



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Alberta's Economic Future

Ministry of Labour and Immigration
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 3, 2020
3:30 p.m.

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The 30th Legislature
Second Session**

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP), Deputy Chair

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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Participants

Ministry of Labour and Immigration

Hon. Jason Copping, Minister

Maryann Everett, Assistant Deputy Minister, Workforce Strategies

Rob Feagan, Executive Director, Safe, Fair and Healthy Workplaces

Shawn McLeod, Deputy Minister

Andre Rivest, Acting Senior Financial Officer

3:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 3, 2020

[Mr. Neudorf in the chair]

**Ministry of Labour and Immigration
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: All right. Good afternoon. I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone. The committee has under consideration the estimates for the Ministry of Labour and Immigration for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2021.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have all MLAs introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials who are joining you at the table. My name is Nathan Neudorf, the MLA for Lethbridge-East and the chair of this committee. We will continue, starting on my right.

Ms Goehring: Good afternoon. My name is Nicole Goehring, MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs and the deputy chair.

Mrs. Allard: Good afternoon. Tracy Allard, MLA for Grande Prairie.

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

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk, MLA for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Mr. Reid: Roger Reid, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Barnes: Drew Barnes, MLA, Cypress-Medicine Hat.

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

Mr. Smith: Mark Smith, MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon, subbing for Mr. Horner.

Mr. Copping: Jason Copping, Minister of Labour and Immigration, also MLA for Calgary-Varsity. On my left I have assistant deputy minister of workforce strategies, Maryann Everett; to my immediate right is acting senior financial officer, Andre Rivest; and to my far right is Deputy Minister Shawn McLeod.

Ms Gray: Christina Gray, MLA for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mr. Nielsen: Good afternoon, everyone. Chris Nielsen, MLA for Edmonton-Decore.

The Chair: Thank you. I just want to confirm the note for the following substitution for the record, that Mr. Smith is here for Mr. Horner.

Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard*, and the committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Speaking order and time. Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. Standing Order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation while the speaking time limits are set out in Standing Order 59.02(1). In brief, the minister or the member of the Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of his comments we will begin a 60-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for the government caucus.

The rotation of speaking time will then alternate between the Official Opposition and the government caucus, with individual speaking times being set to five minutes each, which, when

combined with the minister's time, make a 10-minute block. Discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not the speaking time is combined. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their rotation if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time. If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send a note or e-mail to either the chair or the committee clerk.

A total of three hours has been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Labour and Immigration. The scheduled end time of today's meeting is 6:30 p.m. With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having this break? Seeing none, we will call that break at the appropriate time.

Ministry officials may be present and at the direction of the minister may address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery area set off to the side. Pages are available to deliver notes or any other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to the three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and the meeting clock will continue to run; however, the time for the speaking block will be paused.

Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

The vote on the estimates and any amendments will occur in Committee of Supply on March 19, 2020. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which time they are moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk, and 20 copies of the amendment must be provided at the meeting for committee members and staff.

I will now invite the Minister of Labour and Immigration to begin with his opening remarks. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Before I get started, I would like to introduce staff with me who are in the gallery. If you could raise your hand and indicate who you are when I say your name, that would be greatly appreciated.

Mr. Ryan McFarland, acting ADM for safe, fair and healthy workplaces; Ms Janet MacEachern, chief of staff to the minister; Ms Rachel Stein, chief of staff to the deputy minister; Ms Brittany Baltimore, press secretary; Ms Robyn Cochrane, director of communications; and Mr. Rob Feagan, executive director for safe, fair and healthy workplaces. Thanks very much for joining us in the gallery.

Ladies and gentlemen, since taking office a little under a year ago, our government has taken steps to restore Alberta's economy and bring our budget back to balance. As you would have heard during the Budget Address, we are on track. Budget 2020-21 continues the responsible four-year fiscal plan that started with Budget 2019, a plan to get Albertans back to work, to make life better, and to boldly stand up for Albertans. I am proud to share that Labour and Immigration's 2020-21 budget supports these goals. My ministry's budget is focused on ensuring that spending is focused where we are getting the most bang for the taxpayer dollar. Given Alberta's current economic circumstances, one of our most important priorities is to support training programs that help Albertans boost their skills and get jobs. But we also need to ensure

that hard-earned tax dollars that are going to programs and services will make the most difference in the lives of Albertans, and that is why we will also be efficient with our spending.

Part of the efficient and fiscal responsibility includes looking at the way departments and our department is organized. This past February Labour and Immigration consolidated the workforce strategies group. Workforce strategies is responsible for delivering employment training and immigration programs. In an effort to reduce red tape, streamline stakeholder access, and save operational costs, the program effectiveness branch was disbanded and programming absorbed into the employer services and newcomer supports branches. This reorganization will increase processing capacity, enhance investment support for job creators, and improve immigration services for newcomers.

Realignment of the resources within these branches ensures that programs support key objectives and delivers a strong fiscal foundation that supports Albertans in gaining new skills to meet the demands of and successfully integrate into the labour market. This includes continuing to invest in training that leads to full-time employment, especially for Albertans who have been adversely affected by the economic downturn. This includes oil and gas workers, coal workers, indigenous communities, young people, and newcomers. In fact, we have increased our investment into the training for work and income support for learners programs. The training for work program assists recent graduates with short-term skills training and work experience leading to employment. This infusion of funds will assist in expanding the program to smaller communities and enable an additional 150 to 180 Albertans to access these programs to retrain, gain new skills, and find jobs.

I'd also like to speak about the continued support for Alberta workers impacted by the phase-out of coal. Approximately 1,100 workers were affected by the coal phase-out when the program began in 2018. A total of 240 individuals received assistance from Alberta Labour and Immigration between January 2018 and November 2019, for a maximum of approximately \$11.5 million in grant support. Another 97 received tuition vouchers from Advanced Education, representing a total of approximately \$1.2 million.

We are pleased to say that the funding for this displaced worker program will continue through the technology innovation and emissions reduction program, also known as TIER. This government continues to stand up for Albertans, and we are ensuring that those impacted by the policies of the previous government will not be left behind, which is why we are continuing the coal workforce transition program, which will be funded by a program that will reduce emissions from large industrial emitters, TIER, and not penalize Albertans for working and living in our province. These actions are part of standing up for Albertans and modernizing the way public services are delivered and ensuring that Albertans are getting full value for their tax dollars.

Continuing with the theme of finding efficiencies, since we were here last November, the department evaluated the occupational health and safety area and identified operational efficiencies that led to \$3 million in savings. These efficiencies will have no direct impact on programs or on Albertans. It will maintain the same level of health and safety standards that exist on our work sites. These changes support our government's work to restore investor confidence and grow our economy while also signalling to investors and businesses that in Alberta we don't cut corners, and our rules and regulations are world-class. As such we will continue to proactively work with employers to ensure that they are in compliance with our regulations and codes through education and ongoing inspections.

3:40

I would now like to turn my attention to a number of new items that were outlined in our platform to highlight them in our budget. The first is a Fair Practices office. As many of you know, injuries in the workplace are stressful, both on the employees and job creators, and as such the Fair Practices office, which is fully funded by the Workers' Compensation Board, is up and running. A new office is being constructed, and \$2.3 million was reprofiled from the 2019-20 budget to the 2020-21 budget. Please note that this is not new money but money that was unspent on the design and construction of the office. Reprofiling this money ensures that the Fair Practices office provides fair and transparent support to injured Albertans and job creators as they navigate the workers' compensation system because we want Albertans to have a safe and healthy workplace and every worker to make it home safely at the end of the day.

The next item I'd like to talk about is the heroes' and first responders' initiative. As many of you in this room know, there is no higher form of public service than to risk one's life in the maintenance of public safety. This government promised to establish the fund to provide benefits to families of first responders who die in the line of duty and to boost support for first responders who have been diagnosed with posttraumatic stress illness as a result of their service. That commitment is reflected in our budget. We are committing \$9 million over the next three years, starting in 2020-21, to implement the Alberta heroes' fund for first responders and support psychological health in first responders programs. Alberta's first responders are heroes and deserve respect and support from all of us, and I'm proud to support them in our budget. I look forward to sharing more information in the coming months when the programs are newly launched.

In addition to the creation of the two programs, my department continues to work on developing a new, flexible Alberta advantage immigration strategy, which is part of our platform. Now, Alberta has always been the destination of choice for thousands of talented and qualified people from around the world. Alberta is in a global race for the best and the brightest newcomers. We need talented, ambitious, entrepreneurially driven newcomers to come to Alberta to build businesses and create more jobs, not only for themselves but for all Albertans. For too long immigrants have encountered red tape and barriers to settlement, and the Fair Registration Practices Act, which was passed in June 2019, eliminates unjust barriers and reduces red tape to registration in regulated professions and trades for new and foreign-trained Albertans. I'm proud to state that, as a result of the act, the fairness for newcomers office officially opened yesterday, March 2. The office will work with regulators to speed up and simplify the assessment process for newcomers, and this is an important step towards making Alberta a place where skilled newcomers can integrate easily, work in their chosen professions, and help to restore the Alberta advantage for everyone living in our province now and in the future.

In conclusion, Budget 2020 continues to lay a foundation for the future, and Labour and Immigration's budget supports economic growth, prosperity, and opportunity, and that means everything, including supporting first responders, keeping workplaces safe, investing in training programs, attracting skilled newcomers, and strengthening our economy. We will continue these initiatives by allocating our resources to where they'll be the most effective and do the most good. As Minister of Labour and Immigration I am committed to ensuring that our programs create opportunities to attract investors and newcomers and get Albertans back to work. I believe this budget supports that commitment.

Thank you for your time. I welcome your questions and comments.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. The timer will be set to 20-minute intervals so that members are aware of the time. Who will be speaking for the opposition?

Ms Gray, do you wish to combine your time with the minister's or do block time?

Ms Gray: I would prefer to combine if the minister is open to that.

Mr. Copping: I'm agreeable.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Please proceed.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister, to all the staff who are here, for this discussion. I very much appreciate your time, and I appreciate that following our last estimates discussion, you followed up in writing with many of the things that were read into the record and we didn't get a chance to discuss. Very appreciated. I look forward to having another productive conversation. I will give the same caveat that I did last time. I will apologize in advance if I cut you off at any point. As we learned last time, the time goes by really fast. It did for me. I'm not sure how you felt, Minister, but it flew for me, so we will jump in.

I'm going to start by talking about the business plan. I think that the business plan can tell you a lot about governments and ministers and their priorities.

Now, this year's business plan is based on the one that we saw four months ago, so there haven't been – like, there are some changes, but a lot of the core things are the same. I wanted to ask you a few questions about a couple of the changes between the two business plans, starting with outcome 2, Albertans have the skills demanded by Alberta's labour market now and in the future. A decision was made to remove an objective, which was to "improve participation in Alberta's workforce particularly among under-represented groups." My first question would be: why did we remove the objective when helping underrepresented groups, possibly people who are vulnerable, or others attached to the labour market is so important?

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much for the question. This is still a focus of our department. It's very difficult when you're building a business plan to highlight all the things that you're working on. A number of these groups – as you know, with a number of our programs like our training for work programs, our aboriginal programs, our First Nation programs are focused very much on getting other groups to work. This is still an item that we're conscious of, but again we wanted to focus on getting all Albertans back to work and newcomers back to work, and that's where we're putting our focus in this plan. That does not mean that we're forgetting those that are vulnerable. In fact, we have programs for them as well.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you. It's not an indication of changes to programs. Thank you for that, Minister.

On the next page: implementing the Fair Registration Practices Act. There was just a small change that caught my eye. In the previous business plan it specifically referenced helping newcomers connect with smaller communities, and the smaller communities piece just isn't in this business plan. I was wondering if that's still . . .

Mr. Copping: It very much still remains a focus. I'm looking forward to launching, in the near future, our Alberta advantage immigration strategy. A core component of it is assisting smaller communities. As you may have seen in our platform, we have two

streams that we have proposed: looking at entrepreneurs in rural areas, and the rural renewal stream. Those are going to be very much a key component of it, so the change in the wording doesn't reflect any change in our purpose. When we roll out our Alberta advantage immigration strategy, which will happen over the next few weeks, that will be front and centre.

Ms Gray: Similarly, in 3.4 reference to low-interest loans was removed.

Mr. Copping: Again, that goes back to – there's so much program you can do. We have earmarked additional funds for that within our budget to expand the capacity of organizations who provide loans. This is part of our action-for-newcomers plan. It was outlined in our budget, and we're highlighting that within the Alberta advantage immigration strategy as well.

Ms Gray: Okay. Finally, a performance measure was removed, which is a performance measure that, I think, has been included in Labour business plans for years. Certainly, before my time in that seat. It was tracking the person-days lost to strike or lockout, and I wondered if you perhaps wondered about what that measure might read if it were to remain in for the next couple of years given some of the concerns that we've been seeing between this government and Albertans.

Mr. Copping: Yeah. I can't speculate on what it might be. As you know, the number of strikes and lockouts has been very low over a period of time. In terms of that number, the days lost is really a function of the size of bargaining units and is something that the Ministry of Labour and Immigration doesn't have control over. We provide mediation services to hopefully avoid strikes and lockouts, but in terms of this particular outcome, you know, we felt that it wasn't representative and within the control of the ministry, which is why we removed it. In terms of your question, I can't speculate what the change may or may not be.

3:50

Ms Gray: That's fair. Thank you very much, Minister.

I'm going to switch to the expense by vote, just looking at kind of the raw numbers. The first question I have for you is around the minister's office expense. This is one we didn't talk about in the last estimates because, although there was an increase in that line item, I recognized that with the transition between governments there were severance payments happening. But I note that your 2020-21 estimate for the minister's office is over 20 per cent higher than the 2018-19 costs to run the minister's office. I was curious if you could explain why your office is running 20 per cent more expensive.

Mr. Copping: My understanding is that if you looked at the 2018-19 budget, which is not yet here, the numbers are comparable across in terms of that the '18-19 actual went down, and partly that was because of transition. There was less spending in '18-19 to '19-20 in that we had severance payments, and then it's dropped back to \$621,000. But my understanding is that if you actually looked at the budget in '18-19 as opposed to the actual, it's in that same ballpark.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you very much, Minister.

I suspect, based on your opening remarks around the workforce strategies group being streamlined, that there's some volatility underneath workforce strategies between a few of the line items. I imagine it's related to that realignment that you were describing. I'm interested in just hearing a little bit more about the increase to workforce development partnerships and at the same time the

decrease to labour attraction and retention as well as labour market programs. I will assume it is not because we are no longer attracting and retaining.

Mr. Copping: No. You're quite right. A lot of the movement in workforce strategies between the various line items is driven by the rework. For example, if we take a look at – well, I'll talk about it at a high level. If you look at the underlying number, \$105 million in the '20-21 estimate versus the '19-20, \$114 million, that's roughly a \$9 million differential. If you look at STEP, which we talked about last time, that's an \$8 million change, so that's the primary. We also had \$1 million, you know, through realignment and efficiencies, and then also in terms of moving some money around from some programs to another. The rest of it is the organization.

If you want to go to the specifics, we go to item 2.2, workforce development partnerships. As you know, this helps to ensure that Albertans can respond to skill shortages through collaborative efforts with industry, communities, employer groups, organizations, industry sectors, and municipalities with common labour market needs. As part of the workforce strategy's realignment and reorganization, we increased \$3 million related to labour market partnership grants and industry workforce partnership staffing costs. That was pulled from 2.4, for example.

If you wish, I can go into detail on each one of them, but the high-level overview is the realignment, moving money around. We also found some efficiencies. Then, also, we focused on those areas where we believed we would get a more direct path to jobs. For example, as you work through, we have a slight increase in settlement integration. We have an increase in workforce development.

Ms Gray: You mentioned an increase in the training for work?

Mr. Copping: Yeah. We have an increase in training for work, which is under skills and training support. We have an increase there as well.

Ms Gray: I believe that in your opening remarks you mentioned an increase in income support for learners.

Mr. Copping: Yeah. Which is under training for work or – sorry – under skills in item 2.8.

Ms Gray: Yes. Income support for learners: if I recall correctly, last year that item had an increase, but it's entirely needs-based. Like, as people need that fund, the budget will adjust to fund that. Am I correct?

Mr. Copping: That is correct.

Ms Gray: Fantastic. Thank you for that, Minister.

Mr. Copping: The increase for training to work will result in additional Albertans entering the program, and then they can become eligible for income supports, so by increasing training for work, we also increase the income for support if people need support to attend those programs and find jobs.

Ms Gray: I think that the training for work suite of programming is really important and does directly benefit Albertans, so I'm glad to see that that is being invested in.

The additional funds for training for work – I know we're not on that page. I know that the revenue coming from the workforce development agreements – like, labour is not receiving more of the federal funds, so the increase here is purely within the department.

Mr. Copping: Yeah. It's within workforce strategies. If you take a look at it, you'll notice that there is an increase in item 2.9, the coal workforce transition program. It's a program driven by need, so we've done an assessment in terms of – this is associated with coal mines shutting down and bridging opportunities, whether it be bridging, early retirement, or retraining opportunities and vouchers. I mentioned that earlier in my remarks. That is going up because in the assessment that our department officials have done, there's going to be stronger demand in that this year.

In terms of moving money around, if you looked, there's a drop in labour market programs, which is primarily the Canada-Alberta job grant, which focuses on training programs for employers, which we support and we think is very important. We're maintaining \$15 million in that bucket. That said, it doesn't necessarily get Albertans back to work. It's a retraining, and we felt that it was more important to put the dollars in getting Albertans back to work and then maintaining our commitment for the coal workforce transition program.

Ms Gray: I would agree with your assessment on the value of the Canada-Alberta job grant versus the training for work programs that directly help Albertans attached to the labour market.

From the expense by vote section I did notice – I wondered if you could just walk me through the difference between budget to forecast, just this year's spending, not the estimates in 2020, for occupational health and safety. It's exactly \$3 million, and I just wondered why there was \$3 million not spent in occupational health and safety over this past year.

Mr. Copping: As mentioned in my opening remarks, we were able to find some operational efficiencies of roughly \$3 million, which is decreased due to changes.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe these are changes associated with services.

Mr. Rivest: That's correct.

Mr. Copping: Yeah. Changes to those services through streamlining and improving our processes so that we didn't need to spend the money on the services. We're maintaining the services, right?

Ms Gray: What would be an example of a service?

Mr. Copping: Travel, contract services, supplies: that type of thing is where we're able to save money. Just to confirm, there were no staff changes as well, which I kind of figured that that's where you're going with this.

Ms Gray: Well, I did want to just inquire about the staffing levels in occupational health and safety, so we'll do that now, because during the last estimates you were essentially adding 17 new employees, but you had 10 vacant positions for a net new add of seven. What is happening with occupational health and safety staffing within this budget?

Mr. Copping: There's no net change. Just one second. Sorry. There is a change. My apologies. In '19-20 we had 200; now we have 198. We're just basically sort of not filling vacancies associated with that.

4:00

Ms Gray: One of the things we talked about in the last estimates, Minister, was the ratio of OHS officers per 100,000 workers. Now, our conversation was only four months ago, so my question is: have

those statistics been updated since I last inquired about them? I would like to stay on top of those numbers. They do have a direct impact on safety, and with Alberta's population continuing to grow and the number of OHS officers remaining flat or, you know, down by two, that ratio can, as there are more workers, start to get away from Alberta.

Mr. Copping: We haven't updated the data. As you pointed out, we were only at this four months ago, so some of the data is updated; some hasn't been.

Ms Gray: Okay. So we won't do that.

This is touching on occupational health and safety. In the previous business plan one of the performance measures that was removed was the number of occupational health and safety inspections. We had a discussion about the value of measuring actions versus results. I do still think that there is importance in the number of occupational health and safety inspections, and I was wondering if you would be able to share the number of inspections and also the number of proactive inspections that are continuing to take place within the department.

Mr. Copping: We do have the number of inspections. It's difficult to do a comparison because, you know, the data is only as of January 2020, so we don't have that.

Ms Gray: Okay.

Mr. Copping: The frame of reference for the number of inspections in 2019-20 as of January is 6,776; the number of reinspections, 2,276; the number of investigations, 709.

Ms Gray: Thank you for those numbers, Minister.

Mr. Copping: But, again, as we discussed last time, there's input versus output. You know, what's more important is the output. One thing that I like to highlight and that we've been finding fairly successful is in dealing with reoffenders, basically – oh; sorry. That's on the employment standards side. My apologies.

Ms Gray: That's targeting workplace enforcements and working with the employers.

Mr. Copping: We are, but our focus on the occupational side is to target those industries, as we discussed last time, where there is higher risk and targeting those employers who have – you know, we look at the WCB, we look at complaints, and then we can target them as well. So it's going with the highest risk offenders in those industries where there is the highest amount of risk so that we can reduce the incidence – right? – and really get the most benefit for those types of inspections.

Ms Gray: Absolutely. I think that the proactive inspection program – thank you to the department; they sent me the link where I can find more information – has really good information as well as plans for going forward. One of the pieces that the website was talking about was the focused inspection programs . . . [A timer sounded]

The Chair: That's just the end of the first block. Please proceed.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much.

. . . with a target of 570 work sites between June 2019 and April 2020. Since we're just creeping into April 2020, I was just going to ask: how is the focused inspection program working, and are you on track to meet your April 2020 target of 570 inspections?

Mr. Copping: We're continuing the proactive inspection program, but in terms of just looking through it, we haven't updated the data at this point in time. My understanding is that we do it normally after we finish the fiscal year. That's correct.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you very much, Minister.

Around occupational health and safety there have been a couple of changes that concern me and I think could negatively impact worker safety. First was the blanket elimination of site-based joint work-site health and safety committees. It's my opinion – and I've spoken to health and safety professionals – that Alberta is moving backwards with that blanket elimination, and it was denounced by health and safety professionals from across the country.

I've noted that on your website there are now some very clear forms available for applications for joint work-site health and safety committees or health and safety representative approval, which is very positive language, but it's to essentially provide exemptions instead of having to train health and safety committee members or to vary the duty of a health and safety committee. My question to you, Minister, is: are exemptions sought frequently? Do you have any numbers for how many exemptions have been granted? Are they always granted, and under what criteria? This is work that your director would be doing on your behalf, but knowing that a blanket exemption has already been given for different work sites, I'm now very curious around these individual exemptions and how many may have been approved through your ministry.

Mr. Copping: While I have officials looking for that, I just want to comment on the change that we made to workplace health and safety. As you're more than aware, you know, the legislation your government passed requires that there be health and safety committees by employer – right? – for certain employers over 20. Then a director's notice was put out saying that it had to apply on a work-site basis. We were approached by a number of employers, very large employers and public-sector employers, who said that this resulted in duplication.

You take, for example, school boards. Not only did they have to have a health and safety committee at the district level, like, at the board level, but they had to have it at every school, which took away resources. Quite frankly, given that for the majority of the schools the issues and the concerns were the same, not only did they have to pay for training, but then they had resources that they couldn't use to focus on what they needed to do, which was teaching.

There were a number of issues, so what we did and the change we made based on their request was to say that there is not a requirement. That doesn't mean – again, these are minimum standards – that other employers can't say that where it makes sense to manage safety, they can have health and safety committees or they can have health and safety reps, which would feed into that. As you know, from my background in private industry, in heavy industry, you know, in the private sector, I understand the value of health and safety committees where appropriate.

Ms Gray: I understand your scenario. The scenario you described does make sense, but you chose to make it a blanket exception, and there are going to be lots of different employers where perhaps that blanket exception may not have made sense. I would have encouraged you to perhaps grant variances to the large employers where it made sense and where your staff could make sure that there was reasonable safety and . . .

Mr. Copping: I would argue that we're simply applying the act, because the act said that it was only by employers, and it was by

director's order that it had to be at all work sites. It's not an exemption. It is that we're just applying the act, right?

Ms Gray: How many other exemptions have been applied?

Mr. Copping: We don't track that number. Sorry. I just got the confirmation.

Ms Gray: Okay. I would encourage you to inquire with your department about tracking that. As well, if possible, if your director has any guidelines around how they make the decision to grant or not, I would certainly appreciate understanding how that is happening, to just have a better sense of how those exemptions are being used.

Another item that I wanted to reference – I've got too many papers. I understood – and the websites for the government currently still have these available – that occupational health and safety worked with apprenticeship and industry training to implement something called enhanced compliance. Essentially, these two types of officers, the AIT officers and OHS officers, have had long-standing relationships. The enhanced compliance initiative was specifically to improve worker safety and at the same time increase compliance under the Apprenticeship and Industry Training Act. It allows OHS officers to check trade certifications while they're on a work site, making sure that there's appropriate supervision for apprenticeships as well as making sure that the people doing the work of a particular trade are appropriately designated. Are occupational health and safety officers continuing to operate under the enhanced compliance agreement that was made with apprenticeship and industry training?

4:10

Mr. Copping: No, they are not.

Ms Gray: Minister, because apprentices working without supervision is a safety issue, because workers working in a trade without valid apprenticeship or trade certification is a safety issue, and because this was a tool specifically implemented to improve worker safety and increase compliance under the AIT Act while reducing, well, it would almost be government red tape of having to send out two officers to the same work sites – like, you have somebody there; why not ask them to check the trade certifications as well? – and also, given that this is the direction that other jurisdictions have moved in, I would like to ask why occupational health and safety officers are no longer checking trade tickets while they're on the site.

Mrs. Allard: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order has been noted at 4:11. Please pause the clock.

Member, if you can share what your point of order is.

Mrs. Allard: Thank you, Chair. I may not be correct here, but I'm just thinking that we're discussing government estimates, and I'm not sure that this is directly related to a line item in the budget. I may have missed something, so I apologize if I did. I'm citing Standing Order 23:

- (b) speaks to matters other than
- (i) the question.

The Chair: Member.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. I'm referring to line item 3.2 and, more specifically, in the business plan the references to safe, fair,

and healthy workplaces, strengthening worker safety, which this minister has actually included more often.

Mrs. Allard: I apologize for missing it.

Ms Gray: No worries.

The Chair: No problem. Thank you. No point of order has been found.

Please proceed with your questions.

Mr. Copping: I'd like to get more information on this particular item, and then I'll get back to the member on this particular item in terms of the rationale behind why OHS officers are no longer checking for tickets. I want to check my facts before I get back to you on that.

Ms Gray: Okay. I appreciate that, and I will follow up with you because I hope this is a decision that can be reversed. I think this was a very important and positive step forward. Again, it's a direction that other provinces are moving towards, so for us to be moving away from it doesn't make sense. Government red tape: I'm just going to say that again because that seems to be important.

On the occupational health and safety side, a quick question. Last time, four months ago, we talked about the statutory requirement to publish the three-year plan for the review of regulations in the occupational health and safety code. In your business plan I note that you talk about beginning another review around, in this case more specifically, the WCB. I might be blending two different things. Let me simplify my question. Has the three-year plan for the review of regulations in the OHS code been completed? I was not able to find it on the public website.

Mr. Copping: One of the things that we will be looking at doing is a review of the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the code. That's one thing that we're considering, and part of that is considering what the best approach is to review the various aspects of the code in terms of the plan. That's why you haven't seen that right now. We're considering: how do we move forward on this and on the one hand improve safety outcomes while reducing red tape at the same time? We're assessing sort of: what's the best path forward in terms of the code?

Ms Gray: Okay. Last estimates we had a good conversation talking about the importance of the code updates and how many large employers, oil and gas, are waiting for the WHMIS and what should be routine and depoliticized updates to the code, so I would encourage you to continue to try to move that forward.

When last we met, the new Occupational Health and Safety Council hadn't met yet, but it's been four months. To your knowledge, has that group been meeting? Have you been seeking their advice as you look at how you will move forward with the code?

Mr. Copping: My understanding is that that group did meet in November. You're talking about the OHS Advisory Council meeting?

Ms Gray: Yes.

Mr. Copping: There was a subsequent phone meeting held in December. They haven't met again since that point in time. Part of that as well is that we are assessing in terms of what our best approach is to do a review of the act and the code and then talk about, you know, their role at that point in time. But we're still at

this point in time considering a review of the act and then how we're going to consult in terms of doing that in 2020.

Ms Gray: I would encourage you not to delay the updates to the code that employers are waiting for, that they've been asking for. In some cases, I mean, I think some might be up to a decade now. So I will just leave that thought with you because . . .

Mr. Copping: We are focused on ensuring that we can update the code. As I'm sure you're aware, we're also working with other provincial governments in terms of harmonization, and that work is ongoing as well.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you very much.

I believe it's out of the occupational health and safety budget: AgSafe was being funded at \$1 million per year, or maybe it was \$1 million over a few years. But I just wanted to check: is AgSafe continuing to be supported through the ministry of labour?

Mr. Copping: The short answer is yes. It was \$1 million a year for three years, and that's '18-19, '19-20, and '20-21. It's in this budget.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you.

I have a question that arose for me in question period today. We heard from Minister Fir that cabinet had been given a briefing by the Health ministry around COVID-19. I was just wondering: from your ministry's perspective, can you provide any updates around preparedness for COVID-19 and its impact in Alberta?

Mr. Copping: I can state that there's a crossministry working group which includes occupational health and safety. How do we prepare for this, ensuring, you know, not only safe workplaces, that workplaces are safe and addressing it, working with Health? There is a crossministry, the government is aware of the risks, we are making plans, and we have Health taking the lead and emergency response plans in place. Should an event occur, we'll be ready for it and have the supplies for it as well.

Ms Gray: Okay. This is relating to line 3.2, specifically occupational health and safety. I would like to suggest to you, Minister, that there's a really strong need for the labour ministry to play a key role in the preparedness because worker health and safety, should COVID-19 – actually, the update that they just gave said that it's likely to be expected, so I'm pretty sure they're saying that it's going to arrive at some point. We want to make sure we're prepared. But the concerns around health workers and their protection are really front and centre for a lot of our health care unions right now.

There's a lot of preparedness that's happening in some of the other jurisdictions based on the knowledge that in the 2003 SARS outbreak disconnects between the Health ministry and the labour ministry exacerbated an already dangerous situation. There were a couple of reports written around the 2003 SARS outbreak because they did a lot of reflective looking. One of the key things that they found in that was that health workers were not adequately protected. These are our front-line defenders. If health workers start to get sick and have to self-quarantine, then that means health workers that aren't there. They even wrote an entire chapter in the SARS review about: Ministry of Labour Sidelined.

4:20

I certainly encourage the ministry of labour and yourself, if the ministry of labour is not playing a strong role at that table, to make sure that you are there and that your team is there because our health care unions need to be part of the solution, and we need to make

sure that whatever the latest – and they're updating constantly the science and what the protections are. We want to make sure that those are applied to our health care workers here in Alberta and that there isn't a delay in the protections that they are receiving.

Along that line – and I'd be happy to hear if you do have additional information, because I know some of your department would be part of the crossministry working group – I would like to suggest that if your proactive inspection program has not already been going out to hospitals, has not already been going out to continuing care centres, long-term care centres to talk about pandemic preparedness, that is something that should be happening. I'd be pleased to hear if that might be happening already.

Mr. Copping: I'll ask our deputy minister. As I indicated before, there is a crossministerial task force on this issue, and our deputy minister, Shawn McLeod, is participating in it.

Mr. McLeod: There's been a significant effort put into the pandemic preparedness topic, as the minister indicated, at both individual departments and a crossministry level. We are aware of the report and the difficulty that, in particular, was experienced in Ontario with respect to SARS, and we are doing our best to make sure that that doesn't happen here.

With respect to the sort of outreach, we are in – I don't know whether I'd call it constant – continual and frequent communication with Health with respect to sort of jointly understanding how this is progressing. Certainly, as part of both the regular outreach and outreach specifically with respect to this, we are planning to visit work sites in that regard. I'd have to get an update in terms of specifically whether that is started or not, but that's the basic background.

Ms Gray: Okay. Based on your knowledge, you are planning to do those proactive inspections, to go out to these sites and to make sure that workers are adequately protected as they encounter people who could be infected. Thank you. I appreciate that because health workers' safety through this crisis, should it reach here, needs to be a strong priority. I wasn't aware of the SARS report, so when someone flagged it to me, it was really, really interesting reading. If you haven't seen it, Minister, it's quite readable, and I think it's got some really important lessons in it. I'm glad to know that the department, on the co-ordination here between Health and labour, is incorporating that. I think that's really important.

Now I will move on to an entirely different topic than a pandemic. Let's talk about immigration and settlement supports. I noted that on the refusal-to-process website it lists that it will be operating until April 2020. I did ask about this program four months ago. This is specifically the program where when employers are looking to use temporary foreign workers and job codes where we have high unemployment, they are stopped and instead worked with to help connect with unemployed Albertans rather than bringing in temporary foreign workers in those fields. At the end of our last estimates I was left with the impression that we would be requesting to continue that, but the April 2020 date on the website – I wanted to check in on that assumption.

Mr. Copping: We are in the process of updating the list now. We will be continuing it.

Ms Gray: Okay.

Mr. Copping: When we did our consultation for the Alberta advantage immigration strategy, one of the key messages that we heard from employers – as you know, this is a federal program, the temporary foreign workers – was, quite frankly, where there are

areas of shortages and they can't find Albertans to work in the role, the difficulty of using the program and hiring individuals.

We're also, once we heard about that, working with the federal government to highlight this and do a process review on the TFW program from start to finish so we can do two things: one is to ensure that the protections for temporary foreign workers are in place and that they're strong but also make it easier for, where it is clearly established that there is a shortage in a particular area, employers to use the program. So we've engaged with my federal counterpart to see if we can do a process review to help employers find the workers that they need so they can provide the services and, quite frankly, provide more jobs for other Albertans as well.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you for that.

I'm glad to see that that pilot will be continuing. I'm curious if you know if any other provinces are looking at adopting Alberta's approach. I just thought it made complete common sense, and I'm curious.

Mr. Copping: I haven't heard of other provinces using our approach in terms of the specific list.

That's correct?

Ms Everett: Yeah.

Mr. Copping: Okay.

Ms Gray: Okay. Well, you can tell them about it at your next FPT.

I'm noting the list of express entry applicants. The website gets updated with how many are processed. Obviously, using that list is going gangbusters. I think that's great. I'd like to know: what percentage of our kind of 6,000 spaces – although I know we'll get new numbers this year – are being used by express entry, and how are our express entry slots being targeted right now? Which gaps are we filling with those applicants?

Mr. Copping: For 2020, of the 6,000 spots, roughly 2,000 are tagged for express entry, 3,750 for AOS, and 250 for the NOC pilots?

Ms Everett: Yes.

Mr. Copping: Yeah. As you know, the process in terms of – with express entry we do an assessment of the data, and if we have the NOC codes that are under 3 per cent, then we'll reach out through the federal program and tap people on the shoulder to be able to come in through that.

You know, program improvement is something that we'll be working through when we launch our Alberta advantage immigration strategy. One of the challenges that we have with our system, AINP, is that even though we will process it fairly quickly and then ask the federal government to process a permanent residency, it still takes them, quite frankly, far too long. We are asking the federal government to adjust their targets so that they can process an AINP application at the same rate as they do through their federal express entry programs, which is about three months. Right now the entire process is taking roughly 18 months.

Is that correct?

Ms Everett: Yeah.

Mr. Copping: Yeah.

Ms Gray: I wish you success with that request.

The Speech from the Throne. You've mentioned it a couple of times, the Alberta advantage immigration strategy. In reading

through the fiscal plan, I noticed something called the start-up visa program as well as another one – and this is on page 46 of the fiscal plan – titled the foreign graduate entrepreneur program. I was wondering if you could just give me: one, are any of these programs modelled after existing programs across Canada? Like, is Alberta likely to borrow from – Manitoba has done some programs like this. Then, secondly, your timeline for rolling these out.

Mr. Copping: I can say: stay tuned. We will be rolling out the strategy over the coming weeks.

Ms Gray: Oh, weeks. Okay.

[Ms Goehring in the chair]

Mr. Copping: Yeah. It's with an intent of standing up these new streams by Q3 of this calendar year, in the fall, in terms of doing that. The details: we had a high-level review in our platform – okay? – so I can speak to that, the equivalent of our start-up visa. It's basically targeting international grads in the U.S. who are looking to remain in North America and start a business, come here to Alberta and start a business – the focus, you know, as we've discussed before, is potentially on the STEM areas, but really it's an entrepreneur stream – and then also for foreign graduates of Canadian universities, Alberta universities, in effect, to be able to start a business, an entrepreneur stream. We'll be announcing that in the coming weeks in terms of details around that, but ideally we want to get this rolled out by the end of this year, in the fall.

Then, of course, as you know, being in this role, even though we have some control over AINP and we administer it, the reality is that it needs to be signed off by the federal government before we move forward with anything.

4:30

Ms Gray: That's right. Yeah. So working within those constraints. Okay. Then stay tuned I will.

Your fairness for newcomers office opened yesterday, so I wanted to just check in on that. When we last spoke in estimates, you mentioned five staff for that office. I was just browsing the GOA directory, which may or may not be fully updated, and noted that you currently have an officer and an analyst. I was wondering if there are more than those two staff or . . .

Mr. Copping: My understanding is that we have all five positions filled. Is that correct?

Ms Everett: We have five positions, four filled.

Mr. Copping: Four filled. Sorry. We have four of the five filled. As we just set up the office yesterday, they may not all be in the government directory as of this point in time. Our intent is to fill all five positions, that are here in Edmonton. We did this intentionally from a start-up standpoint till we get processes in place. The intent of this office, quite frankly, as you know, is to work with professional regulatory bodies to ensure that their processes are fair, transparent, and they can make interim decisions within the first six months. That is the purpose of it, and they're starting their work now. We'll get our processes in place, and then we have the potential of offering some of those services not just out of Edmonton but in Calgary down the road. But at this point in time we wanted the positions to be here in Edmonton so we can ensure that the office is working, processes are set up, and it's nearby.

[Mr. Neudorf in the chair]

Ms Gray: I haven't reread the legislation in a while, but it puts a timeline around that interim decision – correct? – but not the final registration.

I did get a chance to just quickly glance through the regulations that were put in place, and it appears the decision was made to use outside auditors. I was just wondering about using outside auditors as part of this versus the staff that you are hiring, if you're able to tell me more about that.

Mr. Copping: It's outside auditors if required, right? That's in terms of the – you know, the initial step will be asking the PROs to provide information to our officers about what their processes are, and then we can do an evaluation. Then if there are concerns about what they're doing, we can do an audit.

But maybe I'll ask Maryann if she'd comment further on that.

Ms Everett: Yes. Using a range of information that we have from surveys that we've done in the past, we've identified a number of PROs that have got a very good track record and some other ones that are having some challenges. Certainly, the priority in the early days is focusing on the ones that need a little bit of help, with a very positive approach, so bringing in auditors and that kind of thing would be in sort of a circumstance where we needed to be a little bit more proactive. Really, our early efforts are around making sure people understand the legislation and to provide support. For example, staff from the international qualifications assessment service will go and assist some of those organizations to put in different processes and that kind of thing.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you very much for that update.

Mr. Copping: I'd also add that, you know, one of the areas we're going to focus on, quite frankly, is where we have areas of shortages. That's one of the PROs. We want to make sure that their processes are fast and efficient because we need people here and we need people here now.

Ms Gray: Which job categories are you thinking of around the shortages? I don't think I printed off the latest copy of the labour forecast.

Mr. Copping: Yeah. Some of the ones we've identified both through our labour forecast but also – the labour forecast gives you a picture, but because it's a provincial picture, it may not give you the whole picture. You look at areas – as we found out in terms of our doing consultation, you know, rural areas have different shortages than we have in urban areas. Health care professionals in rural areas: those are issues that we need to – veterinarians, in terms of supporting agriculture in rural areas, is another example. IT professionals in Calgary – right? – although they're not accredited, so there's less concern on that from the PRO standpoint.

Ms Gray: Yeah. Programmers are fly-by-night, man. Sorry. That was my former job.

Mr. Copping: Yes. No comment. I'll leave it at that.

Again, our focus is to sort of integrate our work – and this is from our strategy standpoint – focus first on areas where, as we do the assessment with the PROs, if their processes are up to snuff, then that's perfectly fine. But we want to go to those on the list where we have demand first versus the others.

Ms Gray: Okay. I just wanted to check if you can give me the amount allocated for the program grants that support settlement, integration, language, and project grants. We talked about this number in the last budget debate.

Mr. Copping: It's just under \$8 million.

Ms Gray: Okay. So it's been increased in this budget. Thank you.

One line from page 46 of the fiscal plan – on pages 45, 46 it talks about specifically the skills for jobs strategy and that focus. It reads, "To assist Albertans impacted by the downturn to return to work as soon as possible, enhanced job search and placement supports have been expanded and include specialized supports for engineers and other professionals." In preparing for estimates and kind of going through the government sites, I'm not sure I saw what that is. I was wondering if you could tell me more about which line item that falls under and what the ministry is doing to enhance job search and placement supports.

Mr. Copping: It's part of our training for work and training support services. For example, there's a program that we're supporting in Calgary called Higher Landing, which focuses on engineers to help them find work in their field or transition to other fields.

Ms Gray: Okay. So you're pulling forward some of those training for work programs that have been approved and are ongoing.

We have only, like, seven minutes left, so let's talk revenue for a minute. With the changes to the WDA, and we had a conversation about this at the last estimates, overall Alberta is receiving 64 million additional dollars, but the bulk of that is going to Advanced Education and not into the labour ministry. Now, through reallocation you've been able to add additional funds to the training for work program. I think that's great, but I continue to be concerned about wanting to see, during a time of very high unemployment, a focus on making sure that the dollars that are coming from the federal government, that flow-through money, is being used to the best possible effect.

On the revenue side, making sure that we continue to keep that in mind, I wanted to flag that. I was looking for the revenue to hopefully increase this budget, and I didn't see it.

Mr. Copping: You know, we've made a decision as a government to focus on skills for trades, so more money is flowing through the labour market transfer to Advanced Education to promote the skills-for-trade agenda. There have been a number of announcements, you know, that my colleague has made in Advanced Education in terms of supporting that. So whether it's through our budget or another budget, it's still going to creating, you know – Careers: the Next Generation is one example. It's going to creating long-term jobs for Albertans.

Ms Gray: Careers: the Next Generation is a fantastic program. I know the value of training for work and those specific programs. The general Advanced Ed spending: I'm concerned about seeing nearly 500 layoffs from NAIT and SAIT and the disconnect between supporting trades and what seems to be happening at those colleges. So I will continue to suggest that labour should get more.

I also wanted to ask: on the revenue page, page 167, premiums, fees, and licences have jumped up by \$4 million, but in the fiscal tables for fees and licences, it didn't note anything. In the last budget the AINP fee was increased. There were things I could see. How is this going up by \$4 million?

4:40

Mr. Copping: That is the AINP fee.

Ms Gray: Ah. Okay. Just reflected in its implementation in this budget.

Mr. Copping: Yes.

Ms Gray: Okay. So no additional changes to premiums, fees, and licences in this budget?

Mr. Copping: No.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you very much.

One of the written responses that I was given was around the amounts allocated for indigenous employment training through the two programs. If you have that information, I would like to confirm how much is being spent on those two programs.

Mr. Copping: The total is \$5.8 million for aboriginal training to employment and First Nations training to employment, which, as you know, provides training for First Nations both on-reserve and off-reserve. That's the difference between those two programs.

Ms Gray: So it's \$5.8 million between the two?

Mr. Copping: Yeah.

Ms Gray: Okay. Fantastic. Thank you very much, Minister.

Around jobs, one of my questions for you was that I've heard quite a bit from university students who are frustrated with increasing tuition costs, which is not your ministry, but also reduced opportunities for students to get their foot in the door and to get that initial job-training experience. Oftentimes they do bring up the STEP program as something that was helping them to get that experience and not having it being a bit of a barrier. Through the last year you and your government have put in the job-creation youth minimum wage, but our youth unemployment continues to remain high, and that does not appear to have had the job-creating effect that its name would suggest. I was wondering if you could speak to that.

Mr. Copping: As we have discussed many times in regard to STEP during estimates last time and also in the House and in question-and-answer period, you know, we wanted to ensure that the money that we were spending was on programs that led to full-time jobs. The previous STEP program competed with the federal program, which also did something very similar. It didn't necessarily lead to full-time employment because it was summer employment. It didn't have to be in the field. It also didn't take into account where certain employers may or may not have put the job in place anyways because there was no test associated with it. When we looked at the effectiveness, the training for work is far more effective in terms of finding people work. It trains people to be ready for market, and then, also, you have measures – right? – that would lead to full-time jobs. Those programs are set up so that the firms providing the training don't get paid unless 70 per cent either go to education or find a job.

Ms Gray: I will pause you there, Minister, just to say that training for work does not apply to university students, who tend to be primarily who talk to me about the STEP program. As well, your increased investment in training for work, you said, was for 150 to 180 more spots, which is positive but not sufficient to meet university student demand.

I also wanted to ask you about the job-creation youth minimum wage because that was sold to Albertans as: our youth unemployment will go down because it will now be cheaper to hire students, and we have not seen that happen.

Mr. Copping: Just on your first point in terms of the training for work, we do have a number of programs that can and do apply to youth that are under 25.

The Chair: Sorry. That completes the 60-minute time for the Official Opposition.

The timer will now be reset for 20 minutes for the government caucus. Who is speaking for the government caucus? Do you wish to combine your time with the minister as well?

Mrs. Allard: Please.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Copping: Yes.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Mrs. Allard: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the ministry staff for attending here today and helping us to understand this budget more fully.

To the minister through you, Chair, I'd like to start with the fiscal plan. I'm on page 138 of the fiscal plan. It states that:

The Ministry of Labour and Immigration supports a strong and diversified economy by working with job creators and other stakeholders to develop a strong and resilient workforce, promoting safe, fair and healthy workplaces and attracting skilled workers and entrepreneurs from across Canada and the world to Alberta.

It's fairly broad. I just wanted to ask the minister through you, Chair, if he can elaborate on the initiatives that have already been undertaken or planned regarding this broad initiative.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much for the question. One of the primary ways we can assist to develop a strong and resilient workforce is through the delivery of our employment and training programs and services. Adequate skills and training opportunities are crucial, as you know, so that Albertans can get back to work. We work with our partners and job creators to ensure that the skills and training opportunities available to Albertans meet the needs of the labour market and ensure secure employment.

Some of our key employment training programs were mentioned before. Training for work is a key program which provides Albertans with skills and training opportunities to help them secure and maintain jobs. There are five streams under this program: workplace training, immigrant bridging, self-employment, transition to employment services, and integrated training. We also have, as mentioned, aboriginal training to employment and First Nations training to employment. These are programs for First Nations both on- and off-reserve. Income support for learners is means tested. It's a program where you have individuals who are not working because they're going to school, but they need the means to support themselves, and that program provides support to them.

Another program is the Canada-Alberta job grant, and that provides funding for employers who are providing training to workers. That's one initiative in terms of developing a strong and resilient workforce.

In terms of promoting safe, fair, and healthy workplaces, OHS, as you know, occupational health and safety laws set out minimum health and safety standards for the workplace to help ensure workers return home safely at the end of their shift and prevent costly lost production and downtime due to incidents. We are focused on consistent enforcement of OHS laws to help prevent workplace illness, injuries, and fatalities. The ministry does inspections and collaborates with job creators, workers, health and safety associations, and industry associations and labour groups to make sure that we can improve safety in the workplace.

The third way in terms of fulfilling this objective is attracting skilled workers and entrepreneurs to Alberta. As I've spoken of before with the Alberta advantage immigration strategy, you know,

our focus is to attract newcomers here to fill jobs where there is a shortage. As you know, even though we have, unfortunately, high unemployment, that's in certain sectors and certain locations. In other locations such as Grande Prairie, where we did one of the round-tables for the Alberta immigration strategy, there's a shortage in certain occupations. Individuals looking for someone with 10 to 15 years' experience: we can't train that individual fast enough within our own training and education system. So using immigration to have, for example, 10 years' experience in terms of a mechanical engineer or experience in terms of, say, a heavy-duty mechanic, of which there's a shortage up in Grande Prairie, they can do the work, and then that firm can grow and then hire other individuals, which can get Albertans back to work. Plus the entrepreneur streams that are part of our strategy are, you know, at the same time bringing entrepreneurs, who create businesses and create jobs for Albertans.

I think these three elements are really the key ways that we're focusing in terms of building a strong and diversified economy, working with job creators to do that.

4:50

Mrs. Allard: Awesome. Thank you very much.

I'm just going to continue with my last question on the fiscal plan. The next page, page 139, mentions that the operating budget is \$209 million for 2020-2021, reflecting a decrease, a saving, of \$4 million from the '19-20 forecast. I'm just wondering: with this decrease in the operating budget what efficiencies were found so that the department can continue to meet its responsibilities without sacrificing levels of service?

Mr. Copping: Thank you for the question. As depicted on page 139 of the fiscal plan, the change between our '19-20 forecast of \$213 million and our '20-21 estimate of \$209 million is primarily due to the following factors. First, we are focusing our skills training investments on getting Albertans back to work; we eliminated STEP, the summer temporary employment program, which results in \$8 million in savings; and we reduced the Canada-Alberta job grant as well.

We are reviewing our programs and services to try to deliver our services in the most effective and efficient way possible. As has been indicated previously, we had savings on the occupational health and safety side. In addition, on the employment centres, we achieved some operational efficiencies in employment standards of \$0.5 million. Those are the large changes in terms of looking for efficiencies.

Then we also have budget increases on top of that. The Alberta heroes fund for first responders and supporting the psychological health of first responders: that's \$3 million a year; increases in the coal workforce transition program to reflect higher demand for the benefits under that program in 2019-20, which is roughly \$2.8 million. We increased funding for training for work and income support for learners as well, recognizing that this particular program drives, you know, very high benefits in terms of getting Albertans back to work. Then we had some changes to the Fair Practices office for set-up.

Those are, for the most part, the pluses and minuses for the total change in our budget.

Mrs. Allard: Perfect. I'm going to move on now to the business plan. I'm on page 117 of the business plan. It states that "the Ministry of Labour and Immigration is committed to the ongoing review of programs and services to ensure that the best possible outcomes are being achieved for Albertans." My first question: if

the minister can expand on what the review of your programs and services entails.

Mr. Copping: In this we are acting on the MacKinnon panel recommendations to develop a framework to support a comprehensive approach to program reviews that ensures services respond to the needs of Albertans and that we use Albertans' tax dollars responsibly. These program reviews will focus on program effectiveness and efficiency and ensure that services are in the public interest. More specifically, Labour and Immigration's review of objectives and outcomes will include the following.

We will be looking at each of the programs in terms of relevance, aligning the program's services and supporting functions to the ministry's objectives and mandates. We'll be looking at its effectiveness. You know, are the resources allocated to prioritize areas, and can we leverage technology and operational excellence? We'll be looking at efficiency. We'll focus our efforts on the most effective programs and services, and we may stop, start, or alter programs as required. We will look at the return on investment and fiscal responsibility. This involves examining activities and outcomes of programs and services to ensure an optimal return on investment. We'll look at the value with the lens of continuous improvement – how can we improve this to actually ensure that it adds value, and what are the opportunities? – and then also through the lens of red tape reduction, so to reduce public-facing tape. Red tape reduction is not only about employers accessing services within our ministry but with our own processes within our ministry. How do we reduce that?

The end goal of the review is to identify ongoing service innovation and improvement. All of the ministry's programs and services are being reviewed, and it is expected that this process will identify savings opportunity for future fiscal plans. The process may also help inform potential changes to program policy as we do legislative reviews. We expect this to be completed in 2020.

Mrs. Allard: So you answered my next question. Thank you very much.

I would just comment that I applaud the ministry on the efforts to be more responsive to employers and to concerns arising from both employers and employees. I appreciate the efforts that have been made and the improvements that have been made with respect to turnaround times, particularly in light of complaints or dispute resolution processes.

My next question is on page 118 of the business plan, referring to key objective 1.2:

Review and amend the labour legislation and regulation to ensure it supports the needs of job creators and enables a thriving economy while protecting worker rights.

Can the minister provide us with more details on the approach for reviewing and amending labour legislation and regulations? Forgive me if you've already answered this.

Mr. Copping: No. As you are aware, we ran on a platform to restore balance in the labour laws. We also ran on a platform to reduce red tape. Bill 2 made some changes to both the Labour Relations Code and to the employment standards. Since that point in time we've had requests from employers and stakeholders. There are concerns about balance within the labour code and ongoing red tape associated in particular with a number of the employment standards, so in the fall of last year we reached out to the community, did the consultation on potential changes to both the labour code and employment standards. We are reviewing that at this point in time with a view to introduce legislative changes this year, in 2020.

Mrs. Allard: Excellent. Thank you.

I'm going to move on to page 120, again in the business plan. I'm looking at key objective 3.2:

Collaborate with other ministries to develop and implement an Alberta Advantage Immigration Strategy that places a renewed focus on attracting and supporting talented newcomers and job creating entrepreneurs to communities across Alberta.

I'm sure the minister can appreciate that that's much more relevant to my neck of the woods given that our economy is not as challenged as some segments of Alberta's provincial economy. We're fortunate to be in that position. Can the minister advise on which other ministries the department will be collaborating with and their involvement in the development of the strategy?

Mr. Copping: Thank you. As you could probably tell by my previous comments, I'm very excited to release the strategy, which will be coming over the next number of weeks. I can share that when we did the consultation, we worked with a number of departments, which included Advanced Education; Economic Development, Trade and Tourism; Agriculture and Forestry, to develop the strategy and the new program streams. In particular, Advanced Education is advising on the international student entrepreneur program. Economic Development, Trade and Tourism is advising on the foreign graduate start-up visa program. Ag and Forestry is advising on the rural entrepreneur immigration program, the rural renewal immigration program.

In addition to working with the other ministries, over 170 Albertans attended in-person consultations across the province, and 75 individuals participated in online surveys. As I already indicated, we were in Grande Prairie to do one of those consultation sessions. Participants included, you know, employers, newcomers, municipalities, economic development organizations, settlement agencies, industry associations, postsecondary institutions, policy experts, and workers as well. Feedback from all the ministries was used with the external consultations to inform our final advantage immigration strategy, which, again, I'll be excited to announce in the coming weeks.

Mrs. Allard: Perfect. As a supplementary, how will this strategy help attract and support job-creating entrepreneurs in communities across the province? If the minister would highlight, in particular, communities in the north, which sometimes are challenged to both attract and retain professionals.

Mr. Copping: Yeah. We will have two streams focused on rural Alberta. One is an entrepreneur stream, and another is a stream that looks at – it's still rural but highlights where there are job shortages in particular occupations. I don't want to highlight too much of this right now before we announce it, but we recognize and we heard from a number of communities when we were doing our consultation that to be successful, it needs to be an all-governments response. It's not only the provincial government working with other departments, but it's the provincial government working with the federal government so that you have an aligned program, and it's working with municipal governments and local communities. They understand the needs of the local labour market plus the requirement to welcome newcomers into these communities. The settlement agencies also need to be at the table.

5:00

You know, we took a look at certain other programs. For example, Manitoba has a very successful program bringing newcomers to rural areas. Plus, we also took a look at and took heed from the federal rural and northern immigration pilot. Claresholm, where the MLA who is present is also involved in terms of a new

federal pilot, is doing that. So we've taken a look at this, and we've learned from that. That's informing our set-up of the rural streams so that we can get the people with the right skills to rural communities so they can build the communities and create jobs, not only for the newcomers but for Albertans in those rural communities, and support economic growth.

Mrs. Allard: As an employer in my former life I certainly appreciate these efforts as well to locate labour where it's needed. I'm going to stay on page 120 of the business plan. I'm on key objective 3.3.

Implement the Fair Registration Practices Act and work via the Fair Registration Practices Office to reduce the red tape associated with the assessment of qualifications for applicants by ensuring that registration practices to regulated occupations and trades are transparent, objective, impartial and fair.

To the minister: has the fair registration practices office been established? I guess that was yesterday?

Mr. Copping: Yes.

Mrs. Allard: Can you elaborate on how the office will work closely with professional regulatory organizations?

Mr. Copping: Yeah. Thank you for the question. The office will work closely with the PROs by first reaching out to regulatory bodies in order to learn about their assessment and registration practices and to listen to any concerns that they may have in meeting their statutory obligations. Then, based on what we hear, the office will create outreach and educational resources to support regulatory bodies in being able to continually evaluate and adjust their assessment and registration practices to ensure that both of these are transparent, objective, impartial, and, as you mentioned, procedurally fair. The office will provide guidance on how to incorporate provisions as set out in the principles-based Fair Registration Practices Act. There will be future periodic reporting by the regulatory bodies, and this will be a key indicator in terms of success, whether they're hitting their targets, and also provide an opportunity for the Fair Practices office to know how that body is doing and whether further work is needed to ensure that's going forward.

Now, again, as indicated in the act, the bodies will continue to be responsible for the standards required before either a licence or certificate to practice is granted, and this is to ensure that the high professional standards are maintained in protecting the public interest or safety. Basically, with the fairness for newcomers act we've said two things: safety is important, but so is a fair, transparent, and timely process for newcomers. That is important as well, so the challenge to the PROs is to do both. We're also quite aware that, you know, we have a number of PROs that are doing this, quite frankly, very well. Others are going to need some assistance. Some have the resources to do that. Where, again, others are smaller organizations, it's more difficult, so then we'll look at funding for some of those organizations to help them modify and change their processes to make sure that they're compliant.

Mrs. Allard: That's a perfect segue. Just wondering if the minister can elaborate on what the most challenging barriers are associated with the assessment of foreign qualifications.

Mr. Copping: We heard a lot of these stories in our consultation, both concerning the Fair Registration Practices Act and then our overall strategy. It's interesting that the overall strategy was focusing on, you know, what the overall objective is of our immigration system and talking about sort of the proposed four new streams. Qualification recognition was still a high priority for a

number of newcomers who participated. What we heard from them is, first, educational requirements assessed against Canadian educational standards and ensuring that it's comparable: can it be comparable, can it be recognized? The currency of practice was another big issue in terms of concerns being raised by newcomers, that they were practising in a particular field for a number of years but that wasn't recognized. Also location of practice: we heard from some newcomers who had difficulty. I'll just use an example: trained in one of the top technical engineering schools in India, working in Germany, coming to Canada, and that German experience wasn't being recognized for their certification here. These are the types of . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Sorry to interrupt.

That concludes the 20-minute block for the government caucus. At this time we will now take a quick, five-minute break. As we said, this is the midpoint of our meeting today. Please come back for 10 minutes after 5 o'clock as we resume with the Official Opposition.

[The committee adjourned from 5:05 p.m. to 5:10 p.m.]

The Chair: All right. We will now reconvene.

Over to the opposition. Ms Gray, are you going to continue?

Ms Gray: Yes, please. Thank you.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Ms Gray: Thank you.

Minister, when we left off, I was asking you about the job-creation youth minimum wage and Alberta's stubbornly high youth unemployment.

Mr. Copping: You were asking about that. You had made a previous comment about the training for work and that it's not applicable to youth. I just wanted to, you know, indicate that I was in the process of just responding to that.

Ms Gray: Oh, yes.

Mr. Copping: The training for work programs in terms of integrated training: 20 per cent youth under 25 have participated in that workplace training, then when we look at ATEP and First Nations and aboriginal training, over 30 per cent. I appreciate that it's not solely focused on students. I do appreciate that, but it is . . .

Ms Gray: If I may, just to check my understanding, in each of those cases, yes, the programs can be accessed by people who are university-aged, but it requires a student to go through another program. It's not something where they've got their university degree and then something that helps them find a job; it's skill upgrading or that type of a program. Integrated training, as an example, if I recall my tours of integrated training sites, tends to be more trade-focused. But please let me know if . . .

Mr. Copping: Some of these programs can be used by new grads, but it's not while they're in school.

Ms Gray: Yeah.

Mr. Copping: The other context that I'll provide on this is that, you know, in terms of Advanced Education, my colleague is focused on experiential learning and providing more opportunities for experiential learning. That is a focus that is not necessarily within my ministry, so I can't speak to detail of that, but our government is focused on providing greater opportunities not only at the high

school level of the skilled trades but also at the college level as well. I think, quite frankly, that that is a better investment than a summer program because we have the federal program out there for summer jobs. But having someone get work in their field – right? – not only are they going to work in their field, but then employers get to try out the employee and the employee or student gets to try out the employer. That's a better investment in terms of money to leading to full-time jobs.

Ms Gray: I will only respond by saying that I've talked to many employers and students who found the STEP program incredibly valuable because then their resumé would have some experience, but please continue.

Mr. Copping: Okay. The other item to speak to is the job-creation student wage, as you know, and we had lots of debate on this last spring. The \$15 minimum wage we reduced, and we created a job student wage at \$13 per hour. This came in place last summer. I agree that unemployment rates for youth remain high, and they continue to be high. We do not have any detailed data in terms of what exactly the changes are. As you can appreciate, it's always difficult when you have multiple things going on at the same time to suss out what exactly is attributed to the changes in the student wage and other factors that are involved in that. I can share anecdotally, you know, talking particularly with individuals in the hospitality industry, that this did provide them with the opportunity to hire youth, particularly in host positions, whereas they couldn't afford to do that before. But in terms of a robust study on that, we haven't completed that at this point in time.

Again, we also expect to release a report on the minimum wage. We had a Minimum Wage Expert Panel that was appointed to do an assessment in regard to the impact of the minimum wage and what the impact was on jobs. That report will be released. We're going to assess it, and it'll be released in the coming months in terms of what's associated with that.

Ms Gray: Months? Okay.

Mr. Copping: Then I'll be able to shed some more light on the impact of minimum wage on youth unemployment.

Ms Gray: My questions going forward are kind of one-offs, so I apologize because we're going to be jumping around a little bit.

Mr. Copping: Okay.

Ms Gray: Foreign credential recognition, which you were discussing with your government caucus, being very important, I just wanted to follow up because I couldn't tell from reading this budget. Are the innovation fund project grants continuing? I believe that in our last estimates \$900,000 was set aside. My understanding for these innovation fund project grants would be that when you are working with a PRO that needs specific focus or needs to update processes, these grants could be used.

Mr. Copping: In terms of the grant, the \$900,000 that we talked about earlier, there are a couple of things going on here. First off, we are going to be doing an evaluation with the new fairness for newcomers office. As we do the evaluation and get a better understanding of where people need to go, then we'll look at: can we reprogram some of the funding that we have in other locations to be able to assist them in doing that? That's one thing.

The other thing. We have protected \$900,000 in our budget under labour qualifications and mobility, and we are protecting that largely to assist newcomers who are looking for loans and target

that, who are looking for loans to be able to write the exams and get their foreign qualifications, as we talked about on Windmill.

So we're moving some money around. We are targeting that in this budget. That's what we're targeting at this point in time. Will there be an opportunity for some funding for programs to help PROs? The answer is yes. But until we get a better sense of what we need to do, we are not protecting the money for that at this point in time.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you.

Another topic that the government caucus raised was just the incredible success we've seen in the queues for employment standards in occupational health and safety, and I'm very pleased to say that our government dedicated a lot of resources and time to try and tackle that. It seems to be continuing to be on a good trend. We talked about OH and S officers remaining flat, and I imagine that it might be similar for the employment standards side. I believe that you were at one point going to tell us about a new program, working with repeat offender employers, perhaps?

Mr. Copping: Yeah. This is in regard to the employment standards. Again, we're looking at different ways to deal with repeat offenders. We're creating a list of employers who are noncompliant, a list of the top 30 that have multiple complaints, for example. Then we go in and have a conversation with them. We are testing for compliance after our first meeting, and we're finding lots of success, that once we go in the first time and explain, "Here's what you need to do," most of them, when we follow up, are actually complying with the standards. So it goes to show that there is some ignorance out there, but once you inform them that these are the rules that need to be applied, then they comply with them. We're maintaining this list of 30 that is rolling on a regular basis.

5:20

Ms Gray: Is your department doing anything specific to communicate with employers proactively around their responsibilities, or are there any new initiatives to just improve that awareness? You're right about ignorance.

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt.

It is the next 10-minute block for the caucus. Mrs. Allard, please proceed.

Mrs. Allard: The time sure goes fast. I'm going to move back to the business plan, page 119. I just wanted to ask the minister briefly about indigenous training supports. The business plan under key objective 2.3 recognizes partnering with indigenous communities and organizations to support the participation of indigenous people in the labour market, which I think we can all agree is a critical step forward for our province. I'm wondering how the ministry will continue to support the participation of indigenous people in the labour market. What are the primary outcomes you're expecting or hoping to achieve?

Mr. Copping: Great. Thank you for the question. I mentioned a couple of programs earlier, the aboriginal training to employment program and the First Nations training to employment program. These are both grant programs that fund community-led projects that support the development of partnerships between First Nations and other indigenous communities, industry, and government. The ATEP grants target Métis settlement members and urban indigenous people, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. The First Nations grants target, obviously, First Nations members primarily on-reserve.

The projects are custom designed to address specific needs of the job seeker and those of the targeted industry or employer, and the programs support the development of partnerships with First Nation communities, bands, treaty councils, tribal organizations. Really, the focus is a tailored program for the individuals in that particular band and also recognizing the labour demands in that particular area.

Mrs. Allard: Excellent. With your forgiveness I'm going to jump around a little bit as well. I'm on page 119 of the business plan under outcome 2. The ministry develops and aligns evidence-based policies and programs to influence and respond effectively to the province's short- and long-term labour market needs. Again, I'm, you know, the MLA for Grande Prairie, so I'm talking a little bit about northern Alberta. But certainly it's applicable across Alberta, and there are differentials. I'm wondering if the minister can expand on: what kind of information and statistics does the ministry produce to support this outcome?

Mr. Copping: One of the key jobs of our department is spending a lot of time in terms of producing reports and labour statistics so that we both understand the demand side – right? – and the supply side and what the gap is. I might just perhaps want to highlight that, you know, there is a plethora of reports that we provide, and a lot of these are put on the website for use by employers and Albertans and are used by other government departments.

I want to highlight just a couple of them that we get a lot of requests for. The first is Alberta's supply outlook model. This is done every two years to predict 10-year job shortages and surpluses. Alberta's occupational outlook 2019 to 2028 was recently released. This also includes a more detailed publication focused on education and skills. The model forecasts a number of graduates across eight major fields of study for different levels of schooling. The first section of the report looks at projected education attainment levels of Alberta's population, and the remainder of the report gives an analysis of the major fields of study at different postsecondary education levels and by gender. So that's just one looking at the supply side.

Another example we have is the short-term employment forecast – and that's released every year – which provides a three-year overview of occupations expected to be in demand in the next three years. It's used by a variety of organizations. The 2019-21 version of the publication is the most recent version available. We have a host of others that we do annually, biannually as well. Again, often some of these look at particular demographics, focusing on youth, women, First Nations, but also could be done on an industry-by-industry basis to get a picture of what is the demand and then what is the supply as well.

Mrs. Allard: Excellent. Thank you. I think that you anticipated my next question quite well. I'm, I guess, just wanting to jump off on that last comment, the short-term employment forecast. Again, as the MLA for Grande Prairie there have been a couple of significant projects that are either starting or coming to a conclusion that will need to be staffed. One is the Grande Prairie regional hospital and another is the twinning of highway 40, that was just announced a couple of weeks ago at Growing the North. I'm just wondering if in those short-term forecasts some of those significant capital and infrastructure programs are contemplated as you forecast labour demands in particular regions.

Mr. Copping: I know that in some of the industry forecasts they'll get captured. The short-term employment forecasts: I'm just not entirely certain whether major projects get captured in that.

Ms Everett: We have actually other tools for that.

Mr. Copping: Yeah. It won't be captured in that, but when we do, like, on an industry basis or a project basis, some of these other reports, then we do capture – for example, when we're looking at skilled trades, then we'll have, you know, information from a number of employers, plus working with our regional representatives on the ground who'll compile a project list on what the demand is. They get a sense of what that is, but it's not in the short-term employment forecast as much.

Mrs. Allard: Perfect. Thank you. I think that this might be my final question. Support for job creators: I don't know if I have the page number. I believe it's in the business plan under outcome 1. Outcome 1 is to support job creators. Given the high unemployment in Calgary, among other cities in Alberta, I'm wondering what initiatives the ministry is undertaking to ensure that every opportunity is available for the unemployed in the urban centres. If I can add an additional question while you're looking: given the unique challenges that many rural parts of Alberta face, how does the department support job creation in rural Alberta at the same time?

Mr. Copping: In regard to your first question, regarding what we are doing to help unemployed Albertans find work in our urban centres, we offer a variety of programs to connect Albertans with jobs. We spoke about some of those programs. Training for work is the prime example, to be able to take unemployed Albertans, give them the skills that they need in an area of demand.

You know, one example I'll provide is in Calgary. We have a program with SAIT. As indicated earlier, there's a shortage of IT professionals in Calgary, and this program has had a very high success rate of training individuals on coding and then placing them in jobs in the sector. That's one example, and that's one of the strongest examples of training for work and the various programs that we have here.

Also, in terms of providing information to Albertans about where the demand is going to be so they can take steps on their own, the Canada-Alberta job grant, although it's not used for this very often, does have the capability that if an employer – and this is one thing that we're going to focus on in the coming year, to make sure employers are aware of this. Under the current program if you're doing training, it'll only cover up to a portion of the training cost if it's a current employee, but if it's an employee who's unemployed and then is hired, we'll cover all the training costs associated with that so we get employees back to work. Now, unfortunately, the current program has, like, 1 per cent that's being used, but one of our plans this year is to focus on getting that out to employers so that they can use that program to get those unemployed into the workforce.

We also support labour market studies through labour market partnership grants, which assist the industry employers with workforce planning, you know, better planning. We get that knowledge out to Albertans, and they can focus on areas.

5:30

This is like a lot of the programs both in terms of the research that we do within our department and the programs that we offer. It's to deal with the mismatch of someone who doesn't have a skill set that's in demand and get them the skill set that is in demand and to make sure that they know about it. A lot of these programs are applicable, you know, in both urban and rural settings, but in particular in the urban settings we do that.

Regarding the rural programs, we appreciate that there are differences. You know, in rural areas, again, as we talked about in Grande Prairie, there are different demands associated with that.

The Chair: Excuse me, Minister. Sorry to interrupt.

It is now back to the Official Opposition. Ms Gray, are you going to continue?

Ms Gray: Yes. Thank you.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Ms Gray: I'll begin, and then after we will have this discussion.

We were just talking about raising awareness with employers. That touches on what you were discussing around the Canada-Alberta job grant. I agree. When we made the change to the Canada-Alberta job grant program so that hiring someone unemployed would cover 100 per cent, we really hoped to see high intake, and that just didn't follow through. So on that as well as on employment standards and even OH and S how are you outreaching to employers and making sure they're aware of their legal requirements as well as supports that are out there to help?

Mr. Copping: There are a number of ways that we're actually looking at doing it. When we talk about that, we have throughout the region a number of individuals who are working with industry in terms of workforce planning, using our current resources to get the word out, particularly on the Canada-Alberta job grant, to industry and employers that they can use that for these particular purposes because they're not aware of this right now.

We're also focused on our communications from a portal standpoint and from a web standpoint. We recognize – I'll just use this as an example, and I'll go back to the Alberta advantage immigration strategy – that our portal does not provide information in an easy fashion, so we need to update that and make it easier for people to use, to understand what are the potential streams that they can benefit from and then what are the criteria associated with those streams. Part of that is in terms of our ongoing organizational effectiveness, looking at not only that area but other areas of occupational health and safety in terms of using web portals for employers to understand what their obligations are.

But also we've done some changes to the set-up – I'm just going to ask for the names of the changes to web portals – to allow employers to access and do reporting into occupational health and safety, both to reduce red tape but also to make it easier. At the same time, we can then provide information to them on that.

I'm just asking officials. We'll have to come back to that. But, you know, through OHS we have, for example, focused on a new system to develop a portal for employers to access and then leveraging that to provide more information.

Yeah. This is the data and statistical hub.

Ms Gray: The data and statistical hub.

Mr. Copping: The DASH system.

Ms Gray: Okay. I hear you saying there's lots of engaging with stakeholders and the groups, more of that web focus . . .

Mr. Copping: Yeah.

Ms Gray: . . . like me on Facebook, for more employment standards information, that kind of thing. Just as an aside, I think the department has always had to find creative ways to get the word out. I actually just found my employment standards branded gum. We didn't release it while we were in government, but at some point

someone gave me a pack of employment standards gum, so I think different things have been tried at different times.

I'm going to cede the rest of this block to my colleague Chris Nielsen.

Mr. Nielsen: How do you follow gum?

Thanks, Mr. Chair. Is it still agreeable with the minister to go back and forth?

Mr. Copping: Sure. Happy to do so.

Mr. Nielsen: Great. It'll be a little bit fast and furious here. I do want to start just by saying thank you for the response to the question from the last estimates around the number of red tape reduction initiatives you took, to the tune of 18, actually. I would be very much interested to learn, because you did provide a couple of examples, what the other 16 might be. I don't know if that's possible later on to provide, but you don't need to worry about that right at the moment.

Talking about red tape, obviously, in your second paragraph in the business plan on page 117 there is quite a robust talk about red tape reduction and whatnot. Coincidentally, I don't know if you knew this, but it seems to be the exact same paragraph throughout every single ministry on their first page. Nonetheless . . .

Mr. Copping: It is a government priority.

Mr. Nielsen: Here's the thing. Congratulations on, I guess, having a little bit more to say on red tape throughout your business plan versus what I've seen in some of the others. When I'm looking at key objective 5.1 and consequently 5(a), under performance metrics on page 122, I just want to draw your attention to the targets. For '20-21 you are looking at a 12 per cent reduction and then in '21-22 a 20 per cent reduction. I'm just kind of curious because in the last estimates you had indicated 50 per cent during '20-21 and 100 per cent in 2021-22. I'm just wondering why there is a bit of a drastic drop in those target projections.

Mr. Copping: I don't have the previous one in front of me right now. It may be how we're just changing the goal, right? Like, in the targets here it's a 12 per cent reduction. I think that goal – you know, our objective is to by 2022-23 do a 33 per cent reduction. I think the way that it was structured in the previous plan was that we're going hit 100 per cent, which is a 33 per cent reduction . . .

Mr. Nielsen: Of your goal.

Mr. Copping: . . . of our goal. That's why there's a difference in terms of how it was written.

Mr. Nielsen: Okay. Yeah. Because I couldn't help but wonder if maybe some of the consolidations with staff or whatever might have affected your ability to reach those targets. I guess when I start thinking about that and some of the new programs, which is always good – more ways we can find to engage people, find them employment, find their training – of course, it does come with new rules, regulations, the Fair Practices office and whatnot. I wonder if you might want to comment a little bit. Is there potentially any pressure being placed on your ministry? Because through the red tape reduction there was the commitment of one in, one out. These kinds of things, obviously, will bring in rules and regulations. Are you going to be able to keep up with, maybe, what has to be taken out?

Mr. Copping: We're quite confident in our ability to do that, as indicated previously. You're quite right. You know, you put in the

Fair Registration Practices Act. There are regulations associated with that. There's new law, and then your count goes up. Also, we have an opportunity to take a look at other acts and regulations and an opportunity to reduce them.

We have identified, to your point, a number of changes that we've made already, plus our intent is that as we go through, we review, as indicated before, the Labour Relations Code and employment standards, as we go through that, you go through it with an eye to: how can we reduce the regulations and the red tape as we're doing that? You know, looking at maintaining still the outcome that you want – right? – in terms of the policy, but can we do it in a way that actually requires less regulation and less red tape associated with that? We are confident that as we do the review of the Labour Relations Code and the employment standards act and then, moving forward, occupational health and safety and, as indicated in the plan, workers' compensation, we'll be able to hit these targets because we'll be putting it through that lens: hit the policy objectives while at the same time reducing the red tape associated with it.

Mr. Nielsen: Okay. Just to loop back to what my colleague was alluding to a little bit earlier around the youth rate, you know, the riding of Edmonton-Decore is blessed with many, many small businesses in the shopping districts. If you ever need shopping, my riding is where to come. Around the youth rate and, of course, the unfortunate statistics we're seeing around the employment levels and whatnot, I have had the chance to speak with many business owners within the area with some concerns about what might become necessary with the different ages. What have you been hearing back from employers around that?

5:40

Mr. Copping: Again, as I indicated before, in terms of the . . .

Mr. Nielsen: You know, with the youth being at the age of 17 versus the age of 18, qualifying for the different wage levels, whether you are in school or not, things like that, employers having to keep track of that: that would be sort of an extra burden on them in order to make sure that they're falling in line.

Mr. Copping: I've heard, quite frankly, no complaints associated with that. When we looked at this, you know, Ontario was doing it. Actually, before we implemented it, we spoke with employers who were there, and they had systems set up to actually handle this. It wasn't viewed as an issue, and I haven't heard anything as an issue.

Mr. Nielsen: Okay. I guess, maybe, around some of those consultations have you seen a variance in terms of the different sizes of business? Obviously, larger employer might have a little bit of a . . .

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt.

Mrs. Armstrong-Homeniuk, your 10-minute turn, please.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Mr. Chair, through you, if the minister would like to finish with that answer.

The Chair: Minister, if you'd like to finish that, any thoughts on the last member's question there, or were you going to pick it up next time?

Mr. Copping: Again, I haven't heard any concerns associated with that from employers in terms of difficulty, whether it be small or large in terms of administering. You know, the reality is that the hours they track anyways. The wage that they have to track: they have to track that anyways. So they'll need to know whether an individual is a student or not. Age: they'll have that in their system.

They have all that in their system as well. For smaller employers there are fewer people to track. The short answer is: no, I haven't heard any concerns or issues associated with that.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Good afternoon. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Through you I'd like to ask the minister some questions. Page 119 of the business plan includes key objective 2.1, "develop and administer fiscally responsible training and employment programs that are informed by and responsive to changing labour market needs to connect Albertans to jobs and get Albertans back to work." Mr. Minister, can you please tell us what your primary training and employment programs are that will help achieve this objective?

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much for the question. We've mentioned a number of the programs that we have in our department to get Albertans back to work and to adapt to changing labour market needs. The training for work programs – we've talked about this before – connect Albertans through training and employment services. That includes the immigrant bridging program, the integrated training program, self-employment training, transition to employment services, and workplace training in that regard.

We ensure that it's a response for a couple of things. First, in setting up these programs, we have local officers that will work with industry to understand what the needs are in that particular labour market. Then the program, by design for a number of these programs – for the service provider we'll put out an RFP. In responding to that RFP, the service provider knows that if they want to get paid they have to hit that, over 70 per cent of the students who graduate from that program will need to either go to a different education program or get work. Not only do we have people on the ground who are looking at "Where's the demand?" and using, as we spoke earlier, all those reports that we have to be able to help assess that and working with industry, but the service providers are very incented to ensure that their program is going to result in people getting jobs because that's how they get paid. That's the primary way, like with those programs, that we ensure that it is reflective of labour market requirements.

Also, on the Canada-Alberta jobs grant, that program is employer driven, so obviously it by design ensures that it meets the labour market needs because they're applying for them because they need these individuals to get this retraining to be able to continue to, you know, provide the support that they need and the work for that particular employer.

In summary, it's the information that we have, the people on the ground who are looking at this, and then we design our programs to be reflective of the labour market requirements for that area.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Page 119 of the business plan includes performance measure 2(a), outcomes for training for work clients. "In 2018, 71.9% of training for work clients reported that they are employed or in further education or training after leaving a skills training program." Mr. Minister, what are some of the examples of skills programs offered to Albertans through the training for work program, and what specific jobs or occupations is your ministry targeting?

Mr. Copping: As previously indicated, the training for work program provides Albertans with skills and training opportunities to help them secure and maintain employment in high-demand jobs. There are five streams under the program. In recent years the training for work streams have been focused on helping support workers impacted by the downturn in the economy. For example,

one of the streams, the transition to employment services stream, provides unemployed individuals with one-on-one services that facilitate rapid attachment or reattachment to the labour market, basically, helping them get back into the labour market and find a job. These services include job matching, short-term training courses, one-on-one workshop support, resumé writing, job search, and interviewing support.

In recent TES contracts I've targeted professional engineers, technologists, geologists, and other geoscience professionals. What we're finding is that individuals who had worked in these types of positions for a long time don't realize that they have a phenomenal skill set that can be applied to a different role. So a lot of these programs spent time with them and, instead of what I would call an experience-based resumé, helped them develop a skills-based resumé and then also helped focus on opening up their eyes to using these skills in a variety of other jobs, not just the ones that they've been working in for a period of time.

Another stream is the integrated training stream, which provides unemployed or marginally employed individuals with a blend of occupation-related skills, work experience placements, employability and/or essential skills in applied academics, and also includes English as a second language. Examples of occupations being trained for in this stream include supply chain management, agriculture and oil field training, commercial developer, industrial millwright, mechanic, class 1 driver, and tech occupations like full stack developer, cloud tech training, and software developer. I gave an example earlier about a program especially on the tech side in Calgary, a service provider working with SAIT to provide a program and high levels of placement after they go through that program.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you.

How much has your ministry allocated to the training for work program?

Mr. Copping: In the 2020-21 estimate it includes \$27 million in funding for training for work, and we break that down as follows: workplace training, \$4.2 million; immigration bridging, \$0.8 million; self-employment, \$2.3 million; transition to employment services, \$7.9 million; and integrated working, \$11.9 million. These programs are delivered by contract service providers following an open and transparent request for proposals. Again, the payment for this is dependent upon them hitting performance targets.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to cede the rest of my time to MLA Stephan.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Please proceed. You have just over two minutes left.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and, through the chair to the minister, thanks for being here, for the important stewardship you have, and for the valuable competencies you bring to your important role.

I want to refer to page 121 of the business plan, key objective 4.4, which states:

Focus evidence-based, proactive occupational health and safety programs on job creators and industries that require assistance in implementing effective health and safety programs that benefit all workplace parties.

My question is: how will the ministry identify which industries require assistance in implementing effective health and safety programs?

Mr. Copping: Thank you for the question. Our ministry uses several sources of data, including workers' compensation data and

OHS compliance data, to identify and focus proactive compliance efforts at work sites in industries where there is demonstrated need or where there is evidence of noncompliance. Our focus is: where are the areas of highest risk and the poor performers? Those are the areas we want to key in on. Comparatively higher injury and incident rates, orders, tickets, and administrative penalties are used to identify the work sites most likely to benefit from enhanced education and inspection activities to achieve compliance with health and safety program requirements and prevent future injuries.

5:50

Mr. Stephan: Thanks, Minister.

Can you please elaborate on how the department works with workers' compensation to gather and interpret evidence on serious workplace incidents?

Mr. Copping: The department and the WCB share data on serious workplace incidents and fatalities to further prevention efforts. More recently our department and the WCB have been collaborating to identify gaps in reporting and to improve data sharing to be more efficient and effective as well.

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt at this time.

It now goes back to the Official Opposition. Ms Gray?

Ms Gray: Yes.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Ms Gray: I will continue. Thank you so much.

Minister, you were just speaking a little bit about the WCB, so I will stay on that topic for a moment. In your business plan you have allocated \$400,000 for a review of WCB legislation. The WCB was reviewed fairly recently, and although there may be different opinions from stakeholders on policy decisions, I think all stakeholders felt that the consultation process was very thorough, engaging, with lots of opportunities and a lot of efforts to bring different parties into the room, where a lot of discovery was made about how much they had in common around concerns with the WCB system. Would you be able to share anything around how the consultation for the WCB review may go? We've seen with the employment standards an online survey. Is that likely to be your approach, or does the \$400,000 indicate more in-person consultation?

Mr. Copping: We're still working through that at this point in time. It will be more robust than just an online survey. As you're reading into the \$400,000, we've earmarked some monies in that to be able to have a broader consultation process. You know, we've heard and we recognize that it was done not too long ago although there is a requirement that it be evaluated in 2021, a statutory requirement. We're looking to get this process going in 2020, and we've heard some concerns being raised with how it's working right now. Also, we've heard some concerns in terms of the process piece dealing with the complex cases and how we tackle that to the benefit of not only, quite frankly, cost.

You know, once you reach a certain point in terms of concerns not being addressed or cases not being resolved, then the potential for intervening factors to get involved in that case makes it increasingly complex. Then you have individuals who are not back at work, and you have longer term settlements. So there is a portion of individuals – some may never, and I understand that. But if we have a look at the process and we can get that individual back to work as quickly as possible, then it's better for the individual, and quite frankly it's better for the employer, and then it also reduces

cost to the system. That's one of the areas that we're thinking about focusing in on as well as doing a broader review.

Ms Gray: Would the Fair Practices office have a role in the review, in providing advice through that? We set it up as somewhat arm's length, but when it comes to a review process, how do you engage them?

Mr. Copping: We're still working through what that's going to look like at this point in time, but we want to take a look at the entire process, start to finish.

Ms Gray: May I ask around the scope of the review? Will you be including employers or activities that are exempt from WCB? There's currently a list of who is exempt from WCB, and it is ancient and hasn't been reviewed in a while, and it was on the radar of the previous government that that needed to be looked at. Can that be included in your review? I've certainly heard concerns from people who work in dentists' offices, as an example, but the list itself includes lots of interesting exemptions like hypnotism services.

Mr. Copping: That has not hit our radar screen. We're still working through what the scope is going to be at this point in time. I hadn't heard of that. Hypnotism services?

Ms Gray: Absolutely. And what else have we got? Inventory loan companies – like, it's a very old list – and microfilming services. I would strongly encourage you to consider it because there are some workers who are caught up in here who would prefer to have the WCB coverage. It becomes dependent on the employer. Employers can opt in, which we know. This list did come up in question period when we were talking about farm and ranch. I think that Alberta should review the list of exempt activities, if you are reviewing the legislation, to make sure it's up to date and in line with other jurisdictions.

Mr. Copping: Thank you for sharing that.

Ms Gray: You're welcome.

On a different topic, the labour relations hotline, when last we spoke, you had received five phone calls and 18 e-mails for just general labour relations information and no use of the one hour of legal consultation time. I wonder if you could provide an update on the work that the labour relations hotline is doing.

Mr. Copping: Yeah. To date we have received 22 e-mails, one Alberta Connects inquiry, and eight phone calls. We have not done any referrals to legal resources although this will be able to be answered by Labour and Immigration staff.

Ms Gray: Okay. So you haven't needed to use those third-party legal services up to this point.

Mr. Copping: That's correct.

Ms Gray: Okay. I imagine the staff who are involved with the labour relations hotline, with the workload that you've described, are also doing other things.

Mr. Copping: Most definitely they are doing other things.

Ms Gray: I appreciate all the staff within the labour ministry and thank them for their hard work, but these are very small numbers for this service.

Mr. Copping: Yes.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much.

Can we talk for a moment about – with the shifting within the workforce strategies department, we know things have moved around, but labour market programs is where we have our LMP grants, I believe. Is the total value of the grants similar to last year? Are they increasing or decreasing?

Mr. Copping: The LMP grants are in workforce development partnerships, and the amounts for the grants have not changed.

Ms Gray: Okay. Maybe I'll just check my understanding. Could you describe what all is included inside of the labour market programs, line 2.6?

Mr. Copping: This is the Canada-Alberta job grant. That's 2.6. That's, as we talked about before, providing support to employers who are providing training to their employees, and then there are different levels, whether it's a current employee or potentially a new employee.

Ms Gray: Thank you.

My next question is more general, and it's simply around the volume of policy work. You are updating labour codes, you are looking at employment standards, and you're talking about a WCB review, which sounds familiar and is a lot.

Mr. Copping: You've lived this before.

Ms Gray: Yes.

Mr. Copping: Yes.

Ms Gray: That's a large amount to chew on. How are you managing the volume of policy changes coming through the department?

Mr. Copping: We have a terrific team. You know, our focus is that we have a group which has continued to be focused on the policy end. Where they need more support, we provide that. I do know that there's significant expertise within the policy group, and they are tapping other individuals within the department itself to be able to assist in terms of doing the policy development.

6:00

Ms Gray: Thank you. That makes sense.

This is jumping back. I had a line of questioning around our preparedness for COVID-19. We have people watching estimates. Thank you to the viewers who are tuning in to labour ministry estimates. I was asked just to follow up on: within our OHS team, do we have physicians and OHS safety nurses on staff?

Mr. Copping: I'll ask Ms Everett to respond to that.

Ms Gray: Thank you.

Ms Everett: I just checked with Rob Feagan. Yes, we do.

Ms Gray: Fantastic. Following that, do we have laboratory or air sampling technicians?

Mr. Feagan: Not on staff.

Ms Gray: Not on staff. But access to be able to consult with, perhaps?

Mr. Copping: If there's a requirement and we need to consult with individuals, then that's what we'll do.

Ms Gray: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: There you go. Next time.

Mr. Stephan, please proceed.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Time is passing quickly, so I'll ask one last question and then cede my time to my colleagues. On page 118 of the business plan it outlines that the ministry also works with the federal and provincial-territorial governments to advance Alberta's interests for flexible labour and immigration policies and address issues related to interprovincial mobility. In key objective 1.3 it states, "Advocate for changes to federal labour and immigration programs to get a fair deal that recognizes the unique challenges and needs in Alberta." Can you provide some approaches or changes that have been or will be made to Labour and Immigration programs to meet and recognize the needs of Albertans?

Mr. Copping: Thank you for the question. As you know, our focus is providing the leadership and tools to create jobs for Albertans and get Albertans back to work. We know that despite that, you know, unemployment remains stubbornly high in certain locations. We also know that some employers are having trouble finding Canadians to fill jobs, particularly in certain regions and in certain occupations. In these cases permanent residents or sometimes temporary foreign workers may be necessary to supplement Canadian workers, so we're working with the federal government on our immigration strategy and on looking at changes, as indicated previously, to certain federal government programs to help ensure that our employers have the workers that they need.

I'm going to make a comment on this because I forgot to mention this earlier. I've talked a lot about the Alberta advantage immigration strategy, and I'm extremely excited to announce this. I'm going to have to mention that because I'm excited and I always want to go faster. I indicated that we'll be announcing it in weeks. It's probably longer than weeks; perhaps a few months before we actually get to that because we're going to need to work with the federal government. I'm just so excited, and I want to actually get this out the door and start moving on it, but it may be longer. I'm going to have to correct the record on that. It may be longer than weeks, and we're talking potentially months on that.

But, you know, part of this goes to the work that we're doing with the federal government. We'll need to work with the federal government on our new streams, both rural and student streams. We also identified, when doing our consultation, that there were some issues, for example, with the temporary foreign worker program. We have asked the federal government to do a process review from start to finish to be able to, on the one hand, make it easier for employers to use the temporary foreign worker program while at the same time ensure that we protect them. One idea that we have floated with the federal government and talked about with our counterparts on the provincial and territorial side is a trusted employer program that we could follow up with so that it makes it easier for them to use the program but at the same time we protect workers. That's very important from our standpoint as well.

The other thing that we're working with and chatting with the federal government about is their newly announced municipal nominee program. They haven't provided details concerning that. This was a platform commitment that the federal government made. We're just concerned that it may overlap with our program in terms of the rural entrepreneur program and rural renewal program. We're in conversations with the federal government about, you know, if it's very similar to what we're doing, then let us run it because we are on the ground – we are local; we know what the communities are doing and what they need in engaging with the local labour

market – or ensure that at a minimum it's not conflicting with our program. That is another area that we're focused on.

I mentioned earlier that, you know, the AINP was originally established to have a fast path to permanent residency. Unfortunately, at this point in time it's far slower than the federal express entry program, so we're working with the federal government on how we change the processes to speed that up. We're also looking at, you know – and this is with our counterparts on the provincial and the territorial side – expanding the economic stream. We control, through AINP, just a sliver of it, but overall we're looking. We've sent a letter to the federal government to target 65 per cent . . .

The Chair: Sorry, Minister. I have to interrupt. You've spoken for 5 minutes consecutively. It does need to go back to the government caucus to follow up with a question.

Mr. Stephan: Well, I'll cede my time to my colleague but maybe provide them with the opportunity to see if the minister can continue and answer the remaining part of that question.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Chair. Minister, first of all, I want to say thank you for your work on this budget and to your staff. I also appreciate not only the awareness but I think the implementation of nuances of labour in rural Alberta. On behalf of my constituents I thank you for that.

Also, as a former job creator I'm excited about the Alberta advantage immigration program, so I certainly would love to hear more about the program and where we're going with that.

Mr. Copping: Well, thank you. Just to close on that one topic in terms of working with the federal government, the last item, which is high on my list as well, is measuring the outcomes. We'll be doing this on the provincial side in terms of our own programs but also on the federal side on the outcomes of the programs and how much it costs to run them.

One of the issues that we heard when we were doing consultation, you know, is that you have individuals who have been – and this is what our Fair Registration Practices Act is doing – asked to come in through the federal program, for example. They come to Alberta, and it takes them sometimes months or years to get accredited in their area of expertise, which is why they were asked, because they had that education in the first place. So tracking, number one: how long does it take someone to find a job in their field? Where do they stay? When I take a look at this from an employer's standpoint, if I was hiring somebody – right? – I would look at: did I hire the right person? I would look at: are they in the job that I want them to do? How quickly do they actually get into that job? What training would I do? Then I would also look at what the cost is to hire that person and the cost not only from the employer's standpoint, but what is the cost to the individual to apply to that?

In working with our federal and provincial counterparts, we don't track these outcomes as closely as we should, and we don't measure the costs associated with them, so it's another item that we've put on the list to work with the federal government on, and we'll need to be responsible ourselves. Let's measure the outcomes and measure the costs so then you know if you've made a good policy decision or how you can improve it, what the impacts are going to be. That's the last item that we're working on with our federal government.

I do recognize that this is a joint project. Immigration is largely a federal affair, but to the extent that we can influence the federal

programs and set up our own programs and pilot them, then we can show the federal government and the rest of the provinces what we are doing. Perhaps they can learn from that, and we can learn from them as well.

Mr. Reid: I appreciate that. Thank you, Minister.

I want to refer to the business plan again. On page 120 you outlined that the ministry advocates and works to ensure newcomers have access to programs and services necessary to be successful and to participate in Alberta's economy. Can you give us a little bit of insight into what some of those programs are that are available for new Albertans?

6:10

Mr. Copping: Thank you. The Alberta settlement and integration program supports newcomers to all of Alberta. It's item 2.1 in the budget. We provide a number of services. One of the first is English as a second language drop-in centres. These provide basic language learning opportunities for newcomers who experience one or more barriers to learning English in regularly scheduled ESL classes. There are a total of three drop-in centres. We have them in Edmonton, Calgary, and Taber. We also offer ESL assessment services – or we fund that – which provide English language assessment information and referrals across the province for immigrant clients to ESL programs and provide counselling services to assist newcomers in identifying education or training options related to language and finding a job in the labour market.

As part of this, we also provide temporary foreign worker support services. This provides supports to help eligible clients adjust to living and working in Alberta. Clients are largely temporary foreign workers and international students that use these services. The services include outreach and information.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms Gray, please proceed.

Ms Gray: Thank you. You were just speaking about a number of topics, including immigration program changes, and I just wanted to say that I understand the difficulty of those taking a long time to get done. I am familiar with that.

This will be the last opposition speaking block, so I do have a couple of questions, but I also just wanted to take a moment to say thank you to all the public servants who've come and supported this process and provided the information through the estimates piece. I think there were only a couple of things that we were going to take away, but if we could please have those back before the voting on the budget, that would be very much appreciated. Fortunately, we have a constituency week in the middle, so the timelines aren't as tight as they have been in the past.

I wanted to ask – and this fits in a little bit with that whole WCB review you're talking about, I think, but it's something you'd already started in on, the certificate of recognition review. At least two studies have shown no strong results with the current certificate of recognition program. As you look to updating this program, firstly, where are you and how is that going? Secondly, are you committed to making sure that certificate of recognition, the program and participation in it, has measurable safety improvements and improved safety measures for workers who work at companies that have certificate of recognition?

Mr. Copping: Thank you for the question. As you are aware, the COR program is a partnership between industry, the department, and the Workers' Compensation Board. Its primary design is that if you have a COR certification, you can have lower premiums associated with WCB. The existing employer review process will

be replaced in 2020, that is our target, and obviously with a better system that uses, quite frankly, a data-driven, evidence-based model to select employers. Our vision is then to have the CPs assist COR holders to address deficiencies in their systems. We do want to update the system and use it to be data based. Work has commenced on development of a risk-based scalable audit tool that would be appropriate for all sizes, small and large, levels of risk, and employer sophistication. Then we're seeking to replace the small employer COR, SECOR, as well with a new and simpler program. But there is a recognition that we need to do continued work on this to streamline the process and make it evidence-based and make it simpler.

Ms Gray: Okay. Well, I appreciate your commitment to that data-based or data-driven – measurable improved safety results would be wonderful through that program.

My next question is actually a follow-up from our last estimates. I had asked about reports that the Premier had asked you to review issues around the trucking industry and temporary foreign workers, but the response from last estimates was simply that the staff were reviewing the data to determine the scale of the issue to Alberta and help inform next steps. Given that that was just a few months ago, I was wondering if there is any update on temporary foreign workers in the trucking industry.

Mr. Copping: We have done some work on this with Advanced Education and Transportation. The issue has been identified. In terms of the response, we're working on that as well. I've also raised this issue at the provincial-territorial-federal table, so they're looking at that as well. In terms of the action items or next steps, at this point in time we haven't identified that. We're still working through the process. The Premier has indicated that this is an issue. It's a concern, and we're working with Transportation on identifying that and raising it federally.

Correct me if I'm wrong. I'm just remembering the policy stuff; we looked at this a couple of months ago. From an Alberta standpoint this is not an issue because we've closed some of the loopholes in our programs. What we're finding is that it's less of a TFW in the traditional sense of the word; it's more international students. In our program an international student has to find work in their field of study.

Ms Gray: Yeah. That was a change our government planned.

Mr. Copping: The change was made to close that loophole. The case that we talked about in B.C. was – and correct me if I'm wrong – an international student from another province who went to B.C., where they don't have that, and started working in the trucking industry to stay in Canada. This is a bigger problem than that in terms of understanding what the federal program is doing but also what other provincial programs are doing, which is why we raised that at the table.

Ms Everett, do you have anything further to add on this item?

Ms Gray: I think that's sufficient, Minister. More information will come in the future.

I will cede the last few minutes to my colleague. Thank you.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you. I want to go back to my favourite topic of red tape and the work that you're doing within the ministry. We've certainly seen that things are very, very busy within the Labour and Immigration ministry, so I guess I have to ask. Around accomplishing the targets that you've set out here in the business plan on page 122, what type of resources do you see the ministry having to use in order to make sure to accomplish and try to hit these goals that you have set out?

Mr. Copping: Again, we're hitting these goals with our current staff. We also get input from stakeholders, who say: here's red tape; here's what's causing us pain in terms of interacting with government in terms of processes. You know, the portals is just a small example I mentioned earlier to make it easier for reporting to occur. Self-reporting as well is another small example of: how do we actually reduce the red tape? Part of it is culture. As you do your work, what lens do you put that through? If you ask yourself the question, "Is this the easiest process internally?" and look at it from the view, "Externally, is it the easiest process to accomplish the same thing?" then you can do significant red tape reduction without a lot more staff. It really comes down to focus.

Mr. Nielsen: I realize that this is not part of your ministry, but looking at what we have here in the estimates and the red tape reduction ministry, they kind of overshot the mark a little bit for this past one. There are increases within the red tape reduction ministry itself. What kind of resources are available to you through that? Is there staff available? Is there just money so that you can bring in staff to work on these initiatives if for some reason you're falling behind?

Mr. Copping: I can't speak to the resources within that associate ministry. At the end of the day, we're responsible for our own red tape, our processes within our ministry, and we're responsible for the regulations that we develop. So we're using our own staff to identify opportunities in our internal processes, and then, you know, as we go through the reviews that we talked about in terms of the legislative reviews, part of the question we're asking ourselves at the same time is: what regulations make sense or don't make sense or are redundant? Then as we do the legislative changes, we'll clean that up at the same time.

6:20

Again, there's not a specific group within Labour and Immigration that is focused on that, with one exception. We do have a group, and we've had a group for a long time – and your colleague will know this – in terms of, you know, operational excellence. This is the kind of work that they did before as well, and they're continuing to do this. Again, the lens is not only internal processes; it's external processes and the overall. We haven't added to that resource, but it's putting that lens on it and continuing to do that.

Mr. Nielsen: So, essentially, no hotline to the red tape reduction ministry going: help; I need some staff or resources.

Mr. Copping: We advise them in terms of the changes that we're making, and then they do consultation as well. They've been out on an industry basis, and they'll generate suggestions – right? – saying that our employers are identifying this particular issue. Then they'll feed that in to us, and we'll take a look at that and work together to hit the targets.

Mr. Nielsen: So . . . [Mr. Nielsen's speaking time expired] Darn it.

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt.

Back to the government caucus, Mr. Barnes.

Mr. Barnes: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, to you and your staff for being here today and for all the work you do for Albertans. Early on in your remarks to an earlier question you spoke a little bit about the coal workforce transition program. Please, if I could, I'd like to drill down with two or three more questions on that. First of all, I see that page 162 of your budget estimates includes line item 2.9, the coal workforce transition program. I see that the funding for the coal workforce program is increasing in

2020-21. Can you please explain the primary reason for this increase?

Mr. Copping: Thank you for the question. As you may recall, in 2017 when the transition away from coal-fired electricity commenced, a study that was done showed that approximately 1,100 coal employees could be laid off and have to transition to another job. At that time estimates were also prepared for the number of layoffs in each year of the transition, and then benefits were put in place working with employers and the unions. Estimates were done in terms of when the closures would occur, and we update that on a fairly regular basis. There's a series of benefits that these employees can take advantage of: bridge to re-employment grants, which provide 75 per cent of employment income combined with employment insurance for up to 45 weeks; a bridge to retirement stream, which is a grant that provides financial assistance of 75 per cent of employment income for up to 72 weeks for those who are close to retirement to get them to retirement; and then relocation assistance up to \$5,000 for those moving to a new job.

We do an assessment, and we just did that, you know, recently in terms of talking with employers about what closures are going to happen and then, also, who's going to take advantage of what program. Typically, the bridge to retirement is the most expensive of the three. So it really depends on the mix. When we take a look at the increase in the amount, it's to reflect the numbers that will be impacted by the closures and then the current mix in terms of whether they're close enough to retirement to take advantage of a bridge or not. We do the calculation based on that.

Mr. Barnes: Okay. Thank you for that answer.

You know, I appreciate you telling me who's eligible, but I'm a little more curious as to what supports are available to the people, the families, and the communities that are affected. I remember a *National Post* article about a year and a half ago that talked about Hanna, where house prices had fallen to about 40 per cent of the provincial average, and many, many people in Hanna were going through the five steps of grief because of what was happening. Please, Minister, can you talk about who the supports are available for and what the supports are?

Mr. Copping: It's always, you know, heartbreaking when you have someone who loses their job and they need assistance. Not only have we put these supports in place, but also, as mentioned earlier, some of our programs are training for work to be able to get people who are laid off and sort of impacted by the changes and also people in the community to take advantage of the training for work programs and training support and to look at if there are changes in that particular area in terms of different jobs from a retraining standpoint. For these individuals we also offer relocation benefits associated with this, and as part of the program Advanced Education also provides up to \$12,000 to workers for vouchers for retraining as well.

Mr. Barnes: Okay. Thank you very much for that.

I'll switch gears to the Alberta immigrant nominee program. I know you've spoken a little bit about it before, but again I'd like to drill down. It's very, very important to us in Cypress-Medicine Hat, with our greenhouses, with our manufacturing, and our oil and gas at times. My main question is from page 167 of your budget estimate, where it depicts your ministry's statement of operations. I see that in 2020-21 in the revenue section you have an estimate for premiums, fees, and licences, and that's increasing from \$4.38 million to \$8.28 million. Can you please explain why it is so much higher this year?

Mr. Copping: Thanks for the question. As indicated, this is primarily driven by fees associated with the Alberta immigrant nominee program. As of April 1, 2020, we will start charging an application fee of \$500 and a \$100 fee for value-added services such as a request for reconsideration or a request to extend the nomination. This accounts for the entire amount of that. By implementing these fees, we're doing a couple of things. One is that we're bringing our fees in line, generally, with what other provincial programs do, especially larger provinces. For example, British Columbia charges \$550. Ontario charges between \$1,500 and \$2,000. This is so we can provide, on the one hand, better service; on the other hand, it's to stop the behaviour of some individuals who would apply, quite frankly, to multiple programs. Given that previously we weren't charging, they would often just put it in on spec because it didn't cost them anything. But it did cost us.

We recognize that it is an additional cost for some of the newcomers, so we wanted to make it fair but also reduce that behaviour associated with just throwing in an application. In addition to that, we also use those revenues to help offset the work that's being done and the additional work done in processing these applications.

Mr. Barnes: Okay. Great. I appreciate you clarifying that some other provinces were charging more. It creates a level playing field and makes it so it's more direct.

Is the fee the same for the immigrant program no matter where they go in Alberta? I'm wondering: have you ever considered a different fee within Alberta to help areas like Medicine Hat that could use it?

Mr. Copping: I am hopeful that when we roll out our Alberta advantage immigration strategy and our two streams, that will address the issue with Medicine Hat. As I indicated in the consultation process, one of our key principles in doing this is going to be continuous improvement. So if it doesn't have the results we want to have, then we're going to have to look at other changes, and that's going to be definitely one that we look at.

Mr. Barnes: Okay. Thank you. I appreciate that.

Last question in the short time left. Line 2.2 on page 162, your workforce development partnerships. I see your budget increased last year by approximately \$3 million. Can you please explain why there is a \$3 million increase and a little bit more about how the workforce development partnerships work and who you're partnering with?

Thank you.

Mr. Copping: Sure. Thanks for the question. You know, as we talked about before, we did a workforce strategies realignment and reorganization. That's money moving from other areas of the budget into this area. The purpose of the labour market partnership plans is to work with industry and other stakeholders to provide funding that will enable Albertans to enhance their skills or respond to skills shortages through collaborative efforts, right? It's a grant, and it's a grant that we . . .

The Chair: I apologize, Minister. Sorry to interrupt.

I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this item of business has concluded. Thank you for a very constructive question-and-answer time with excellent discussion and a high level of respect and decorum. I appreciate that very much.

I would like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet next on Wednesday, March 4, 2020, at 9 a.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Advanced Education.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 6:30 p.m.]

