However, Madam Speaker, again, we will be very interested in the review and the results of that review by the AIMCo board, and we trust the right decisions will be made at that time.

We continue to have confidence in AIMCo delivering excellent results on behalf of the owners of their assets, and that includes the heritage trust fund. We're confident that AIMCo will continue to deliver in future years and even decades very effectively on behalf of Albertans, on behalf of public-sector workers.

The Deputy Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just want to start off by saying that not only myself but my office staff have received hundreds of questions and concerns over the last few months on what the provincial government is doing and the federal government is doing, and we've been happy to answer those and to try to keep people as informed as possible on the response not only of the federal government but of the provincial government as well. Some of the questions have already been covered here today, so I won't get into those again, but I appreciate some of the comments from the Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat in talking about the resiliency of small business and talking about how quickly they could adapt.

A number of small businesses in my riding quickly changed how they were doing business in order to keep people employed and to keep revenue coming in, and I wish them all very well. I did my best to support as many of them as I possibly could, and I was glad to, in many of the restaurant cases, eat out quite a bit in order to support them. So it's worked out well for me and my waistline.

4:20

That being said, of course, my riding depends heavily on oil and gas. Leduc industrial, Nisku, and the Edmonton International Airport have all been strong economic drivers for Alberta, and they

are directly tied to the price of oil and the growth within the oil industry. EIA has been an economic driver in my region, creating thousands of jobs in the last few years, and that depends on passenger travel, of course, so tourism and the movement of people is also an issue. I'm also happy to say, just on a side note, that Minister Savage and Minister Fir both took the time to talk to small businesses in my area as well as oil and gas companies in order to get their perspective so that the ministries were getting the best information possible.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I'll take this opportunity to again remind this House that we do not use names of individuals in this Assembly.

The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's the first day back in a while.

I appreciate the questions and comments of the member, and I think they're very appropriate. Firstly, I just agree with the fact that we have such a resourceful, innovative, entrepreneurial small-business community, and I can name several examples in my constituency where businesses have adjusted quicker than I would have anticipated to be able to deliver services in a different way and have thereby been able to continue to offer Albertans jobs and employment during this time when they otherwise might have lost their jobs. I think it's a great suggestion to continue to support small businesses wherever we reside. That's a great suggestion, and I would encourage everybody in this House to in fact take that suggestion seriously, and I expect we are.

Relative to the energy industry we know how absolutely, incredibly important the energy industry is to this province. Now, that's not to suggest that other sectors or diversification is not important. It is. It's not either/or; it's both and all. But the energy industry is and remains an important economic driver, and that's why we responded immediately to that sector with an AER levy abatement for six months, which would provide just immediate relief. Recognizing the size of the industry, at \$113 million that abatement was not – there would be more needed, but that was the first thing that we could do.

We also were very pleased when we did finally receive the billion dollars from the federal government and could roll out our Alberta program, which is the site rehabilitation program. That program works with . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Madam Speaker. We have now seen hundreds of thousands of job losses and people who have lost income in Alberta as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, but during the first year of the government's mandate Alberta lost roughly 50,000 jobs, and the deficit increased by roughly a billion dollars. Since that very difficult first year we've now seen the pandemic, the oil price collapse. More jobs are going to be lost. We know that people are really going to struggle, and the province is also facing some difficult financial choices, and there are many days when I do not envy the folks across the way.

At the same time we also see some areas where we could trim spending, Madam Speaker. The energy war room has been a failure by any measure. Even those who thought it was a good idea now concede that it isn't working. So does the minister stand by the commitment to the energy war room? There is a commitment from Treasury Board and Finance as well as out of the industrial carbon tax. Put another way, as small businesses are going bankrupt and folks are in jeopardy of losing their homes and there's no assistance for small business on the things that matter to them like access to

PPE and commercial rent assistance, are we going to save Albertans \$90 million, which is the projected expense from the energy war room, or not?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. A couple of things there. Firstly, with respect to jobs, as the member opposite pointed out, you know, many Albertans during this economic downturn have lost their employment. Many that are still employed have received a very significant drop in their wages and remuneration. Others have gone from working 40 or 50 or 60 hours a week down to 10 or 20, so there has been significant loss.

I will say this. We inherited a pretty stagnant economy, and we immediately brought in very aggressive measures to improve our business environment. Madam Speaker, as I noted in my initial comments, we believed 2020 was going to be a turnaround year, and the data from January and February, the economic data, would support that assertion. Our policies were working. We had the economy on the right track, and we were attracting investment, creating job opportunities. Of course, that all changed with COVID.

Again, we are making adjustments. However, we are not going to depart from our fundamental premise, that we believe it is government's primary and foundational role to provide the most competitive business environment possible and that Alberta entrepreneurs and businesspeople will then invest and grow and flourish and create opportunities for themselves and for other Albertans. We fundamentally believe in that policy approach going forward.

With respect to the war room at this point in time, again, given the current realities, we're expecting that there will be a reduction in expenditure at this point. Actually, for this year it will be reduced to \$3 million, in terms of the war room expenditures, from \$30 million. However, I believe the function of the energy war room, or the Canadian Energy Centre, is fundamental . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Okay. Let's shift gears entirely. It's very, very clear from the numbers that are now emerging out of this economic crisis in particular – and this is happening across the continent, really – that this recession and this downturn are different from those that were previous. One reason is that it's affecting women differently and more disproportionately than men in the types of jobs lost, the kinds of pressures that have come as a result of public health orders. Based on that, economists across the spectrum are now saying that a component of a recovery built to last – that is to say, even in this emergency response phase we haven't quite gotten it right on child care. But in the recovery and the resilience phase we must get this pillar of the economy right. If we do not, this is not a social services question; it is a fundamental economic and jobs question on the growth of our economy. Will affordable and accessible child care be one of the pillars? As this minister is crafting our stimulus response, our recovery response, our economic resilience, can the minister update this House that child care will be a pillar in Alberta's recovery strategy?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I do agree with the member opposite that this downturn has disproportionately affected the service sector and, with that, perhaps has disproportionately affected women, certainly in the service sector. One thing I'll say is that, again, given the way Albertans have responded to public health

recommendations, advice, guidance, and measures, the way they've responded so responsibly, as Albertans do, the fact that we've really flattened this COVID curve and we're able to relaunch the economy and, actually, many aspects of the service sector right now I think is so fundamentally important. That's the first thing I'll say, and that's not to at all suggest that folks in the service sector have not been disproportionately affected. They have.

In terms of the child care sector I'll leave the vision for child care to our very capable Children's Services minister, but I will say this. We have intervened. At this point in time we've recognized the need in that sector. We're providing up to \$17.8 million in grants to child care centres and approved family day home agencies to ensure that they're ready to safely restart and support families through Alberta's economic recovery. That will be a phased-in approach, but we recognize, again, the importance of significant, adequate, safe child care capacity in this province.

4:30

The Deputy Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, the essential services model of managing COVID that really dominated the early days of this outbreak, in my opinion, created immense amounts of economic injustice to Main Street, Alberta. Let me tell you what happened in central Alberta and probably everywhere else. Multinational and international big box stores, who are not based in Alberta, had maybe a few products that were deemed essential, so therefore they were allowed to stay open. Meanwhile they're selling every single other product as well in their stores. People were literally lined up outside the doors trying to get in, yet in the midst of that, we created a framework that essentially barred the doors, locked the doors to Main Street, Alberta. That is a huge economic injustice to the citizens and the businesspeople of Alberta, who were not allowed, essentially, to survive in the midst of this while the international and multinational stores took all of the business.

So my real question is – and I should also say that that now will contribute not only to a loss of past business but potentially, through the change of habits and behaviour, as well moving to substantial amounts of online buying. Anybody who studies the business realizes how much online buying has increased. Shares of companies that are focused on that have skyrocketed in recent times, so we've changed habits as well to move people to buy from those kinds of situations. It furthermore contributes to a substantial tax loss to Alberta because although sometimes there are agreements whereby taxes are paid, in many cases in online buying there aren't, so we're losing tax revenue as well.

So my challenge is to us as a government. How do we create a framework moving forward for Main Street, Alberta? Without Main Street, Alberta this province is in long-term trouble. Government revenues are down. The wealth of the people is down. We need to solve that in the long-term focus, and I'd appreciate what your vision for that might be.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Fifty seconds remain in this debate. The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: All right. Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'll look to answer quickly, efficiently. Firstly, I would agree with the member's observations and assertion that many of the small businesses, particularly in rural communities, main street businesses, were disproportionately affected by public health measures. That's why, again, I'm so ready, like all of us are, to relaunch the economy and to reopen. In fact, we've done that now with our stage 1

reopening. The vast majority, not all but the vast majority, of retail businesses particularly have been reopened, and that is excellent.

Ultimately, Madam Speaker, we will double down . . .

The Deputy Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. minister. That now concludes the Finance portion of this debate.

We'll take a moment to swap officials, and then we will move on to Labour and Immigration.

Hon. members, we will now proceed with the 10-minute opening statement from the hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am pleased to be here taking part in the discussion, a very important discussion, on the impacts of COVID-19. I want to start off by again offering my condolences to all Albertans who have lost loved ones and who have been affected by this serious disease. I recognize that the last few months have not been easy.

Since day one our government has acted quickly and swiftly to keep Albertans safe. Our government has provided \$13 billion towards the comprehensive pandemic response that prioritizes Albertans' health and safety, from providing necessary personal protective equipment to our front-line staff to deferring utility payments so Albertans won't have to choose between putting food on the table or making a bill payment. Our rapid response has led to our government relaunching our economy, and this has been accomplished through the tremendous sacrifices made by Albertans who have stayed home and helped flatten the curve. While the removal of restrictions is slow, it is deliberate, and as we relaunch, we continue to take advice from our medical experts such as Dr. Deena Hinshaw. We are taking careful and appropriate steps regarding public health and safety of all Albertans, and it is paramount that we continue to do so.

The Ministry of Labour and Immigration has been quick to respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19, and our goal is to do everything we can to support Albertans during these challenging times. To help Albertans cope with COVID-19, we acted quickly to make changes to our employment standards regulations to allow full- and part-time employees to take 14 days of job-protected leave if they are required to self-isolate. We made it easier for all employees to access this leave without cumbersome documentation, and we eliminated the minimum length of service requirement. These changes have helped and continue to help contain the spread of the virus.

Now, we know the decision to stay home is incredibly difficult, especially for Albertans who are losing income due to self-isolation. That is why we also extended personal and family responsibility leave. This leave allows Albertans to stay home to care for children while schools and daycares are closed. This leave continues to keep Alberta families together at this critical time. We also worked quickly to ensure Albertans can stay attached to their jobs longer if they are impacted by COVID-19 related layoffs. We did this by extending the deadline for temporary layoffs from 60 to 120 days. This change helps Albertans who otherwise may have faced permanent job loss as a result of this pandemic.

We recognize that throughout this time many Albertans have been concerned about their financial stability, so as Albertans waited for the federal benefits to begin, our government acted swiftly and implemented the temporary emergency isolation support program to help bridge the gap. Now, Madam Speaker, this support was available to working Albertan adults who experienced total or significant loss of income as a result of having to isolate or care for a dependant who was isolating due to COVID-19. From March 15 to April 5 our government provided almost \$108 million

to more than 94,000 Albertans through this program, and that was \$50 million more than originally anticipated.

Now, in addition to these supports for employees, we also acted to help employers during this time. That is why we quickly implemented the WCB premium deferrals program, to help provide some immediate relief to private-sector employers at a time when they needed it the most. For small and medium businesses, the government is covering 50 per cent of their 2020 WCB premiums. That benefit is estimated at \$350 million. For large employers, they will have their 2020 WCB payments deferred until early 2021, at which time their premiums will be due, providing some much-needed liquidity. In addition, private-sector employers who have already paid their WCB premium payment for 2020 have been provided a rebate or credit. These actions ensure the sustainability of the workers' compensation system and help job creators with financial flexibility.

Throughout this time we've also put several ministerial orders in place to help keep Albertans safe and provide flexibility for job creators and Albertans alike. Following the direction of Alberta's chief medical health officer, I signed a ministerial order to help meet the needs of the health care sector, particularly as it relates to long-term care. This included limiting health care workers to only one work site as a way to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to protect the jobs of those who held multiple positions because they would be required to take one role and one job. Now, this ministerial order allowed for temporary measures to be put in place that outlined a process to ensure health care workers only working at one site would maintain hours, and these measures were needed to allow employers to adjust their workforce and respond quickly to implement the necessary safety changes that were put in place by Dr. Deena Hinshaw.

4:40

In addition to new and extended leave, recent ministerial orders also allowed for faster changes to work schedules and modified group termination rules to provide greater flexibility for employers to respond to the pandemic.

We also expanded the types of respiratory personal protective equipment that can be used at work sites at the request of employers, and these actions were made and continue to be in place to ensure worker safety is of the utmost priority. Madam Speaker, workplace safety is paramount, and we are doing everything possible to ensure the safety of Albertans and their families.

The Department of Labour and Immigration has since the start of this pandemic fielded over 3,000 calls in regard to how we assist workers and employees in limiting the spread of COVID-19. Since that time we have conducted more than 2,000 inspections, all with the goal of ensuring proper mitigation is in place to protect Alberta workers and the public and help reduce the spread.

Madam Speaker, we recognize a number of concerns were raised regarding the meat-processing facilities – we talked about this earlier in question period today – and the health and safety of workers at Alberta's food-processing plants continue to be monitored to ensure the safe operation of Alberta's food supply chain and the safety of Alberta workers. Public health officials, occupational health and safety, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and others have all worked together to continue to protect worker safety at the plants and help limit the spread of COVID-19.

A dedicated Alberta Health Services task force continues to work to support each facility and prevent future COVID-19 outbreaks. Now, meat-processing facilities in Alberta are expected to continue to implement safety controls that meet requirements identified by Alberta Health Services, occupational health and safety legislation, and chief medical officer of health orders. Alberta Health Services

and OHS are inspecting facilities regularly to ensure control measures are implemented and provide ongoing advice and support to the workers and employers. Now, our occupational health and safety officers have done numerous on-site inspections of meat-processing plants to evaluate new health and safety measures put in place for revised operations.

I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that when OHS was notified of concerns, both at Cargill and JBS, we had occupational health and safety officials there within days to do an inspection and work with counterparts at Alberta Health Services and Alberta Health. When Cargill was shut down, we did two inspections during that period of time, and then on the week of reopening we did three inspections. As part of that, we joined Alberta Health Services for the reopening on May 4, and both of us were on-site again May 6 to further assess the operations. In addition, that week occupational health and safety also convened a meeting of the joint work-site health and safety committee on May 7. Again, we were there today to make sure that the operations are safe and protect the workers at Cargill. To sum it up, occupational health and safety continues to prioritize the inspection and monitoring of meat-processing plants to ensure the necessary controls are in place and that all health orders are being followed.

Now, finally, Madam Speaker, I want to highlight the work my ministry has done to provide information and resources to Albertans amid this crisis, particularly during relaunch. We have worked with Alberta Health to develop a number of specialized workplace guidance pieces to help improve safety in day-to-day operations. These helpful business practices are available via the Alberta biz connect portal, and there are well over 30 of them on the portal for different sectors and for different types of work sites.

In conclusion, Madam Speaker, my ministry has acted swiftly to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. We have taken decisive actions that have had a significant impact on work sites throughout the province and helped us to contain the spread together. We are all in this together, and 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 of health. Albertans are strong and resilient people. We can and we will get through this, but we can only do it together.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any other members wishing to speak? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise for this COVID debate. I do want to start off my remarks with my deepest condolences to the families and co-workers who have suffered a tragedy and the loss of life during this pandemic.

I appreciate the minister starting off his opening remarks and being available to answer questions. In fact, his opening remarks answered some of the questions I had off the hop, which were going to be around some of the numbers. I heard the minister say that the OH and S contact centre has received over 3,000 calls, so my follow-up questions would be: how has the contact centre been staffing up? Are there more people in order to handle that volume? Thank you for that information.

You've also mentioned 2,000 inspections, and I was wondering if you'd be able to break that down to "How many were in-person inspections, virtual, and how many were reactive versus proactive?" just because there are different types of inspections that can be used.

If you have it, I'm also very interested in the number of unsafe work refusals that have gone through the formal process. Of the

3,000 phone calls, you may have had many people calling to ask about their rights, their workplace rights. How many have become the unsafe work refusals officially defined under the OH and S Act?

Finally, the volume of work when it comes to occupational health and safety during this pandemic, I know, has had to have been a lot for the ministry. I'd like to know if there have been additional staff hired, either in OHS officer/investigator roles, the occupational health specialist or hygienist, if you've been training up OHS team members who are already there to improve their infection control knowledge.

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

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the questions. Those are a lot of questions. I'll try to get through as many as I can in two minutes, and if I miss some, then maybe, perhaps in the next two minutes, I can get back to them.

For the first question – this is in regard to inspections completed – as of May 22 there were 2,058. Of that, just over 800 were proactive inspections. The remaining were reactive.

In regard to the call centre inquiries the specific number is 3,238, again as of May 22. We have staff that are available to provide them in the call centre, and when there's additional work, we will supplement with other staff in occupational health and safety.

In regard to inspectors I just want to set the context. We increased the number of inspectors in the budget for last year, 2018-2019. We were fortunate to have graduated a class of 27 occupational health and safety staff in February of 2020. And as the hon. member knows, it takes nine months to train someone who can become an inspector. This is not something that you can just easily walk in, with a couple of weeks of training, to do. You need to know what to look for and how to do that. So we had an additional 27 staff that graduated in February 2020.

Then we've been able to perform a significant number more inspections. If we look at the first quarter this year, as our most recent numbers, versus the first quarter last year: over 1,500 more inspections with the additional staff. And we have a plan as we go into relaunch to add more resources. But again recognizing that it's nine months, what we're doing is that we've identified another 20 individuals who have moved out of the field and working in other areas in occupational health and safety or in other areas within our own department, and we are in the process now of . . .

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

Ms Gray: Thank you very much to the minister for those responses. I will flag a number of unsafe work refusals if you have a moment in the next response.

I'd like to talk a little bit about the guidance that is being given to Albertans during the relaunch. The minister in his opening remarks spoke about "workplace safety is paramount." I have been to the biz connect site to look at the resources that are available, and I find them, from a workplace health and safety perspective, to be inadequate.

The main document: the document essentially doesn't tell workers what their rights are, employers what their rights or responsibilities are, doesn't list OH and S as a resource. Instead, OH and S is just mentioned on the first page as: this information does not supersede OH and S. It mentions the hierarchy of control, which is an important system within OH and S, so I appreciate that, but it doesn't talk about an employer's responsibility to make sure that their workplace is safe and to manage hazards. In fact, the words "hazards" and "hazard assessment" aren't in these documents.

4:50

The document doesn't explain to workers what their rights are and that they have a right to be involved in workplace health and safety. It doesn't tell employers that they have to involve their workers, which they do by law. Please let me know if the OH and S law has changed. They have to. Instead, it says: you may want to share this document with them once you've made your plan. You aren't giving workers and businesses the tools, the OH and S fundamentals, to understand that they need to work together to solve this new hazard in their work environment. I would love to hear the minister's thoughts on that.

I realize that on the biz connect site there is a link to separate OH and S documents, but why hasn't OH and S been incorporated into the guidance being given to employers, these main documents?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister of labour.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I'd like to go back, first of all, to finish off the conversation about resources. Then I'll go back to the inspections, and then we'll try to get to your other question associated with the biz connect documents.

In regard to the additional 20 individuals, these people are getting additional training as we speak, just refresher training, in essence, and then we can use them where we're focusing on inspections under relaunch. Our initial focus was on essential services. Now we're turning to the stage 1 relaunch to make sure that the barbers and the restaurants are doing what's in accordance with the CMOH guidance as well as occupational health and safety.

In regard to the number of work refusals, to date OH and S has received 19 work refusal complaints related to COVID-19. As the hon. member knows, you know, when you get a call for an occupational health and safety work refusal, an inspector will go in and assist the parties to try to resolve it. Seventeen of the 19 have been resolved; two have not. Decisions were rendered by occupational health and safety in regard to those two.

I just wanted to put this in context. Yes, there are significantly more work refusals than we've had, which is understandable. But if we compare ourselves to, for example, B.C., they've had 18, a little bit larger. Ontario, 260: they're larger, but they're not that much larger. So I think we're actually doing a good job. Not "we" as government; Albertans, employers and employees, are working together because they understand that they need to work together to be able to solve these issues, to address health and safety worker issues.

Just one more comment, and then I'll come to the guidance documents. You know, when we take a look at the number of . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Next time.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. I'm not going to change our theme, so we're going to keep talking about guidance documents for a bit longer, and that will hopefully allow you an opportunity to respond.

You're right; co-operation between management and workers or their representatives when they are making their return-to-work plans is a critical component. It is not mentioned in the guidance being provided to employers unless they go to the very specific OH and S materials that are a link somewhere else. Right now we know that in recovering from a crisis situation like this, it's an opportunity for governments to review, establish, re-establish, and reinforce labour legislation. The reinforcing of labour legislation is what is not happening here, and this is an opportunity to make sure that people understand how the co-operation and co-ordinated action are needed to keep people safe at work.

Looking through the documentation, noting that OH and S is not a key part of this, and noting that the direction to include workers, to conduct hazard assessments, which are required by legislation, and the guidance to help employers do that is missing, appendix D, the relaunch consideration template, could have been something that specifically talked about, “You need to do this; this is how you do a hazard assessment” to reinforce that.

Finally, I will say that some of the industry-specific stuff, like for restaurants, goes into great detail about the customer’s safety. It doesn’t talk at all about how to keep the kitchen staff safe. There’s worker information that’s missing in these guiding documents. I am concerned about this and would like to see OH and S working more closely with Alberta Health in developing these materials and in reminding employers and workers of their rights and responsibilities which are required by law.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister of labour.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and thank you again for the question. I promise we’ll get to that this time.

I just wanted to finish the last comment that I was making on the earlier set of questions. You know, Albertans have done a tremendous job of flattening the curve, and that includes employers and employees in the workplaces. We have over 160,000 workplaces in this province, and we’ve had 41 outbreaks. Now, I appreciate that some of those outbreaks have been significant, and we’ve talked about some of those before, in meat-packing. But we’ve had 41 outbreaks, and the vast majority of them: the workers and employees have been able to – we’ve been able to put in place measures not only to reduce the number of outbreaks, but when outbreaks have occurred, for a large number of them we were able to get on it and actually stop it and stop the spread at that point in time. That is, basically, employers and employees working together to do this. So I urge looking at the data. In the main, employers and employees are doing a good job.

Now, in regard to the documents, there are numerous references to occupational health and safety as we go in the documents in terms of reporting and necessary – and I also understand that occupational health and safety was involved, working with Alberta Health to do this. Now, these are unprecedented times because these are documents you’re developing not only to deal with worker safety but with the safety of the customers and Albertans.

I’ll say to the hon. member that to the extent that we can improve this – because the hon. member was quite right. The legislation is very clear, right? You know, work sites or employers with over 20 employees are required to have an occupational health and safety committee. These committees are supposed to – their job is to identify hazards and then look at mitigation to address those hazards. We are very clear on our website to make sure that happens, and we have a handbook for . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Glasgo: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As the MLA for Brooks-Medicine Hat I have the distinct pleasure of rising in the House to ask some questions to the minister of labour today, so I will be choosing to do that. I just wanted to start by expressing my deep and profound condolences to the families who have lost loved ones in Brooks during the COVID-19 crisis. I know that there has been much talk and much conversation around worker safety so far today, and I just want to express my sincere and heartfelt condolences to those who have lost family members due to the COVID-19 crisis.

I want to thank the minister of labour for his swift action in coming to the aid of my constituents in Brooks and those who work

at the JBS Canada facility in my riding. JBS employs thousands of people, Madam Speaker, in my riding, and they’re so important to our community as well as those workers. You know, we’ve seen our community come together and rally around these workers and their families and show them that we really do support them, that their work is essential, that the work that they do every day – when they go into work and they provide that meat and are part of the supply chain, they are really feeding the world and western Canada. I know our government supports that, and I’m just grateful for the minister of labour and his office for making that happen.

I was just wondering if the minister could update the House on how he is working with employers like JBS or Cargill in ensuring that the highest standard of safety is provided and enacted for large-scale production facilities like that. What supports are being provided to workers?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister of labour.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question and for your comments. As indicated in my opening remarks, especially with meat-packing, you know, we’ve had two large outbreaks that occurred. Once we were notified in terms of the concern, we moved quickly with other agencies, including Alberta Health and Alberta Health Services, to ensure that measures were in place to protect workers. One thing we did find out and as noted – and this is a learning as noted by Dr. Deena Hinshaw, that some of the spread was happening in the community, and it was related to work but outside of the workplace. That is a learning that we made and we have applied to other locations to be able to protect workers so that we’re not looking solely at the work site and what measures are in place to control the spread within the work site but also outside the workplace. I was able to share that on a conference call with my colleagues across the country who are also ministers responsible for health and safety, for them to look at that to ensure not only that we can pass those learnings on and use that within Alberta but use it outside the province.

5:00

Then we continue to do follow-up, right? In particular, we had conversations. I know that occupational health and safety officials had conversations with JBS last week. We were at Cargill today to make sure with the follow-up that not only the measures are in place that were assessed but that they’re working as intended. When we do the follow-ups, Madam Speaker, when inspection occurred in Cargill today, we’re dealing not only with the employer side, but we’re dealing with the employee side. Both these sites have joint health and safety committees, and occupational health and safety reaches out to both the employer and employee side so we can understand, get a better picture of what’s going on, and make sure that the measures in place are working and see whether or not another order must be . . .

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

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I appreciate that the conversation has moved to Cargill and meat-processing plants because I would really like to stress that we know that there was workplace transmission and communication happening in those work sites, and I think it’s really important to acknowledge that. Although there may have been learnings about other community-based transmission, workers got infected with COVID-19 in their workplace prior to their voices and their concerns being learned and being heard. I appreciate that the minister says that within days inspection was happening once the concerns reached his office. My

understanding was that that very first inspection was a virtual one, which workers did not feel was adequate in their mind at the time.

Right there, the fact that the workers at Cargill and in these meat-processing plants tried to raise concerns, tried to talk about this with their employer and their voices weren't listened to, is a really important reason why we should be reminding employers of their responsibility to include workers in workplace health and safety and reminding workers of their right to participate in health and safety and reminding workers of the mechanisms when they are concerned about health and safety in their work environment. Very often workers may be in a position where they do not feel like they have those rights. Through the guidance documentation and through the supports to both employers and workers, that is an opportunity for your ministry, when you say that workplace safety is paramount, to communicate that information to the workforce that is in Alberta and to make sure that workers are aware of their rights and their responsibilities.

To supplement my previous questions about the guidance documentation, I will say that right now I cannot give a clear answer to a worker when a worker says, "What should I expect going back in the recovery?" None of these resources have been written with them in mind. It doesn't answer the question: should I be involved in the conversations? What if I have a concern? What should I do then? This information is really important and appears to be missing.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister of labour.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and again thanks to the hon. member for the question. I want to just touch briefly on virtual inspections. We've had this conversation before, but virtual inspections are not uncommon. The hon. member seems to suggest that when a virtual inspection was done at Cargill, this was somehow subpar while, in fact, virtual inspections are part of the tool kit for occupational health and safety officers. This is used in addition to on-site inspections, and I can tell you that the virtual inspection that was conducted two days after we received the letter from the UFCW and treated it as a formal complaint and asked an occupational health and safety officer to go out there – that safety officer had been to that plant over 20 times, was intimately familiar with it. They involved not only the employer side in terms of the occupational health and safety people there but both the representative from the joint health and safety committee from the employee side and the local rep from the UFCW. That was done. It was a guided tour instructed by the occupational health and safety officer.

This is being used not only in Alberta, which prior to COVID it was being used, but this is being used across the country. You know, I would urge that the member opposite not say, quite frankly, that these are subpar. It was a focused assessment being done. It's a standard operating procedure, and it was done with both the employer side and the union side and the employee side.

Now, in regard to the questions of the biz connect and the table of contents, you know, if you look through the documentation, even within, for example, meat packing there are multiple locations where there are links to – you go to OHS for this information and this information. If there is a concern in regard to an illness, occupational health and safety: you go there, too. To the hon. member I will say that I appreciate the comments that there is a link in there to OHS, but it doesn't show up in the original document. I'll make a . . .

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

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. To be very clear with my language, it was the workers of the facility who did not feel safer or did not feel that an adequate inspection had happened, and they shared concerns. A colleague of theirs then passed away, and the plant had to be closed. If a big part of OH and S working with employers and workers is to make sure everyone is brought along in workplace safety, that an inspection happened that the workers didn't feel was adequate to them is a concern and is one that I think is worth raising without disparaging the good work that the OHS professionals are doing. I think you need to look at the relationships and what is happening in each employment scenario.

We've been talking about the guidance documentation through a number of question sets. I'm going to have to move on, having raised my very strong concerns with the quality of information that Albertans are getting. I will instead ask you a more direct question around your ministerial order around personal protective equipment and the change through that ministerial order made at the request of employers. My question to you, Minister, is: the evidence that went in behind that, can you make that evidence public? There are employees, there are Albertans who are concerned about that decision, which was made with not a lot of communication, and if the evidence behind that decision could be shared, I think that would increase a lot of people's comfort with changes to PPE.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister of labour.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and thanks again to the hon. member for the question. Under the occupational health and safety code, as the hon. member knows, there are a number of ways that you can make changes to the code and some of the parameters underneath the code. One of those ways is the director of hygiene, who is an occupational health and safety official, based on a request made by employers to say: we want equivalency. They can assess that request.

We had an official within our department make an assessment of the standards, the standards and what is equivalent to what we commonly know as the N95, and then what are the other standards: European standards, Chinese standards, Australian and New Zealand standards, Korean and Japanese standards. So an assessment was done, and this assessment included looking at what other bodies have done. The government of Canada had approved the equivalency of the standards, so that assessment was done. Also, other provinces, including B.C., had already approved this and actually had it listed. That was completed as well. Based on that a recommendation was put forward to approve this on an employer-by-employer basis.

Part of the challenge is that if you're only doing it on an employer-by-employer basis, doing the approval becomes very lengthy, so I made the decision to do it as a ministerial order, have blanket protection so that we have more options for employers to use these types of masks for their set purposes, right? But, again, from an occupational health and safety standpoint, it's not just about its equivalency. Then people need to be trained in the proper use, there needs to be proper fit, and there needs to be proper storage. All of these things are important for the proper use of this. The fact of the matter is that these are being used in other provinces and have been endorsed by the government of Canada as equivalency.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, so the House is aware, we have about 26 minutes remaining in this portion of the debate.

I will recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Falconridge.

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you, Minister, for all the work during this pandemic. I think you have done a great job. When it comes to Cargill foods, I think there was the

unfortunate incident that there was an outbreak, and when it comes to Cargill or JBS Foods, I appreciate the work that you have done and also that the government has done. It was great, and it was great help.

I had a chance to talk to a few people who verified that they were in the hospital. I talked to them. When it comes to OHS and the AHS inspection, even if it was virtual before, I thought they were quite confident that whatever the employer could have done, I think they have done a good job. And even after the pandemic and when you go to the – like, we just opened Calgary on Monday, but when you go to small businesses and the use of PPE, I was surprised at the guidelines they're following.

5:10

I think they're training their employees on how to identify the symptoms. Some small businesses even have those thermometers. They basically check your temperature before you walk into the premises, which is great. I also found that the employees were trained even to look for the symptoms. Like, if you have a symptom, they have all kinds of displays of, you know, you name it, the COVID symptoms and how to protect. It was great and something which we should appreciate. I can see where the opposition is going. There might be some drawbacks, but that will be for another day.

When it comes to PPE, I think mostly the businesses are using it. Some businesses I've seen are using the face masks and also wearing the gloves. I think we need to . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister of labour.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Copping: Well, thank you very much to the hon. member for the – not quite a question, so I'm not quite sure where you're driving with that. I'll speak a little bit because you spoke in your opening remarks about the meat packing. You know, again, we did have two very large outbreaks at the plants. I am pleased to say that now at this point in time we have single digits in regard to Cargill and in regard to JBS in terms of confirmed infections. It appears as if the measures that have been put in place once we got involved and looked not only at what was happening within the workplace but around the workplace and provided supports as well – and it's not at all the fault of the workers there. As Dr. Deena Hinshaw indicated, one of the challenges was that they didn't have the space to self-isolate at home. Resources were provided for the plant to enable those workers to go stay at a hotel to be able to self-isolate to be able to stop the spread, and our learning from this is to be able to look beyond just the initial workplace on how we deal with that.

Thank you very much for your comments. The work is up and going now. It appears that the work is safe and the measures are being put in place. I, like you, you know, going out in Calgary, have seen employers and employees doing a very good job of working together to ensure the safety of not only Albertans, who are using the services or who are shopping but also being very responsible for employees themselves in terms of wiping down interaction amongst themselves and also in certain cases wearing PPE where they can't get the distancing – much of the guidance for wearing nonmedical face masks for the general public, which is similar for some workers . . .

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

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. You mentioned the WCB premium deferral in your opening comments. I just wanted to talk about Workers' Compensation Board very briefly, first with a

comment that I think we need to be aware that there are some very high-risk professions that do not have mandatory WCB coverage. As dental hygienists, just as a single example, are going back to work, they are in a close proximity environment where they are at high risk of COVID-19. They may or may not have WCB coverage because it is optional for their employee group. That is more just a comment that I think the minister needs to review when he is able to.

My question is along the lines of the WCB coverage when there is workplace transmission of COVID-19. There will be some fields where it's very clear that someone contracted COVID-19 because they were in the workplace. That situation is fairly straightforward, but with more and more people returning to work and it becoming more difficult to identify, how are you keeping abreast of the WCB policies and procedures as they begin to roll out, and do you have any concerns about the COVID impacts on our workers' compensation system and its ability to respond and to provide the appropriate benefits and supports to employees who may contract COVID-19 because they are now going back to work?

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

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member is quite correct in pointing out that WCB can apply where there's transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace. In fact, to date there are 441 accepted cases. This is being done based on the current rules that are in the legislation that exist today and actually existed under the previous government, where there is an assessment in each individual case looking at what the likelihood and the probabilities are in terms of whether it was contracted in the workplace or contracted elsewhere, and there are a number of factors that go into that decision, but such cases are being accepted.

Now, in regard to the follow-up question in terms of the benefits associated with the claims, you know, as the hon. member knows, often the benefits associated with the claims are for someone who is just sick, and full sick benefits associated with that would apply. In the cases where a WCB claim is accepted and, sadly, someone passed away, then full fatality benefits apply, which includes funeral expenses, grief counselling for all immediate family members, financial survivor benefits, including a lump-sum fatality benefit and employment support to a spouse who is not gainfully employed. All that applies standard, COVID-19 versus not COVID-19. Thankfully, that applies in very rare cases in terms of workers, and most of the cases are associated with disability benefits for often a shorter period of time.

We haven't done the total cost associated with this, but when you look at it if – that's a great question. I'll have to get back to the hon. member on that. My initial assessment is that when most of the costs are associated with a short period of time of, in essence, sick benefits, then it's not as significant an impact as some other injuries may be, where longer periods of time and rehabilitation are required.

The Speaker: Hon. members, for the benefit of those here, we have 18 minutes remaining in this section of 50 minutes of debate.

I see the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Mr. Turton: Awesome. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's always a pleasure to rise here in the Legislature. First of all, I'd just like to thank the minister for some of his comments and answers to many of the questions here. You know, as a long-term member of a private-sector union here in the province I have worked quite a bit with quite a few employers over many, many years on job safety plans to try to make work sites safer for many of my colleagues that I worked with on various construction sites around Alberta, so I

appreciate a lot of the work that you have done, Minister, over this time.

As I have mentioned before to yourself and to other members of this House, there actually is a Cargill plant located in Spruce Grove. It actually makes most of the McDonald's hamburgers all across Canada. During this time, you know, talking with the workers and the management at that location, they've continued to follow many of the rules that your ministry has put forward to provide a safe working environment so that workers can continue to provide for their families and provide goods and services to many residents of Spruce Grove.

I guess my question to you, Minister, is that there are countless examples of other businesses that have been able to follow the rules that you've been able to put forth. They've been able to operate within this context of COVID within a safe manner. I was just wondering, for the benefit of the House, if you could maybe highlight a couple of those positive examples of other businesses or sectors that have been able to still continue to work yet maintain worker safety during this time.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. Now, the hon. member is quite right. As I indicated in a previous answer, this has been largely, not entirely but largely, a success story both in terms of the work that Albertans have done on flattening the curve but also maintaining safety from a health and safety standpoint of both employers and employees in the work site. We have over 160,000 work sites in the province. We've had 41 outbreaks.

Now, don't get me wrong. Some of those outbreaks, like at Cargill and JBS, were large, in those two locations, but the others we've been able to get a handle on very quickly. When we look at it as a percentage of the overall workplaces that we have, it's less than .03 or .02, depending on how you want to do the math, which shows the tremendous success of people working together to ensure that they follow the guidance of the chief medical officer of health.

Mr. Speaker, as the Premier indicated earlier, we have had a relatively light touch in terms of shutting down areas of the economy in response to COVID-19, so we've had sectors of the economy, including construction in particular, which continued to operate through this. The hon. member, you know, his background is in construction. We've had the industry players from construction put out best practices guidelines, working with their union counterparts to be able to do that with endorsement and put that out. We actually had that on our occupational health and safety website, best practices guidelines, and employers are following that.

5:20

So we are not getting the stories that you've heard maybe four to six weeks ago from Ontario, where there are horror stories, where there are significant issues. I imagine that's maybe one of the reasons why the right to refuse is being used so much more there than it is here, because we have employers and employees working together and acting reasonably, as Albertans do. So I think that in some regard it's been a success story.

The Speaker: I'd just encourage the hon. minister to perhaps direct his comments in this direction, not necessarily because I'm hoping that you'll look at me but more so for *Hansard's* benefit. When you are looking away from the microphone, it's difficult for them to follow along at home.

The hon. the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has a question.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. My next question to the minister is on kind of two separate but seemingly similar topics. The single-site ministerial order that you signed: I believe the implementation was being managed through Health, the co-ordination of the parties, so in long-term care making sure that the monies being given are being used to increase the wages of those that it's intended to. My question on this situation is: will you as the minister who signed the order, the minister of labour, be monitoring the situation to make sure that no one loses their job once the risk has passed as a result of having been forced to choose a single site? I believe that there's already one case going to the Labour Relations Board around this. So my question is just: as the minister who signed the order, does your office have any role in making sure that this is a smooth rollout?

Secondly, the wage top-ups for essential workers: how is Alberta participating in that conversation? Is that through you and your office, and are you consulting with organized labour? When talking about how Alberta will implement the essential services wage top-up discussion, I know labour has requested to be able to share their thoughts on that. What process are you using?

The Speaker: The Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll try to avoid bobbing and weaving for *Hansard*.

In regard to the first question for the ministerial order, as the hon. member knows, we did some engagement of the industry players and some union players to help draft that. We put a mechanism to address disputes in that ministerial order, which was to go the Alberta Labour Relations Board. From that perspective, I would suggest that the parties who provided the advice were wise, and I would thank them for making that suggestion. We put that in. The hon. member is quite right. We do have one dispute before the board, but that is for the board to decide. We put that in place on purpose so that if there is a dispute, there is a dispute mechanism that is being used. Given that it is a quasi-judicial body, I can't comment any further on that. But that's what the parties suggested. That's what I put in place. I think that's appropriate, and it's being used appropriately in that context.

In regard to the wage top-up, you know, this is a federal program. We need to engage, and the federal government needs to sign off on any programs, and they set the criteria for that. We are in conversations with the federal government about the criteria and how it works. I understand that other provinces have taken different approaches to this. We are understanding what kind of flexibility we have associated with that. The conversations are ongoing. Once we get a better understanding of that, then we can move forward in terms of what's the best process and how are we going to make this happen at that point in time. But we are still in conversations, and we hope to be able to have a better handle on that within the coming couple of weeks.

The Speaker: Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much for that, Minister. So I will assume from your answer that you are the minister responsible for this essential workers wage top-up. You're currently working with the federal government, and yes, you are prepared to consult and involve labour as they have requested. You are welcome to correct me in your next rebuttal if I've misunderstood that, but that's what I think I heard.

My next questions are just on your role as minister of immigration as well. My first concern is that I've been hearing from a number of workers who are concerned about needing more

flexibility. The AINP site has been updated with more language kind of indicating that. Are you currently in conversations with the federal government around temporary foreign workers who had closed work permits who may have been laid off as a result and making sure that perhaps they would be able to find work if they found work with other employers, that that would be accommodated or some other measure of flexibility? Perhaps their AINP applications will be approved regardless.

Secondly, we've spoken in this Chamber in the last COVID debate about the critical need for health care for all. As the minister responsible for immigration, I'm going to raise this again with you. Understanding that your government has said that no one will pay for COVID-19 related treatments, that is still a huge barrier for someone who does not have health care coverage because if they don't know if they have COVID-19 or not, they are worried that it is not COVID-19, they will get a bill. So you have vulnerable workers who will make the choice to continue to work or to hide an illness because they're worried about the financial costs. This call has been made very loudly and clearly from a number of representative organizations. It's already been done in other jurisdictions, and I repeat my call to you as the minister responsible for immigration to hear the voices of many of these workers in Alberta who are worried that they don't have health care coverage and that they are not going to get the treatment that they need.

The Speaker: The Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just for clarification, we're waiting to get feedback from the feds in terms of the criteria, and then we'll decide how we move from there. I just wanted to be clear about that.

In regard to the Alberta immigration nominee program, we recognize as COVID-19 – there are a number of applicants in the process, and COVID-19 makes it more difficult for them, Mr. Speaker, quite frankly, to get through the process, so we've made a number of temporary adjustments to assist applicants during this time. They no longer require original documents or signatures except in copies. We are not declining incomplete applications, and we're providing the applicant time to complete the application and demonstrate they comply with eligibility requirements, so up to 60 days at this point with a possibility of extension because some TFWs may have lost their jobs. They're applying. That was a common stream for AINP. TFWs come through that, and if they lost their job and they don't have a job, that may impact them. So we've done up to 60 days with an extension, and we're delaying, quite frankly, application decisions for up to 60 days and, again, with another possibility of extension, allowing the applicant more time to provide the required information.

We are sensitive to the fact that some TFWs have lost their job and recognizing, as the hon. member knows, the TFW program is a federal government program. They run the program, but we're in ongoing conversation with the federal government. They are looking to provide flexibility. Often if a TFW has a permit to work at one location, they got laid off, to make it broader and if they can find another job and actually providing bridging for them so not to be able to say right away – so we're working the feds in that regard because we understand some of the difficulties with TFWs who are already here and, quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, have trouble getting home.

We may deal with the health care issue in the next round.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis has a question.

Ms Rosin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm actually going to go off a bit on the vein that we're already on. I want to start by thanking the hon. minister for all of his work over the past couple of months. I know he's had an incredibly difficult task and a busy few months being in charge of the labour portfolio, so I'm very grateful for all the work he's done in keeping Albertans safe and making sure that our labour issues and our labour market runs as freely and as naturally as it can.

I want to go off on the vein of the temporary foreign worker program. As I'm sure you know, I represent the riding of Banff-Kananaskis, and what's interesting is that over the last few years while the rest of Alberta has struggled with not having enough jobs, my riding has actually had too many jobs. We've actually had a labour shortage. What's interesting is that Banff, because it relies heavily on international tourism for its economy, has been kind of able to withstand the blows of the economic downturn up until now. But that being said, as a mountain park – and I know the member across the way who represents Jasper deals with some of the same issues in that our mountain parks and our tourism industry in these areas rely heavily on temporary foreign workers and seasonal workers.

As I said, we've had a labour shortage the last few years, and now that businesses are starting to reopen and there are concerns about borders opening and labour shortages, I'm wondering if the minister can speak to how the temporary foreign worker program has been affected or how it's working in mountain parks and if there are any considerations that will be taken going forward to ensure that our small businesses and our tourism industry has the labour to support it.

5:30

The Speaker: Hon. members, there are five minutes remaining in the debate for this period. The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. Yes, I'm very much aware that some of the mountain parks rely not only on temporary foreign workers, but there are other federal programs which allow for the students – when we go to the Banff Springs hotel, it's often the Aussies that are there – to be able to move around. This is an agreement between a number of countries that the federal government has entered into, which allows for workers to come in, work for a period of time, get experience, and then move on. The bulk of the workers in the mountain parks are actually under that program, not the TFW program.

But the TFW is critically important. The fact is that, you know, with the closure that we've had, a number of these individuals under that federal program went home because they get home early. Now, some haven't. Some have stayed and then, as we reopen again, may be able to be re-employed as a temporary foreign worker. We continue to support the temporary foreign worker program in the mountain parks, and, in particular, we're working with the federal government to maintain those programs and allowances for temporary foreign workers to come in.

There are challenges, and we're working with the federal government. If you have someone who comes in from overseas, Mr. Speaker, they have a requirement for two weeks self-isolation, and this individual has to know about all the rules that we have in Alberta to keep workers safe. In that regard we've been working with the federal government to be able to explain to newcomers who are coming in under that program so they and we can – sorry. I said that I wouldn't bob and weave, but I'm doing it again.

Mr. Speaker, we also have an office that assists temporary foreign workers. Now, granted, it's a federal program. But this is a provincial office to address questions, to assist them with the obligations that they have so that if they are laid off or if they're concerned about the occupational health and safety issues, they can come to us.

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

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. On the same theme, on the question of health care for all, which we were talking about in the last set of questions, essentially one of the keys to getting through this pandemic is that everyone needs to be able to listen to the directives of the chief medical officer of health. One of those is: stay home if you are sick. Go and get tested if you think you may have COVID-19. That's where health care for all would very much help.

But "stay home if you are sick" is one that not everyone is able to follow. In fact, we know that people at the lower end of the income scale have way fewer paid sick days, many of them zero paid sick days or job protection. Now, unpaid job-protected leave your government has granted through two different leaves, but if someone can't afford to take the time off, we are putting them in a position of having to make a decision between buying food for the family or going into work sick and maybe trying to hide that they are sick. It's a really, really tough position to put workers in.

There is a national conversation happening around 10 paid sick days, and the initial ideas are being floated that it be funded through the federal government to help offset costs, to not add on costs to businesses which are already hurting but to support the businesses who don't want their workers to come in sick and to support the workers who need to follow the direction of the chief medical officer of health. Will you be the lead for this government given your role managing employment standards, or will it be the Minister of Finance at the table having these conversations on a national scale? Do you support more access to paid sick days to protect Alberta's workers and to help them to follow the medical advice of our chief medical officer of health?

The Speaker: Hon. members, there's a minute and 45 seconds remaining for the Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thanks again to the hon. member for the questions. Let's deal with the federal 10-day sick leave. You know, as I indicated during question period, this is an item that was just announced earlier this week. We are seeking greater clarification in terms of what the federal government is seeking to accomplish and how they are seeking to accomplish this. We want to be thoughtful about this – right? – in terms of addressing how we would implement this. The hon. member across the way is asking me if I have a point on this issue. Again, we make decisions as a cabinet; we make decisions as a government. There are lots of other ministries that will be involved in terms of making decisions around this. However, we'll be working, you know, in terms of understanding what the suggestions are by the federal government, how they want to implement it, what the parameters are, and then whether or not we can make it work for Alberta.

But I will say, Mr. Speaker, that we understand the need for this. The emergency isolation support program was put in place for this reason. Now, don't get me wrong. There were challenges associated with it. We set it up very quickly, but the reason we set it up was so that people who had to self-isolate didn't have to make the choice between: I need to self-isolate and not get paid. That's why we set it up, and the federal government then set up the CERB to do that

and much more – right? – but that was the main reason we set that up. So we want to get a better understanding from the federal government in terms of how they're going to fund this, what the requirements are, and what the direction is, and then we can move forward in terms of making a decision.

I want to thank the hon. member.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes our debate on Labour and Immigration for the purposes of the delivery of Government Motion 19.

We will now move to an update from the hon. the Minister of Education. I'm not sure if the hon. minister has officials who would like to join you in the Chamber this afternoon. Is that correct? Okay. Why don't we just give everybody two quick minutes here while our Labour and Immigration officials head out of the Chamber, and we'll get the Education officials in. Then we'll have you begin with your opening statement in just a minute or so.

Hon. members, we will now proceed to a period of 10 minutes, where the Minister of Education has the opportunity to provide an update to the House of the COVID-19 response, and that will be followed by a period of 50 minutes of questions and answers with the minister.

The hon. the Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone. Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today and update members of the House on my ministry's COVID-19 response and to recap some of the steps we've taken to continue student learning and adapt to our new reality.

First, I would like to thank everyone involved in our education system for stepping up and adapting to different ways of learning outside of the classroom. It's truly remarkable how much has been achieved in less than three months. When in-school classes were suspended across Canada, Alberta was one of the first provinces to put together guidelines to continue teacher-directed learning under these circumstances. That was in March. In fact, many jurisdictions reached out to us in Alberta to discuss our approach for at-home learning. In late April we confirmed that at-home learning would continue for the remainder of the school year to provide certainty to students, to parents, to educators, and to school authorities.

Teachers in schools are continuing to use multiple approaches when it comes to delivering course content until the end of this school year. The majority of school boards are offering online learning and about half are also e-mailing or sending paper-based homework to their students. I know that continuing student learning so quickly after in-school classes were suspended would have not been possible without the dedication, the passion, and the commitment of teachers and school board staff and leaders and parents.

From day one of this pandemic we've been working closely with our education partners to ensure students are getting the support that they need. We worked with school authorities to provide 60,000 devices such as laptops and tablets to students, based on need, so that they could continue to learn from home. I also redirected \$3 million set aside for a pilot project within our school nutrition program to nine nonprofits to ensure that children and youth who had access to the nutrition programs at school did not go hungry while in-school classes were suspended. I'm glad to give you an update that all the nonprofits received their funding and are working to support vulnerable students and their families for the remainder of the school year. Some school authorities have developed new ways to continue providing food assistance to students and their families, including grocery vouchers and food hampers. We also gave the option to school authorities who were unable to continue

the nutrition program to direct their remaining funds to nonprofits, who could then further provide assistance to their communities. Some have chosen to do so.

5:40

As the end of the school year approaches, we have been working in the past weeks with our education partners to prepare for summer school for those who offer it and on the re-entry plan for the upcoming school year in September. Our re-entry plan is based on the best information at hand today and with the safety of students and staff always being our top priority. I've had many meetings with our education partners and asked for their input. We shared a draft plan with school authorities and partners, including the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Alberta School Councils' Association. My department continues to work on incorporating feedback from our education partners to refine the plan.

It is my hope to share the school re-entry plan with everyone as soon as possible. I know many parents who are keen to know what school may look like in the fall and how summer school will proceed. The re-entry plan will provide clarity on areas such as student learning, transportation, hygiene and cleaning protocols, PPE, specialized supports for students with special needs, extracurricular activities, and provincial exams.

Mental health supports are also a key element in the plan. We will continue to work with school authorities to ensure that these supports reach our children and their families and are used in the most responsive and effective ways at the local level.

As I shared with Albertans earlier this month, we are planning for three possible scenarios in September. I've often said over the past weeks that we are hoping for the best while always preparing for the worst. In scenario 1 schools are open and operate as much as possible under normal circumstances. For scenario 2 schools are generally open but with some health restrictions in place. This could include physical distancing guidelines and hygiene measures. In scenario 3 at-home learning continues much like it does right now. I would like to reiterate that the safety of students and staff will remain our guiding principle as we finalize the re-entry plan. We are working with the chief medical officer of health on public health guidelines for schools. By August 1 the province will make a decision on which scenario will be implemented for the beginning of the school year based on Dr. Hinshaw's advice and the regional relaunch stages.

Also, this summer the temporary funding adjustment that we announced on March 28 will end, and full funding will be restored as of July 1 of this year. As I've always stressed, this was a temporary measure due to the suspension of in-school classes and to allow additional dollars to be directed to the province's overall COVID-19 response. This was a very difficult decision that was not made lightly. Full funding as laid out in Budget 2020 and communicated to every school division and school authority earlier this month will flow as boards prepare for the new school year.

I also want to provide a quick update on summer school. As you may recall, summer school was included as a possible activity under phase 1 of Alberta's relaunch strategy. While not all school authorities offer summer school, our direction to those that do is to follow health restrictions if they would like to offer summer programming. That said, we do know that registration numbers are down compared to last year overall, which is not surprising given the current COVID-19 environment.

I also shared some good news with Albertans last week on capital funding. We have accelerated for school divisions an additional \$250 million for school upkeep and renewal. That was part of our government's announcement in April to double the province's overall 2020-21 capital maintenance and renewal funding to

stimulate job growth and support Alberta's economy. It's a win-win situation as this extra funding will accelerate hundreds of projects in all school divisions across this province while creating an estimated 3,750 jobs that will see more Albertans working again sooner.

These projects are valued between \$100,000 and \$2.5 million, and every school division will receive funding. This is intended to allow school divisions to complete even more maintenance and renewal than as originally planned on their typical year's budget. It will provide upgrades to schools and communities all over Alberta. I have asked school divisions to report on these projects that are able to move forward by the start of June. We expect the majority of them to be complete by this October, and hopefully when the time is right for students and staff to return back to school, some will be able to see how their schools have benefited from this funding.

I know it's been a long few months for all students, parents, and the dedicated Albertans who work in our education system. I'm extremely, extremely, extremely proud of all of the incredible, thoughtful, and innovative work that has gone on and has been accomplished to ensure students continue to learn. I look forward to sharing the re-entry plan for the upcoming school year as soon as it's ready.

On a last note, I want to congratulate our graduating students. It really warms my heart to see that they can celebrate even in the midst of a pandemic, that they are able to celebrate the successes they've had over the last 12 – for some of them 13 when you include kindergarten – years, to ensure that they celebrate the special occasion and all of the hard work that has gotten them to this point. I know it hasn't been the ideal situation for them to celebrate in this manner, but I congratulate every single one of those students. Well done, and celebrate what you have indeed earned. I wish them all the very, very best.

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to provide the update, and I look forward to the questions.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we will now proceed to a period of 50 minutes of question and answer to the hon. Minister of Education. It will be done so where no member is able to speak for more than two minutes in duration and will alternate between private members of the opposition caucus and private members of the government caucus should there be questions from both sides. The time is now 5:47, and we will conclude at 6:37.

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

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to begin by acknowledging that there was another announcement today that two more Albertans have died of COVID, and certainly our thoughts are with all of those who have been impacted, whether it's directly through a fatality or illness or anyone who's been impacted at home.

This has been a very memorable year, I think. Most graduating classes want to really remember their grade 12 year, and I have no doubt that the grade 12 students of 2020 will never forget what happened this year and the impacts on our entire province and on them personally.

I want to begin with a question that I did ask the minister privately – I think she said that she was going to look into it some more, so I'll put it here on the record – around the 60,000 devices that she mentioned earlier. The number is a rolled up number between school divisions, the Métis Nation of Alberta, and the government of Alberta, she said a number of times, so I'm wondering specifically how many of those are government of Alberta acquired devices.

Many of them, I imagine, are from school divisions, and the school division currently owns the asset. I'm sure that many of you

have fund raised for various school activities. Often what happens at those schools is that they'll buy capital and donate it to the school and to the school authority. They'll buy Smart boards, they'll buy tablets, they'll buy computers, and they'll even buy musical instruments and those types of things. That parent fund raised money buys assets that get donated to the school authority. I imagine that most of the school division devices were ones that parents already fund raised for.

So I'm specifically asking about how many government of Alberta acquired and disseminated devices there were out of those 60,000, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, a lot of parents have asked us to consider a model similar to what's happened in Ontario, where parents actually receive a direct payment to help with the increased costs that they're facing, and I think most parents would say that they've had significant increased costs with emergency remote home education.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you so much for the question. You are right. There were over 60,000 devices, including laptops, Chromebooks, tablets, and iPads, that were provided to students. As well, the Métis Nation of Alberta in partnership with Rupertsland Institute had purchased more than 2,200 devices for self-identified Métis students across Alberta. United Way also contributed Chromebooks to school authorities and provided financial support for Internet access to those families that were in need. The private sector donated Chromebooks and computers to school authorities. Service Alberta computers were matched with hard drives for deployment schools, and many schools who had older equipment refurbished it or had equipment that wasn't being used, and they have lent those out and have also offered payment plans to families.

5:50

We've continued to work with industry partners and have provided those names to school divisions, whether they're the major providers of Internet, et cetera, and some of the plans they have available are specifically designed to help students out. We continue to do that. As far as specific numbers, we're going to still have to get all of those from school divisions. Those exact numbers haven't been drilled down exactly, but we do have the ability to say that we have all come together as an education community, including those that are government, those that are school-owned and school-authority owned as well as private partners and nonprofits, all for the betterment of students. We continue to improve upon that on a daily basis, weekly basis. My department is in constant contact with those. We lately have not had a great influx of requirement for further need, but we're always open to address any need that arises, and we've been doing that on a school division by school division basis.

The Speaker: Are there other members who are hoping to ask a question?

Ms Lovely: Well, I wanted to start off by thanking you, Minister, for coming to my constituency this summer. You worked it in on your tour. No. It wasn't in the summer. It was in the winter. I just wanted to share that the minister did snow angels with me in the snow in front of the school, and it was such a good example for the kids that you were able to have fun. You and I and the superintendent were on the snow making snow angels, and that was a very memorable moment for me, so thank you for doing that.

I also wanted to ask you a question. There's been some confusion with one of my school boards regarding some funding. I see from

what I've received that there's been an increase in the funding, but they are under the understanding that there's been a change with their PUF funding. I'm just seeking some clarification so that I can bring that information back to them so that it's more clear for them.

Thank you, Minister.

Speaker's Ruling Relevance

The Speaker: I'm happy to hear from the minister. I want to ensure – and I don't know the details about what's happening, and I'm not sure if the PUF funding or whatever the question is about is specifically related to COVID or not, and maybe it is. This will serve as a general reminder that the questions and answers today should be specific to actions that the government is taking as a result of COVID. Maybe this is and I just don't know, but that will serve as a general reminder for all members of the Assembly that that will be the case.

The hon. Minister of Education.

Debate Continued

Member LaGrange: Thank you. It was great to be in your constituency, and it was great to make snow angels. I can't say that I'm sad to see that the snow has left, but that being said, as far as it relates to PUF and COVID, we had no changes to the PUF funding in this current year with COVID. The money continues to flow. Those resources are still there for school boards to access and to provide for their most vulnerable children. It is important, especially given the circumstances of COVID and the challenges that it places especially for our vulnerable children, often who are medically fragile as well, that school boards are able to access those funds and utilize them in the most appropriate way to benefit those students. There have been no changes to the PUF funding throughout the COVID epidemic.

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

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just to reiterate, in my last question the question was specifically about government of Alberta acquired devices. How many government of Alberta devices were given out within that 60,000? I don't need the district numbers. I'm confident that we can get those. I'm specifically asking about government of Alberta. I think Service Alberta was the one ministry that was mentioned, so it would be great if we could have a number ideally today. If not, if it could be tabled in this House, that certainly would suffice, but how many government of Alberta, not district-owned, not Métis Nation owned, not private-sector owned devices were actually given out? That certainly was the highlight of the 60,000 number when it was originally rolled out. That would be very helpful.

I do want to say that when I've been talking to teachers, most have said that somewhere between 20 and 30 per cent of the kids are getting their work done with no problem, submitting it before deadline. About 50 per cent of the kids are getting some of the work done most of the time, and about the other 20 to 30 per cent of the kids they haven't heard anything from for months. Many of them have said this in a variety of different settings. I think that's probably an anecdote that I've heard from at least five different teachers in the last week, so I imagine it's not far from the reality. I think that those kids probably don't have access to technology, a large portion, and don't have a regular way of connecting. These teachers have tried their best to track down these kids, but if a kid goes dark and doesn't have access to technology to stay connected, it's really, really tough.

Have you been working with the ATA and with school authorities to track these numbers of kids that haven't been able to actively participate, and what are you doing to ensure that that gap gets eliminated in the remaining five-ish weeks of school? Certainly, they've already lost a significant portion of time, and we wouldn't want them to lose more, especially if when the fall comes, we aren't at full back-to-normal status. We don't know yet. There are the three scenarios. How are we going to ensure that students who have already lost significant progress don't lose even more in the weeks ahead and potentially months?

Member LaGrange: Thank you for the questions. I'll start with the computers again. You wanted more specific numbers. Checking with my colleagues here, we have what is called the computers for schools program, that not even through just COVID but at any point in time we are looking to provide schools with technology, with computers, and that's something that we have on an ongoing basis and has just been ramped up through COVID. We will certainly get you those numbers from that program and will get that to you as soon as possible.

As far as students going dark, we know that there is a percentage of students that are going dark. Of course, this is school divisions. I'm in constant contact with the college of Alberta superintendents, who is monitoring that at the division level with their school divisions. They're in constant contact with the principals, who are in constant contact with their teachers to ensure that we are connecting with those individuals. The teachers are following up with phone calls. I know of teachers who have actually gone to students' homes and have made sure that the students are fine and that everything is going all right. We cannot force parents or students to do the work, but we are certainly encouraging, strongly encouraging, and doing everything within our power to make that a reality.

I'm sorry. The last piece of your question was – oh, working with the ATA. Absolutely. We're working with all our education partners. As you'd indicated, we have been very much on the re-entry plan, ensuring that we are talking to the parent groups, the Alberta School Councils' Association, the ATA, the college of Alberta superintendents, the Alberta School Boards Association. All of us have come together, and we're working together, and beyond that they're reaching their far-reaching tentacles. The Alberta School Councils' Association just did a survey . . .

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary . . .

Mr. Toor: Falconridge.

The Speaker: Falconridge. I'm a terrible person. The hon. Member for Calgary-Falconridge.

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to start by saying thank you to the minister. You have done a wonderful job. I think that once COVID-19 started, the first fear we had was: what will happen to the kids in the schools? The way we handled it, I think it went very well, so kudos to the ministry and their staff, same as to you, Mr. Speaker.

I want to start by saying this, that I represent Calgary-Falconridge, which is in the northeast. I had the chance to talk to a lot of parents and students. They made the tough choices during COVID-19. They did. It might be virtual learning. It might be technical issues. What I found is that a lot of kids who are on the waiting list for the charter schools – there was a cap from the ministry before. I think there was a cap of 13 charter schools, maybe 14 or 15. It's not only the number of schools but also the number of students they can have and what kind of program they can have. I

was surprised at the thousands of students on the waiting list in Calgary. Thousands.

6:00

Some of those students are going all the way from northeast to the south end, so basically they're spending hours just in the transportation. So there is a huge demand in the northeast area I represent, and I think after we come out of this COVID-19, there will be some new initiatives we need to take. So my question is: Minister, are you looking at giving more choices to the parents of students in the future?

The Speaker: My apologies to the hon. Member for Calgary-Falconridge. Similarly to the previous question, it's important that they are specific to the government's COVID response. I suppose it's reasonable to think that COVID did impact charter schools as well. I'm not sure if that was your question, but I'll provide a general caution that the questions should be about the government's response.

The hon. Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question. The COVID pandemic affected all schools including our charter schools, absolutely. I've been very encouraged by the collaboration that we've had from the various associations, as I said earlier: the Alberta School Boards Association but also the independent schools association, the charter school association. There are a number of them. They've all come together for the common good of looking after all the students, recognizing that all students in Alberta need to have their learning needs assessed.

It's why, when we first looked at our response and how we would react to the pandemic, we made the very critical decision that we would not be cancelling classes, only in-school classes, that we wanted children to learn. It's what we heard from all of the education partners. It's what we've heard from parents. They didn't want – you know, some areas of the country chose to do different things and suspended learning, suspended classes, cancelled classes, whereas we very much wanted to ensure that students had the opportunity to continue learning. It's just in a new format.

There will be many things that we will learn as a result of COVID-19. Already the co-operation amongst school divisions, the ability to utilize, you know, online programming and expand that, the partnerships that we've developed with other agencies: there is so much that I can say will be silver linings in all of this for all types of learning.

And I look forward to bringing forward the Choice in Education Act, 2020, in the days to come.

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

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to take a moment to talk a little bit about the education helpline. I didn't hear that in the opening remarks. I expected that we probably would. I know that on the heels of the more than 20,000 education staff being laid off, which was just two weeks after the budget was brought forward so quickly in this place – it felt a lot like this, actually, the debate process around that budget – there was a decision to cut the grants for education, and the directive was made around laying off a number of different staff, including educational assistants. And then in the weeks that followed, the minister announced there would be this education helpline.

I've had many concerns raised and complaints brought to my office about the lack of support on that phone number, on the people who are there to help. A number of people have said that they felt like it was more that they were asked to complain about their

teachers or their principals rather than to get new resources or supports. They were told, “Well, your teacher or your principal should really be providing all the support,” even though these are parents that have known their school for a number of years and have worked with them, and they’re now, many of them, down an educational assistant and were hoping to get some new additional support that was sort of alluded to in the announcement.

My questions around the education helpline are a few. Number one, what type of staff member is answering the phone? Like, what are their credentials? What’s their experience? Are they new staff to Alberta Education, or are they existing staff? So who’s on the phone?

Number two, around the script, it seems like it’s essentially running a little bit like a call centre. So what’s the script, and would that be able to be tabled in this House? Like, what are the questions that are being asked and the recommendations that are being given? They seem to be a little bit varied. And, really, are we assessing its effectiveness after each call and measuring whether or not that’s a useful resource or investment or if parents are just finding it frustrating? Because many are telling me they find it very frustrating.

Thank you.

Member LaGrange: Thank you for the question. The helpline was put in place specifically during COVID because we were hearing from parents, particularly parents that had special-needs children, that they wanted some further direction. Oftentimes it wasn’t so much that the resources weren’t there; it was the fact that they didn’t know how to access them. So the helpline is there to supplement and enhance what school divisions already have in place.

When I look at – and she would know this; the hon. member was a former school trustee as well. There’s always a protocol in place when a parent has a concern or a question, and typically that protocol is to go to the teacher. If they don’t find the answers they need at that level, then they proceed up to the principal and to the superintendent and to the board. Of course, the staff that are manning the phonenumber are my department staff. They’re experienced staff. They’ve been there a long time, is my understanding. They’re senior managers, in fact.

They are, first and foremost, ensuring that the proper protocols have been adhered to, that parents and those that are phoning the line are first being asked: “Have you talked to your teacher? Have you talked to your principal, to your superintendent?” Because that’s always your first go-to. Beyond that, if there are additional questions, if they’re looking for additional help and supports and resources, that’s where we’re hoping to connect them with whatever else they may be looking for. Could I give you a script? I don’t know that we have a script in terms of we don’t know what each particular parent is looking for. So we are trying to address those individual needs that they have as we’ve heard they want them addressed.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I’d like just to start off by saying thank you to the minister for the work that you’ve done. I’ve recently spoken with some trustees in my riding who are very complimentary of the work during the COVID-19 process. I’d also like to take a moment to thank the teachers and the parents who, on very short notice, had to quickly adapt to a new way of teaching their children and their students, and just, really, say thank you for doing that. I’m assuming that for many it was quite a challenge, and for others they may have had to brush up on a few things themselves to help get their kid through some math or maybe some social

studies, and I hope that that process has been positive for everybody. And also to hear about the 60,000 devices that have gone out to support student learning and the nutrition program: there were a lot of steps taken very quickly by your ministry to support students and to support parents as well.

I have two questions. Basically, around COVID-19, you talked about three potential scenarios: fully, general, and sort of a status quo. If you could talk about whether or not that could be developed regionally: so will you be looking at Calgary as a separate area versus Edmonton and across the province as you look for reopening over the summer into the new school year?

Second, as we come into June and the grade 12 students, if you could go through what diploma exams look like, how they’re going to be tested in the final months of their student career, the K to 12 portion of it anyways, and then what the universities are doing or postsecondaries are doing, accepting certain grades or how those exams are going to be looked at – depending on the percentages that they’re getting, is there any leeway there? I was just hoping that you could provide some comments on those two questions, please.

Member LaGrange: Absolutely. Thank you for the questions. Are we looking at in the scenarios and the re-entry plan a regional approach? Absolutely. We will be looking at adhering to the guidance of our chief medical officer, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, and Alberta Health and everything that they give us in terms of advice on how to proceed, and if there are hot spots, how we can address those hot spots. So a regional approach, much as you’ve seen for the greater re-entry plan, will certainly be what we are looking to bring forward as well.

6:10

As far as the graduations go, we have cancelled all graduation diploma exams as well as PATs. They will not continue. The teacher has the ability to give the student the mark dependent on the work that they’ve done to date and the work that they’re completing for the rest of this school year.

Postsecondaries. We’ve been working with postsecondaries behind the scenes to ensure that they recognize the fact that we are in extraordinary times and that students, you know, are very much concerned that this will affect their ability to get into postsecondary. They have very much understood that and are working with us to determine how those grades will be looked at, but, of course, they have students that are in the same situation as well that are having to complete their studies in a new format given extraordinary circumstances and have been very, very good to work with in that regard.

I think I’ve covered all three, but if I’ve missed something, please feel free to tell me that I’ve missed something.

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

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When I posted yesterday about this debate coming up, I had about 200 questions written in from mostly parents, who were hoping that we’d be able to get through as many of them as possible. So I’m going to do my absolute best to be able to honour their questions.

One that I want to do at this point in time is specifically around – and it was mentioned that a number of parents of students who have special needs have been calling in and wanting more support. They’ve been working with their principals and their teachers for years, most of them. It was after their educational assistants were laid off that this number was announced, and part of it was to say: we’re going to help you, parents of students with extreme needs.

They are very frustrated because they know the system well. They don’t need somebody to tell them how to readvocate over and

over again. They've been doing that for years. They want more resources, which is what the announcement initially said would be in place, that there would be more supports and more strategies and more people to help parents. They definitely are feeling that instead they're being given the runaround and told that they should go back to their school or that the department will go to their school. That actually creates a heightened sense of fear often among parents and school staff because they're worried that they're being asked to complain and that this could be held against the staff that are working so hard to try to meet their needs. But, of course, with the important educational assistant support being cut, it's not available.

I do want to say that I appreciate the commitment to making a decision by August 1. The parents have asked if the commitment will be made to announce it on August 1 as well, not just deciding and waiting, because they would like to be able to plan if they require child care. So we're hoping for that.

Another one of the parents' questions that I'll do in this exchange was around trauma counselling supports. We know that during the floods of 2013, for example, there was a specific strategy around trauma counselling and how it related to what students had experienced during that time. Is that something that's being developed in your ministry at present to make sure that the needs of these students are met?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much, and thank you to parents that are connecting with you. I know that many parents are connecting with us. Also, the Alberta School Councils' Association just put out a survey. They've had over 65,000 responses that they're right now distilling through: all parents that have a desire to have input into what the re-entry plan looks like, what some of their concerns are, you know, what some of the successes have been, what has not worked so well. Definitely we're always listening to parents.

I just want to go to the point that the PUF funding and funding for special-needs children did not change. That continues to flow to all school divisions, and certainly school divisions were putting those people in place to work with that cohort of students that have special needs. Again, even prior to when we made the announcement that in-school classes would no longer continue, that at-home learning would be happening, there was a fear amongst this parent group because their children are vulnerable, often, as I said, medically fragile as well. In certain schools there were upwards of 75 per cent of those parents voluntarily keeping their children home prior to even the announcement that we made on March 16. I believe that was the date that we made that announcement.

We have been working very, very closely with Inclusion Alberta, which represents many parents across the province in terms of the special-needs children, to very much address some of the concerns that we're hearing. They are unique amongst that group. We also indicated that August 1 is the latest that we will inform parents of the new re-entry plan.

The Speaker: Are there others wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Thanks very much. One of the other parent questions here is: "Ask the minister, please, if she is aware about the education cuts resulting in school mental health therapists already being laid off. If she knew this, why did she cut funding?" This, I think, is specifically around RCSD and the whole RCSD model after a decade being disbanded and the staff being left in the lurch. Many are told that they can apply on district-specific contracts for,

you know, .05 of a full-time equivalent position or those types of things.

Particularly parents in rural communities have expressed significant concern around the lack of supports specifically for mental health but also around the other allied health folks that are part of RCSD: occupational therapists, speech pathologists, supports for those who are deaf and hard of hearing as well as those who are blind. They are in a state of chaos at this time. We also have been informed by a number of unionized AHS employees that the extension was made through to the end of the summer, that there wouldn't be any layoffs. These RCSD employees are often AHS employees, but what does that mean on September 1, when they're supposed to be working with kids and supporting them in their transition to the next school year? The question was originally around mental health therapists, but it is about all of the allied health folks that are employed through RCSD.

Also, Albertans are struggling with unprecedented job losses and loss of income. As we move to the relaunch phase, a question for the minister. The UCP promised to make life more affordable. With school fees rising after the elimination of the bill that capped school fees, with bus fees ballooning – Rocky View, I think, is where this parent is from – how does the UCP plan to keep their promise to Albertans who are already struggling with these bills and now their fees are going up astronomically? I'll stop there.

Member LaGrange: Thank you for the questions. I just want to correct a misconception that I just heard. Perhaps the hon. member does not know this piece, but the regional collaborative service delivery model is still in effect until the end of this school year. School divisions receive the full funding for that, so there has been no change to the regional collaborative service delivery model through COVID.

As far as the new funding model, when we went out for engagement on the new funding model, it was certainly something that we heard from pretty well every school division across this province, that they felt that that delivery model was not working for them. There was only one area where they felt that it was working and meeting their needs, and they have chosen – all those dollars have remained within the school divisions. The dollars that we were spending on that particular model have been disbursed among school divisions. And those in that particular area are choosing to pool those resources so they can provide it because it was working for them.

The other area said that it wasn't working for them. Now they have the flexibility to provide services and hire those individuals that they want to provide those services. I'm hearing great things from school divisions that they like this flexibility and that it's actually going to work better for them, that they're going to be able to provide more services more effectively to more students.

As far as the relaunch in terms of transportation funding, in the upcoming model we've actually increased funding in transportation. Transportation is always an issue. Part of the re-entry plan and something that we're looking at is transportation, because when you look at other provinces and other jurisdictions where they are providing transportation, they've gone back to in-school learning, but they are doing social distancing. It's almost cost-prohibitive to have some of the measures in place.

The Speaker: Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has the call.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you. It'd be great if the minister could table the names and who it is that's supporting the RCSD elimination, because many, many, many organizations, parents, and districts

have reached out to me saying that they are deeply concerned with it. I know that the minister was on the board when it came into play 10 years ago, and I was as well at that time. There was so much frustration around windshield time and lack of service and how co-ordination was done, and so many of the actual allied health professionals spent the majority of their time filing paperwork and tracking miles and trying to put together piecemeal contracts, particularly in rural and remote communities. We've heard from a lot of folks in this area that they are deeply concerned about the impact. The minister said that there are a number of organizations – or maybe she said divisions – that support this move to eliminate RCSD. It would be great if we could actually have some evidence to confirm that.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Even private schools have reached out to me saying that when they were part of RCSD in more of a regional way – they don't have enough kids to get a big enough grant. They've talked to folks in the department and were told: it's not going to be worth your time to apply because your enrolment is so low. They have kids who have significant trauma that need counselling services, for example, and they were told that it's probably not going to be worth their time to actually apply for their portion of what used to be supported under RCSD when they worked together as part of a larger region.

6:20

Another question from a parent. It's specifically around the decision that was made in the earlier part of COVID – and maybe the minister is in a position to reverse this now – around getting rid of reporting class sizes. Of course, a lot of parents are concerned that if we go back to class sizes that are as big or even bigger – CBE yesterday in their board deliberations said that there will be two kids more per class on average, essentially. So how are we going to ensure appropriate physical distancing and a safe learning environment? One parent here says: "My kid is supposed to have 35-plus kids in her class next year because of cuts. How can that be done safely?"

Member LaGrange: Thank you again for the questions. As I toured across the province, it was something that I did hear from school divisions in terms of the regional collaborative service delivery model, particularly in the remote and rural areas. Often-times they still had issues with windshield time and positions that remained vacant because they couldn't get those specialties and attract those specialties to their areas. So they were looking at new and creative ways of filling those positions.

Again, this was something that we heard about as we engaged, the new funding model that school divisions themselves, when they provided input, were wanting to change. So we responded to that information that we received from our school divisions, and we addressed the concerns that they wanted and have given them maximum flexibility to utilize those dollars in the best interests of their students within their local context.

In terms of reporting class sizes, we have committed to working with the Alberta Teachers' Association to form a group, which we are right in the process of forming, a task force of sorts, a committee of sorts to look at class size complexity. As everyone felt – again, we've consulted and talked to all of our education partners – it's not just the size of classes but the complexity of classes. You know, to be even more specific, we talk about the CBE. When I looked at the audit that came back just recently and have addressed with the CBE, their percentage of teachers that were not in front of students was quite high, so they're looking to address those. That was one of the recommendations, to address that.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any hon. members wishing to speak? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. There are a number of questions around the early years and particularly kindergarten and the importance of play, tactile learning centres. I'm sure the minister has toured many kindergarten classrooms. My mom was a kindergarten teacher, so I spent a lot of time with her in her classroom. Kids touch stuff. They lick stuff. They share it with their friends. They're deeply worried.

Fair enough. You want to acknowledge the complexity of classrooms. That's fine, but at least don't start by getting rid of the data that we do have. Maybe that data isn't enough. Then parents are saying: feel free to collect more data. But how is it going to be safe to have the same class sizes we had before COVID with these new concerns we have around safety, cleanliness, and appropriate protocols? That is one.

I want to say that I was trying to follow Dr. Hinshaw's update today. I have a number of concerns around the multisystem inflammatory syndrome that she mentioned, specifically with children and adolescents, that she has a possible case already here in Alberta, something that seems to be spreading quite quickly in jurisdictions where it is. I want to know that the minister has been part of discussions around this, and what is going to be done to make sure that – one of the things that was really interesting about COVID is that with COVID specifically we haven't seen many fatalities, particularly among young people. But multisystem inflammatory syndrome seems to be a significant risk, particularly around a number of organs. How are we going to ensure that we keep students safe as well as the staff who work with them and the parents they go home to at the end of the day?

Thank you.

Member LaGrange: Thank you again for the questions. What I would say first around the data is that the data is always there in terms of the class sizes. I can instruct school divisions to provide me that data at a moment's notice. When I require that data, I absolutely will. Again, I've already made the commitment and I'm working with the Alberta Teachers' Association and other education partners to look at the complexity and size of classes. That's all part of that discussion, and we will be looking at that.

Absolutely right: children are children. I have seven of them myself. I know how busy they are, especially the little ones. I have four grandchildren, soon to be five. We are working with Alberta Health to provide us those protocols in terms of: what will we require to keep the environment safe in terms of cleanliness, cleaning protocols, what types of cleaning materials we'll need, et cetera, et cetera? So all of these things we are looking at, and we are in discussion as to how we can do it. Of course, the number one priority as part of our guiding principle when we developed the re-entry plan was the safety and the security of our children and of our staff. So that is the number one priority. We will always put that first.

The multisystem inflammatory problem that is occurring with children is very real. I believe it's very much similar to Kawasaki disease, when I've done my research. So I'm very much aware of that, and we are also, again, looking at that, ensuring that teachers know the signs and the symptoms to recognize. So that's going to be part of the protocols and part of the professional development that we're going to provide to our system to ensure that they can . . .

The Deputy Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Glasgo: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you for the opportunity to rise, and thank you to the Minister of Education for taking the time today to answer some of our questions around COVID-19. As many of us do in this House, I was taking some time looking through my e-mail and looking at a lot of concerns from parents regarding going back in September. Overwhelmingly I hear parents saying that they want to go back and that actually their children are looking for ways to get back to school. They miss their friends. They miss school itself. I was, unfortunately, one of those kids who always loved going to school.

You know, I just feel that there is so much pressure on parents right now to just be the all-star and do everything that they can. So I just want to say thank you to all the parents in Brooks-Medicine Hat who have gone the extra mile to do that.

My question is for the Minister of Education. What exactly are we looking for? What are the targets that we're looking for in order to send children back in September? You talked about a regional approach. I know Brooks was one of the ones that was delayed in the relaunch because of an outbreak. What does a second wave look like? How would that affect our relaunch in September?

The Deputy Speaker: The Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you. Great questions, and I wish I could give you certainty in the answers. Right now, as I've been saying all along, we are, you know, certainly wanting the best, to be able to go back in a very normal setting. That's why we've got the plans. We're providing for three scenarios, hoping for the best but planning for the worst, you know, so that we have a good, solid plan so that wherever we find ourselves on or before August 1, we can provide that certainty.

We definitely take our direction and our guidance from the chief medical officer and Alberta Health. They will certainly be the ones telling us what their best recommendation is in this area. You know, that has served all of the province in good stead thus far because we are so fortunate to be one of the best in terms of keeping that curve low across the country. So we can take solace in that fact.

I do know that to date we have 926 children who have tested positive for COVID. We also know that the Kawasaki-type disease, autoimmune, is still a very small percentage of children, comparable to others that are suffering from other inflammatory diseases, but we know that students can be superspreaders, so we have to be very, very careful.

6:30

We have to ensure that we are able, even in the event that we go back under one scenario, to transition quickly to another scenario if there is a second wave of pandemic or if there is a hot spot in a certain area that all of a sudden develops. We want to be able to ensure that we have thought this through all the way, that we can give parents the surety to know that we're thinking through all the issues.

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

Ms Hoffman: Thank you. I think that staff have raised some concerns around even more falling on them. I did hear that we're going to be tasking teachers with doing health assessments to identify whether or not students are showing up with multisystem inflammatory syndrome, and I think that many teachers would feel that that may not necessarily be their greatest strength. They're trying to keep kids safe in a number of other areas. So the question that I'm asking is: will there be additional resources to help with the additional demands that are continuing to be put on existing school staff?

Also, when we were debating estimates – and this relates back to COVID now even more than then – we were talking about CEUs and the move to the weighted moving average and the funding cut of 50 per cent in your fourth year and 75 per cent in your fifth year. I was told it's interim. We are very close to the end of the school year and, in turn, the beginning of the next school year. Teachers are asking me – and so are parents – about: what does this mean for students who want to take a number of different options, that are in CTS, for example? They've already lost out on a significant opportunity this year in those classes because, of course, the focus has been on diploma-related coursework, but they want to ensure that students have the opportunity to engage in the full spectrum that is supposed to be the high school experience.

For a number of students – we've heard a lot of talk about the trades in this House and how important they are, and I want to say that I agree – an opportunity to take a CTS course and be engaged in a future career path is the reason why they go to school. They haven't been able to do that, a lot of them, over the last several months. What are we going to do to make sure that the new funding formula doesn't hurt them when they return post-COVID, that they get a proper educational experience, and that they have the opportunity to pursue their interests in an educational setting, of course acknowledging that with COVID there could be issues with touching and those types of things? So how are we going to make sure that we do that safely?

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, we have about five minutes left in this portion of the debate.

The hon. Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. To address the first question, in terms of additional resources, et cetera, a portion of the CMR funding, the maintenance and renewal funding that was recently announced, which was \$250 million, a significant amount – we already know that approximately \$50 million of that has already been allocated by school divisions towards some of the additional protocols and systems that they want to put in place such as handwashing stations, upgrading those types of facilities that will help ensure that proper protocols are there to protect students and staff.

I know that staff may be a little bit concerned about students coming back and having to monitor their health. You know, I can understand that, but that being said, on a day-to-day basis, when you have students coming to school, oftentimes children leave home on the bus and by the time they get to school, all of a sudden they've developed a fever or whatever. So we need to continually reinforce to children (a) that they need to let their parents know if they're not feeling well so that the parents can make that initial assessment in judgment, because they are in the best position to do that, and (b) that if they do become ill in school, we do have the teachers and the staff looking at it from an objective perspective and that they can look at those students and say, "Okay; you know, perhaps this is this" or whatever and somewhat be able to deal with those situations. Of course, in light of COVID that will take on a new meaning, for sure.

As far as the school divisions providing experiences for students, absolutely. School divisions want to provide those wonderful . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Mr. Turton: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you very much to the minister for answering our questions. I'd like to take us back to about maybe seven, eight weeks ago, just before spring

break, when it was a really hectic time when it came to COVID and the response from the education system. I was one of thousands of Albertan parents, one of hundreds of thousands almost, around the province that had to deal very quickly with having to all of a sudden find new arrangements for my two young boys, that are in the public system in the most amazing riding in the province, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain, and try to deal with the whole new dynamic of teaching my boys French.

I know that a lot of parents were concerned at the time about the speed at which the decisions came down in terms of affecting the school schedules. I guess my question to the minister is: at that time what was the type of consultation with the school boards as well as teachers? It happened very suddenly. I was maybe hoping that she can just kind of walk through the process that it went through over the course of that weekend and just kind of, you know, how the ministry reacted in communicating with parents, school boards, and teachers about this new schooling arrangement with having the kids stay at home.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you. It seemed, even from my perspective, that things were moving very quickly, as they have been with COVID and our reaction to it, and I'm glad we took the steps that we took. As Dr. Hinshaw, our chief medical officer, was presenting to the Emergency Management Cabinet Committee meeting on I believe it was the Thursday or Friday prior to the Sunday, at that particular time the recommendation was that we continue to keep our classes open.

During that weekend there were numerous conversations that were had with the Alberta School Boards Association, the ATA, the college of Alberta superintendents, and Dr. Hinshaw, and by late Saturday, Sunday there was definitely a feeling that we needed – and

we discussed all of the possibilities. Do we do it on a regional basis, do we look at it from just, you know, isolated areas, or do we look at all in-school learning shutting down? In broad consultation with all of those groups it was very, very clear that this needed to happen and needed to happen right now. We had parents that were very fearful to send their children to school. We had staff that were very fearful to come to school. Because there were so many unknowns and so many things happening and so much uncertainty, that was what led to that final decision.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, that now concludes the Education portion of this afternoon/early evening.

I will now invite any other member of Executive Council to make a statement if they wish.

Seeing none, I will recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I think it just is worth noting at this moment that I would like to thank the ministers who made themselves available and the staff who made themselves available, because I think this is an important issue and an important debate. As you referenced, you know, the time has now come and gone for additional ministers to make statements on this issue, and I think I have to just register our disappointment that of the ministers we have, four were made available and 18 were not.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, that would not be appropriate at this time. I'm wondering if there was a motion although that would be highly unusual for you to make at this time.

Seeing that there are no other ministers to make statements, that has concluded our afternoon. The evening session has been cancelled. This House now stands adjourned till 9 tomorrow morning.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6:39 p.m.]

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