



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Human Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

Thursday, May 5, 2016
9 a.m.

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The 29th Legislature
Second Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (ND), Chair
Smith, Mark W., Drayton Valley-Devon (W), Deputy Chair

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Ellis, Mike, Calgary-West (PC)*
Hinkley, Bruce, Wetaskiwin-Camrose (ND)
Horne, Trevor A.R., Spruce Grove-St. Albert (ND)
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Also in Attendance

Clark, Greg, Calgary-Elbow (AP)

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participant

Ministry of Human Services
Hon. Irfan Sabir, Minister

9 a.m.

Thursday, May 5, 2016

[Ms Goehring in the chair]

**Ministry of Human Services
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: I would like to call this meeting to order and welcome everyone. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Human Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2017.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have all MLAs introduce themselves for the record. Minister, when we get to you, please introduce your staff that are joining you at the table. I am Nicole Goehring, MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs and chair of this committee, and we'll continue, starting to my right with the deputy chair.

Mr. Smith: Good morning. Mark Smith, Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mrs. Pitt: Angela Pitt, MLA, Airdrie.

Mr. Orr: Ron Orr, MLA, Lacombe-Ponoka.

Ms Jansen: Sandra Jansen, Calgary-North West, and my researcher Thomas Ockley.

Mr. Sabir: Irfan Sabir, MLA, Calgary-McCall and Minister of Human Services. I'm joined by my executive team: Lori Cooper, Carol Ann Kushlyk, Mark Hattori, Susan Taylor, Tracy Wyrstik, Jillian Carson, Sherri Wilson, Mahmud Dhala, Kathy Telfer. And I do have my staff: Bill Moore-Kilgannon, Aaron Manton, Kelta Coomber. David Morhart, my deputy minister, will be joining me after the meeting upstairs.

Ms Drever: Deborah Drever, MLA for Calgary-Bow.

Mr. Hinkley: Bruce Hinkley, MLA, Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Horne: Trevor Horne, MLA for Spruce Grove-St. Albert.

Mr. Malkinson: Brian Malkinson, MLA for Calgary-Currie.

Ms McKittrick: Annie McKittrick, MLA, Sherwood Park.

Ms Luff: Robyn Luff, Calgary-East.

Mr. Shepherd: David Shepherd, MLA, Edmonton-Centre.

The Chair: Thank you.

Please note that the microphones are being operated by *Hansard*, and we'd ask that BlackBerrys, iPhones, et cetera, be turned off or set to silent or vibrate and not placed on the table as they may interfere with the audiofeed.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. Before we proceed with consideration of the main estimates for the Ministry of Human Services, I would like to review briefly the standing orders governing the speaking rotation. As provided for in Standing Order 59.01(6), the rotation is as follows. The minister or the member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf may make opening comments not to exceed 10 minutes. For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of the third party, if any, and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of any other party represented in the Assembly or any independent members and the minister may speak. For the next 20

minutes private members of the government caucus and the minister may speak. For the time remaining, we will follow the same rotation just outlined to the extent possible; however, the speaking times are reduced to five minutes as set out in Standing Order 59.02(1)(c).

Members may speak more than once; however, speaking times for the first rotation are limited to 10 minutes at any one time. A minister and a member may combine their time for a total of 20 minutes. For the final rotation, with speaking times of five minutes, once again a minister and a member may combine their speaking time for a maximum total of 10 minutes. Discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not speaking time is combined. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their speech 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 speak directly with either the chair or the committee clerk about the process.

Three hours have been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Human Services. 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 proceed with a break.

Committee members, ministers, and other members who are not committee members may participate; however, only a committee member or an official substitute for a committee member may introduce an amendment during a committee's review of the estimates.

I would like to note for the record that Mr. Malkinson is an official substitute for Ms McPherson, and Mr. Ellis is substituting for Mr. Rodney.

Ministry officials may be present, and at the direction of the minister officials from the ministry may address the committee. Ministry staff seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery area. Members' staff may be present and, space permitting, may sit at the table or behind their members along the committee room wall. Members have priority for seating at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and we will adjourn. Otherwise, we will adjourn today at noon.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and the clock will continue to run.

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.

Again I will remind all meeting participants to address their questions and responses through the chair and not directly to each other.

The vote on the estimates is deferred until consideration of all ministry estimates has concluded and will occur in Committee of Supply on May 17, 2016.

If there are amendments, an amendment to the estimates cannot seek to increase the amount of the estimates being considered, change the destination of a grant, or change the destination or purpose of a subsidy. Any amendment may be proposed to reduce an estimate, but the amendment cannot propose to reduce the estimate by its full amount. The vote on amendments is deferred until Committee of Supply convenes on May 17, 2016. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are being moved.

Twenty copies of amendments must be provided at the meeting for committee members and staff.

I will now invite the Minister of Human Services to begin with his opening remarks. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Chair, and good morning, everyone. Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge that we are here today on the traditional lands of Treaty 6 First Nations.

I am pleased to be here to talk about how the 2016 budget for the Ministry of Human Services supports children, families, and Alberta's most vulnerable through challenging economic times.

We have much to reflect on this morning. The tragic ongoing situation in Fort McMurray is a reminder of how in tough times Albertans always pull together to support each other. Our thoughts are with the people of Fort McMurray today.

The past year has been a challenging one for Alberta. Our government's 2016 budget, the Alberta jobs plan, provides a path to help Albertans as our province faces one of its biggest challenges in a generation. The global collapse in the price of oil not only affects the economy and our government revenues, but these challenges also have a human face. It puts stress on families, communities, and the social fabric that holds us together. This leaves us with a choice. We can make cuts to programs and services, cuts that will only hurt Albertans, or we can choose targeted, thoughtful spending increases so that the vital services Albertans depend on are protected.

We believe that Albertans made a choice when they supported our plan to get the province back on track. Albertans want stable funding for services, not reckless cuts that will only hurt our most vulnerable. That's why our government is choosing to take action that promotes job creation, economic diversification, and growth. We are choosing action that makes sure Albertans have the supports they need. I am proud that our government's 2016 budget, the Alberta jobs plan, has maintained important investments that stabilize the social services that Albertans rely on, perhaps more than ever. This is one of the key pillars in the new Alberta jobs plan introduced with Budget 2016, and that is what is guiding my ministry's approach to our budget this year. We are taking a socially responsible approach that addresses the external fiscal realities facing Alberta today.

The new Alberta child benefit will provide lower income families with up to \$2,750 each year to help parents make ends meet, provide a better quality of life for their children, and address poverty in Alberta. This new benefit supports 235,000 children in 130,000 lower income families, including those receiving AISH or income support. Funding for this nontaxable benefit is \$147 million in 2016-17 and increases to \$196 million when it is fully implemented in the following year. A single parent with two children can receive a maximum of \$1,650. When combined with the enhanced family employment tax credit, our government is providing \$336 million in annual benefits to lower and moderate-income families.

9:10

Human Services is providing an additional \$10 million this year for child care to support demonstration projects and address areas with high demand. This will allow us to continue improving access to affordable, quality, licensed child care as the province's finances permit. We will be listening to the child care community so that needs are met where demands are most critical. As Alberta's population grows, so do the demands for important services that support families and communities.

Our government will ensure that every Albertan receives the support they need when they need it. That is why with Budget 2016 we are making sure that important programs like income support,

PDD, AISH, and family support for children with disabilities are kept stable and are able to accommodate growing caseloads. Over \$24 million in new funding for persons with developmental disabilities and family supports for children with disabilities will ensure that every Albertan can live safely and with dignity. We continue to work with our partners in the disability community, including ACDS and Align, so that the disability sector receives not only financial support but also the systemic support they need to protect the safety of persons with developmental disabilities. Furthermore, over \$29 million in new funding for assured income for the severely handicapped will accommodate the growing AISH caseload, which increases by an average of upwards of 1,500 clients per year.

I'm also very proud of the work our government is doing to address poverty and homelessness in Alberta. We are putting additional funding into the homeless serving system, including homeless shelters, and we are addressing housing first program pressures. In addition, the Ministry of Seniors and Housing is making significant new investments to build more affordable housing and renew existing housing. This means that more people will be moved off waiting lists and into safe and affordable places they can call home.

Our fiscal situation means we must be sure that every dollar is meeting the priority needs of Albertans. The ongoing funding for family and community support program grants in Budget 2016, building upon a one-time grant increase last year, will allow us to extend a number of grants this year. It will also allow for new investments in programs that support the safety and well-being of Alberta families.

Human Services has been able to maintain the significant investments from last year's budgets to better support Alberta families, children, and communities. We have stabilized funding for the child intervention system because the safety and well-being of Alberta's children is a priority. We provided family and community support services partners with their first funding increase since 2009, something many of our municipal partners have expressed their appreciation for. We have partnered with the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters to provide enhanced services and programs for survivors of family violence. We are managing to do this while keeping the ministry's budget increase to less than 2 per cent when the cost of the Alberta child benefit is excluded.

We are reducing ministry support services expense by 3.5 per cent, and we are reducing the lines for both manpower and supplies by 2 per cent.

As part of our ongoing work to integrate service delivery for Albertans, the ministry is restructuring. This has streamlined administration within the department and reduced the size of our executives from 14 ADMs to six. Our ratio of employees to managers is 13 to 1, reflecting our focus on front-line services.

My department will continue to work towards further savings without compromising the services we provide to Albertans. Our government believes in the Alberta values of inclusion and equality of opportunity for all, and we do not abandon these principles when times get tough. Albertans look out for one another, and that's what our government is doing.

There has been much debate about the province's fiscal deficit but little discussion of the deficit that will be caused by cuts to public services. That kind of deficit leads to a social debt with a human cost. Our government stands with at-risk youth, families fleeing violence, persons with disabilities, and lower income Albertans. Budget 2016 controls spending and protects the vital services Albertans depend on, and it introduces new, fiscally prudent measures to improve the quality of life for Albertans even in these challenging times.

Regardless of the fiscal situation my ministry and I continue to work tirelessly so that Albertans have the supports and resources they need. We will continue to work with our partners in municipalities, First Nations, Métis settlements as well as numerous service providers, agencies, social workers, nonprofits, volunteers, community organizations, self-advocates, and other valued partners as we endeavour together to improve the lives of Albertans.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I would just like to note for the record that Ms McKittrick is an official substitute for Mr. Westhead.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Would you like me to set the timer for 20-minute intervals so you're aware of the time, or would you prefer to let the hour flow without interruption?

Mrs. Pitt: Just let the hour flow.

The Chair: Thank you. Go ahead.

Mrs. Pitt: All right. Well, thank you very much for being here today for the estimates of Human Services.

I just want to start off by acknowledging the front-line workers who are fighting out-of-control fires right now in Lac St. Anne, Fort McMurray, and High Level. Our thoughts are with them and, of course, with the Leader of the Official Opposition, Brian Jean, and with Tany Yao, who is a member of this committee.

Given that we know this budget, in particular, will likely change in response to the situation that this province faces with the natural disaster and that taking care of the people that are affected right now is certainly a priority, I think, for everybody here in this room, I would like to start off by asking: do you have a plan to account for the obvious need for the programs provided by Human Services?

Mr. Sabir: In relation to?

Mrs. Pitt: The natural disaster situation that's happening right now in our province.

Mr. Sabir: I think that at this point it's too early, but Human Services will deploy all needed and necessary resources to help those affected by the wildfires and natural disasters.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Have you taken any steps right now to help the residents?

Mr. Sabir: Yes. We are working with the reception centres. We are working with the Red Cross. Our Human Services emergency operation centre is in effect, and we are working with the other GOA departments, government departments, to make sure that . . .

Mrs. Pitt: Have you started to budget for the costs that are going to be coming in?

Mr. Sabir: At this point this budget is under consideration, but we will monitor the pressure and provide for that.

Mrs. Pitt: All right. Okay. In the last paragraph on page 72 you commit to streamlining services that the previous government had spread across ministries. We agree that services should be integrated better across all ministries. Will the minister provide examples of where the current system is disjointed?

Mr. Sabir: What's that in relation to? Are you asking about any specific line item?

Mrs. Pitt: Page 72 in the business plan, the last paragraph. It says:

A person-centred, integrated service delivery approach that focuses on the individual's unique needs and circumstances will make the system easier to navigate and help Albertans receive the programs and services they need, when they need them.

If you can give an example of where that is working, where it's not working.

Mr. Sabir: It's about improving the services. Before . . .

Mrs. Pitt: Where, specifically?

9:20

Mr. Sabir: I'm getting to that.

Before, it was that a person may have to go to different places to get their services. For instance, when we are talking about the Alberta Supports centres, a person can call in or click on a web page, walk into those centres, and can receive almost 120 different kinds of services relating to 26 programs, not necessarily to Human Services but also some services related to the ministry of seniors. What we are essentially doing is that we are making it a one-stop shop, where people can come in and there are services relating to child care, income support, a spectrum of services that they can be assessed for and can be guided and provided with those services. So that integration will make it easier for Albertans to navigate those services and access those services.

Mrs. Pitt: How will you measure this? How will you measure the success of these integrated service centres?

Mr. Sabir: There are certain measures. Some of them are provided in the business plan as well, and we also collect a lot of data internally to monitor those services like client satisfaction surveys.

Mrs. Pitt: Could you tell me where that is in the business plan?

Mr. Sabir: It's not given in this one because this plan measures the outcomes, which are given in this business plan.

Mrs. Pitt: There are very few measurables in the business plan.

Mr. Sabir: But we do collect data to monitor client satisfaction with our services.

Mrs. Pitt: So we'll see that in next year's business plan?

Mr. Sabir: I don't know how quickly we can change performance measures, but I have added some performance measures after our last conversation.

Mrs. Pitt: That's not in the business plan at all.

Mr. Sabir: But we will make sure that we keep on improving our services, our business plan, which reflects our progress.

Mrs. Pitt: And measure them.

Mr. Sabir: And measure them.

Mrs. Pitt: And publish them.

In paragraph 6 on page 72 you note that the volatility of the natural resource sector is a strategic risk which may lead to homelessness, but the business plan mentions nothing about a plan to address this. Why are you focusing on blaming the resource sector and our economy when it has been the economic driver of our province and country for decades?

Mr. Sabir: I think I'm not blaming the resource sector. The resource sector has been the economic engine of this province, but the fact remains that prices are fluctuating. We don't control those prices, and lately, in February, we saw a drop, down to even \$27, and that has created a strain on the provincial revenues. For last year's actual we got \$8.9 billion, and this year we are only collecting \$1.5 billion. So there is a gap in revenues, and that certainly presents risks to the services we provide to Albertans. It's not about blaming the sector. It's a reality of the market that fluctuates.

Mrs. Pitt: Well, it actually says: the volatility of the natural resource sector is a strategic risk which may lead to homelessness.

Mr. Sabir: It's a risk in that when prices are low and the economy goes down, people lose jobs, they don't have the means to provide for their basic needs, and that can put a strain on our services.

Mrs. Pitt: So what is the plan to address this?

Mr. Sabir: What is the plan in relation to Human Services?

Mrs. Pitt: Yes.

Mr. Sabir: We provide stable funding, and we are making sure that Albertans have the needed and necessary resources and support they need during these tough times.

Mrs. Pitt: So just throwing some money around. Is there not a plan, a strategic plan?

Mr. Sabir: It's not just throwing some money around. Rather, they are the programs which Albertans depend on.

Mrs. Pitt: What, specifically?

Mr. Sabir: Anything. Albertans depend on income supports. Albertans depend on AISH. Albertans depend on homelessness supports. Albertans depend on child care. These are all the programs that respond to the needs of Albertans during tough times, and these are the Albertans who are most vulnerable to these fluctuations in commodity prices.

Mrs. Pitt: So what is your plan on homelessness, and why isn't this in the business plan?

Mr. Sabir: The plan on homelessness is given in our budget details. It's a line item. We fund it through seven community-based organizations. We are deploying resources and we are providing funds to make sure that we can address homelessness by improving the system, by making houses available, by making shelters available, by funding into the women's shelter program so that there are funds available for people who are at risk of facing homelessness.

Mrs. Pitt: All right. Let's talk about women's shelters, performance measure 1.4, the strategy to
prevent and address family violence, sexual violence and bullying by supporting women's shelters, collaborating with communities and other ministries to address root causes and promote healthy relationships across the lifespan.

This is a measure, I believe, that could be done as a stand-alone outcome. It is so important that we address the needs of our most vulnerable and that we help victims move their lives in a positive direction. However, I'm not seeing this being monitored by any performance measures. Why are you not creating a performance

measure evaluation for your ministry to ensure the government is making measurable progress in this area?

Mr. Sabir: That's a strategic direction towards the outcome. We want Alberta families and communities to try to improve supports by strengthening prevention and addressing the root causes of social and economic challenges.

With respect to that strategic measure, what we have done is that we have increased the women's shelter funding by \$15 million. It was the first increase in a long time, making the total investment we provide for women's shelters \$49 million.

Mrs. Pitt: How are you monitoring that, though?

Mr. Sabir: We are working with the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, and that's how we monitor, through that organization, how many people are served, what supports are available to them, and how satisfied people are with those services.

Mrs. Pitt: What is the desired outcome? You don't have a performance measure here.

Mr. Sabir: The desired outcome is that no one should be subjected to violence. When those unfortunate incidents happen, they have someplace to turn to, and women's shelters provide that necessary support.

Mrs. Pitt: It's really great to see spending in this area, but it's really hard to measure any outcomes.

Mr. Sabir: Item 1(a) is the performance measure on page 73 of my business plan. That says, "Percentage of Albertans who have information to better help in situations of family violence and bullying."

Mrs. Pitt: Line item 9.3 on page 145 of the budget. While many areas of your budget are seeing growth, this year your government will be decreasing the amount of funding for women's shelters in this province. Considering that line items 9.2 and 9.4 state that your government will be increasing funding for homeless shelters by nearly \$3 million and support and outreach by \$1 million, why are women's shelters the only areas to receive a decrease?

Mr. Sabir: Women's shelters had seen a funding increase of \$15 million in last year's budget, and we are maintaining that support. I don't see that funding has been decreased. It was at \$34 million, and now it has gone up to \$48,920,000. It's a huge increase in the funding that women's shelters were receiving in previous years.

Mrs. Pitt: There is a bit of a decrease. I'm just curious: was it not used or given out?

Mr. Sabir: There were some decreases in terms of administration, supplies, and services but nothing really impacting the services provided by women's shelters. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, there was a 2 per cent decrease in admin and supplies across the ministry to find efficiencies and to respond to the economic and fiscal realities we are facing today.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. I was just curious if there was another reason for that.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder programming is listed as a strategic area for this government in line 1.6 of your business plan. Turning back to the budget, on page 144, line item 4.7, last year you decreased the funding by \$14 million, and this year the fetal alcohol spectrum disorder initiatives are receiving another reduction. Why?

Mr. Sabir: Which line item are we talking about?

Mrs. Pitt: Line item 4.7.

9:30

Mr. Sabir: We provided some advanced grants last year, which were multiyear grants, and that's why that line item has been decreased. But the centres will essentially get the supports and funds they need to move forward with their programs.

Mrs. Pitt: Through granting?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. They received multiyear grants last year, so that's why the advanced grants line item has been decreased.

Mrs. Pitt: Considering that this still represents \$23 million in Human Services, will you explain why you have no performance measures?

Mr. Sabir: With respect to this peril of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder there is a 10-year strategic plan, which is entering into its last year. It has been evaluated at the five-year point and at the seven-year point, and it will be evaluated again towards its completion.

Mrs. Pitt: My last question on outcome 1 focuses on performance measure 1(d), which reads: "Percentage of licensed day-care programs and contracted family day-home agencies that are accredited or participating in accreditation." This is currently listed as a 97 per cent target. This means that 3 per cent of licensed daycare programs are not accredited. Can the minister explain what this means?

Mr. Sabir: Accreditation is not mandatory, to begin with, while licensing ensures that the programs meet certain criteria and that they operate at a certain level. It's not mandatory, so daycares may choose not to get accredited. But once they get accredited, they are monitored more closely, and they do get some benefits like wage top-ups and subsidies. So it's a higher standard, but licensing ensures that all day homes meet a basic standard.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. To outcome 3, "greater collaboration between government, communities and indigenous partners to strengthen services and achieve shared social outcomes." It is so important for us as parliamentarians to be leaders and advocates for those most vulnerable, marginalized, and who need our assistance. There have been so many tragedies within this community, and the recent Auditor General's report on the seven suicides should be a wake-up call for us to act in a responsible manner that provides the necessary supports. However, I'm quite disappointed that your strategies are not properly aligning with helping Albertans. Keeping in mind the recent AG's report, why is there no mention of mental health as poor mental health is a major barrier to employment, health, and safety?

Mr. Sabir: The recent Auditor General's report. Certainly, I share the sentiment that it reflects very uncomfortable realities of our society, and my heart goes out to all the families and friends of those people who are victims of that tragedy. That report itself has 12 recommendations, which have implications for many departments, including Human Services. So we will be working across government to come up with a plan to move towards implementation.

Regarding mental health, the lead on mental health is the Department of Health, and as you may recall, there was a review conducted, led by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View and one of my colleagues, the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Health

has taken the lead on that one, and Human Services is contributing towards the implementation of that plan.

Mrs. Pitt: Let's turn to performance measure 3(b). This measure states that the government sees the number of indigenous children placed with indigenous families as the best measure of government collaboration. Given the number of serious incidents and deaths of children in care, I want to know what your ministry is doing to ensure that safety is the first and primary concern when deciding placements.

Mr. Sabir: That certainly is the primary concern, and that's the starting point, that we only take children into care when they're neglected and when their well-being and safety are at risk. When we remove them from that environment, it's a top priority that they're placed in an environment that is safe for them. Due to cultural sensitivities we make sure that the First Nation children, wherever possible, are placed in a home that is more aligned with their cultural values so that they don't lose their culture, whenever that is possible. We make sure, first and foremost, that they are safe and, second, that they are placed in a home that is culturally appropriate for them.

Also, our practice framework includes the signs of safety approach. Whenever our intervention system gets in touch with a family or a child, the first thing they do is make an assessment of what supports are available, what risks are out there, and they provide for those risks, and they capitalize on those supports and strengths to make sure that the child is safe.

Mrs. Pitt: What specifically are you doing to ensure the safety of the child?

Mr. Sabir: Those are the systems in place. Safety remains the priority.

Mrs. Pitt: When the child is going to an in-care home, how do you ensure that that is a safe place?

Mr. Sabir: In-care homes like foster homes and kinship homes have rigorous processes in place before you become a foster parent or a kinship parent. There are certain tests and measures that you have to go through to make sure that the child is safe. It's an individualized assessment made in each and every case.

Mrs. Pitt: How is this a measure of government collaboration?

Mr. Sabir: How is it a measure of government collaboration? The major concern that First Nations have raised is that when we remove the child from their communities, if they are placed in nonaboriginal homes, they are at risk of losing their culture. So we work with First Nations communities and we work with First Nations bands, First Nations designates to make sure that we place them in a home that is more culturally appropriate for them. We collaborate with them each step of the way in planning so that the shared outcomes are the ones that are beneficial, that are in the best interests of the child, and that are acceptable to both First Nations and the government.

Mrs. Pitt: I just want to point out that we're very supportive of the government's willingness to place an increased focus on our indigenous population. I would like to ask about a few points listed in your business plan. You state that you will be implementing the objectives and principles of the United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. This is a UN document. It has 46 articles and multiple subsections. Can you perhaps point out the top three in this plan that you will focus on first?

Mr. Sabir: That's the work led by the minister of indigenous affairs, and it's ongoing work. Last July the hon. Premier sent out a letter to all ministers to basically do an inventory of their services where they interact with First Nations. That step has been done. For instance, in child intervention we interact with First Nations. For AISH we interact with First Nations. There are certain services that we provide to First Nations. We have provided that, but all other ministries were asked to do the same.

Based on those recommendations, the minister of indigenous affairs has prepared a preliminary report, and he's moving on with signing protocol agreements with different First Nations. A couple of weeks ago he signed the first one with Treaty 8 First Nations. Those tables will provide the forum for further discussion on how we can implement the United Nations declaration.

So it will not be something that the government will prepare in the boardrooms and just impose on them; rather, we will consult with them on how best we can move forward. It's at that stage.

9:40

Mrs. Pitt: What are your top three?

Mr. Sabir: Child intervention will be the first one, and there is child care as well as disabilities. Those are the three things.

Mrs. Pitt: All right. PDD, under line item 4.2, supports to Albertans: can you explain the increase of nearly \$17 million?

Mr. Sabir: That's 4.2, supports relating to persons with developmental disabilities?

Mrs. Pitt: Yeah.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. This program provides supports to adults with developmental disabilities to live in their homes and access specialized supports requirements, find employment, be included in community life, and be as independent as possible. It's provided primarily through contracted service providers in the community and family-managed service agreements. This increase will help us to deal with caseload growth and the increased number of people seeking those supports. At this point there are approximately 11,000 adults on this program.

Mrs. Pitt: Are there any on a wait-list?

Mr. Sabir: There are people on the wait-list.

Mrs. Pitt: How many?

Mr. Sabir: There are 413 people on the wait-list.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Line item 4.5: can you explain the increase of \$7 million?

Mr. Sabir: Family support for children with disabilities. The increase, again, will essentially provide us with the resources to accommodate the growth in the program, which is 4 per cent per year. This program will provide a wide range of supports and services to the families of children with disabilities such as counselling, respite, child care, behavioural supports, and developmental supports.

Mrs. Pitt: Are there any on a wait-list?

Mr. Sabir: Are there any on the wait-list? No.

Mrs. Pitt: No.

Line item 4.6: can you explain what this money is being used for?

Mr. Sabir: Provincial disability supports initiatives. These initiatives provide community supports for adult disabilities through programs such as the Alberta brain injury initiative, community access for people in continuing care, crossdisability support services, and residential access modification programs.

Mrs. Pitt: Can you explain the modification program?

Mr. Sabir: The modification program is money available for people if they need to make some kind of renovations to their home to make it more accessible: the use of lifts, elevators, those kinds of things.

Mrs. Pitt: This is the RAMP program?

Mr. Sabir: It's the RAMP program.

Mrs. Pitt: Is that all that's in there?

Mr. Sabir: In this line item?

Mrs. Pitt: Yeah.

Mr. Sabir: No. There are other initiatives.

Mrs. Pitt: You said the modification program. Is that only the RAMP program, or are there other programs?

Mr. Sabir: The modification program is one. RAMP, called the residential access modification program, is one initiative in this one, but there are others like the Alberta brain injury initiative, community access for people in continuing care, crossdisability support services.

Mrs. Pitt: What is the purpose of initiatives related to the PDD transformation plan? What are the measures or evidence of success?

Mr. Sabir: The purpose of the transformation is that Albertans should have access to the programs, and these programs need to be tailored to their needs. When we talk about the transformation, we are working with that community to make sure that they have the needed and necessary supports. For instance, if I give you an example of safety standard 8, that is a standard in place concerning their safety. When I became the minister, I heard the concerns from all around that these measures are overly restrictive and that they may not necessarily be the best for their safety. I worked with them and repealed those standards.

Mrs. Pitt: Sorry. I'm talking about the transformation plan.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. That's what I'm talking about. What we are trying to do is to make services tailored to their needs and make services to best serve their needs, so that's why we are modernizing these services.

Mrs. Pitt: What is the cost to date of the transformation plan, and what are the results?

Mr. Sabir: No specific costs, but they are subsumed in the department's admin budget.

Mrs. Pitt: Where is that? Where's the line item?

Mr. Sabir: Program planning and delivery.

Mrs. Pitt: What's the line item?

Mr. Sabir: As I said, there is no specific line item, but wherever the program planning is, the same staff, the same resources are used to transform, to make changes. It will be program planning and delivery. It will be the costs which are already there within the programs. We are not using external resources or external bodies to do that.

Mrs. Pitt: Let's go to Alberta Supports. These are tough economic times for the province, especially for those in the oil and gas sectors of the economy. During these times I know that my office certainly receives a lot of calls from constituents looking to connect to employment services but who are often experiencing long wait times and overburdened staff. Many just can't get there. I'm wondering how you can expect to keep up with the demand in this economy given that you are making a decrease to the call centre and program delivery under line items 5.1 and 5.2?

Mr. Sabir: So 5.2 and 5.1?

Mrs. Pitt: Yeah.

Mr. Sabir: Okay. At this point we do not have any wait lines, and this decrease, which is minimal, is in the admin costs, like through restraint in hiring. It's not impacting the services we are providing them. At this point we have no wait lines on this program.

Mrs. Pitt: Is it just that the demand is down?

Mr. Sabir: No. The demand isn't down. We just are controlling it by keeping the hiring restraint and only hiring for the positions which are critical. We are just trying to control the costs. But services have not been compromised, and there are no lineups. We are managing the lineups. We are managing within the budget.

Mrs. Pitt: Because of the decrease did you let staff go?

Mr. Sabir: We didn't let staff go. Where the demand was higher, we were shifting staff around from less demand areas to higher demand areas.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Excellent.

Child intervention. What exactly have you done to find savings in programing and delivery for child intervention services, 6.1?

Mr. Sabir: To find savings, the program planning and delivery budget has been reduced, both in terms of salaries and supplies like maintaining the hiring freeze and only hiring for the most critical positions, but services are still the same.

9:50

Mrs. Pitt: You decreased salaries, did you say?

Mr. Sabir: There was a wage freeze and a hiring freeze. Managers' wages were frozen.

Mrs. Pitt: Above all else, we think that our children's safety is paramount. What steps has your ministry taken to ensure the safety of our children in care while at the same time decreasing funding to foster care support?

Mr. Sabir: As I mentioned in response to a question earlier, the priority of the ministry is that children should stay home as far as possible, and they're only removed from their homes when there is a risk to their well-being and safety. To begin with, we work with the family. We provide resources to families so that there are fewer children in care.

Mrs. Pitt: So do we have fewer foster parents?

Mr. Sabir: Not fewer foster parents.

Mrs. Pitt: They have less foster care support, though.

Mr. Sabir: Less utilization of foster homes but not fewer foster parents. I have some numbers here.

Mrs. Pitt: With the decrease in that funding, though, how is . . .

Mr. Sabir: More funds are deployed towards the prevention so that fewer children come into care.

Mrs. Pitt: I know. But once children are in care, do the foster families not need the support? How is that ensuring safety for the child?

Mr. Sabir: Foster parents do get the needed and necessary supports. What I was saying is that we are deploying more resources towards the prevention so that fewer children come into care.

Mrs. Pitt: I understand. But once they're in foster care . . .

Mr. Sabir: They do have the needed and necessary support. There is a caseload decrease, though.

Mrs. Pitt: There's a caseload decrease?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. We have 1,900 foster homes, 1,600 kinship homes, and there are approximately 3,600 children and youth in foster care and another 1,700 children in kinship care.

Mrs. Pitt: So what would the decrease in funding mean?

Mr. Sabir: There is a caseload decrease as well. A decrease in funding doesn't mean that foster parents will not have the needed and necessary support. They will still get the same support.

Mrs. Pitt: So supports are the same?

Mr. Sabir: Yes.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. According to your website deaths of children who were receiving child intervention services are examined by a number of external and internal bodies, including the office of the Chief Medical Examiner, the Fatality Review Board, the Child and Youth Advocate, the Council for Quality Assurance, and ministry staff. One of the concerns raised by the round-table investigating the deaths of children in care in January 2014 was that the department wasn't tracking the recommendations that were coming from all the separate investigative bodies in one place and that there was no accountability for improvement. Has your office done anything to change this?

Mr. Sabir: We are tracking all the recommendations.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay.

Mr. Sabir: That has been changed in response to that.

Mrs. Pitt: That's excellent.

The recent data from the child intervention information and statistics summary shows that intakes saw an increase of 6 per cent, and this is a 19 per cent increase for designated First Nations authorities. These numbers compared December 2015 with December 2014. Can you give some details about the significant rise?

Mr. Sabir: The significant rise in the number of children . . .

Mrs. Pitt: The 6 per cent increase, and it's a 19 per cent increase for the designated First Nations authorities for intakes.

Mr. Sabir: So the reason for the increase in the caseload of DFNAs?

Mrs. Pitt: Yeah. Why such a rise? You can get back to me with more information on that.

Mr. Sabir: I'm just looking. I'm trying to find which number you're referring to.

Mrs. Pitt: The child intervention information and statistics summary. It's on your website.

Mr. Sabir: Are you looking at the number of calls we are receiving and those things?

Mrs. Pitt: No, no, no. The actual intakes.

Mr. Sabir: Intakes mean that it's just that a concern was raised to us and that we have talked to them. It doesn't necessarily mean that we've got the child in our care. For instance, last year there were 45,000 intakes, and approximately 89 per cent of them didn't result in an open file.

Mrs. Pitt: Why the increase, though?

Mr. Sabir: I think that whenever a concern is brought to our attention, we will make sure that we investigate. We will complete the intake to make sure that there are no safety concerns. But for the increase there can be many reasons.

Mrs. Pitt: But you don't know why?

Mr. Sabir: I can talk to many reasons. There are many things going on in communities. All First Nations are different. There are infrastructure deficits. There are domestic violence issues. There are economic issues, employment.

Mrs. Pitt: Was the designation changed, the authority to designated First Nations increased?

Mr. Sabir: Does giving them authority change these numbers?

Mrs. Pitt: Was that the situation?

Mr. Sabir: No.

Mrs. Pitt: From the same report, the child intervention information and statistics summary, there has been a large increase in the numbers of young adults having an active SFA agreement. This actually looks like pretty good progress. Can you give some information about this area?

Mr. Sabir: What was done: the age of eligibility for youth receiving services was increased from 22 to 24. That made more youth eligible for these supports. That's why there was an increase and we did increase supports for that. That program also includes the advancing futures bursary.

Mrs. Pitt: How many people have agreements? Do you know how many youth, and what was the increase?

Mr. Sabir: At this point we have 1,576, and in 2014 there were 1,040.

Mrs. Pitt: Oh, wow.

Mr. Sabir: A little bit of math.

Mrs. Pitt: The deaths of children, youth, or young adults receiving child intervention services shows a significantly higher number for the 2014-2015 year, with 33 deaths. I see that the funding for line 6.2 has remained basically the same. Are there any changes as to how this money is being spent?

Mr. Sabir: The funding for this item was increased, actually, with our last budget. This budget maintains that increase, and we will make sure that we have stable funding for those services. Line item 6.2 will provide a range of services to children and families like in cases where children are found to be in need of intervention services. It includes family enhancement, child protection, support and financial assistance agreements, and protection for sexually exploited children. That line item is stable, and that accounts for the increase we made to this area last year, which was \$37 million. So we do have stable funding.

Mrs. Pitt: Line item 7.1 shows a modest decrease. Can you explain?

10:00

Mr. Sabir: For the most part, the reason for the decrease will be the same. It will be that we reduced the program planning and delivery by not hiring, keeping that hiring freeze and only hiring where it's critical. For the most part, you will see slight decreases in line items. That's the reason that we made that decrease across the board.

Mrs. Pitt: In the 2015-2016 budget you have your forecast for child care subsidy at \$5 million below budget. Why?

Mr. Sabir: At this point we are at 85 per cent capacity in our child care system. There is not much uptake.

Mrs. Pitt: For the subsidy?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. We have 108,000 spaces, and at this point only 85,000 are taken. Due to the downturn in the economy the subsidy has not been used as much.

Mrs. Pitt: Is anybody being turned away if they meet eligibility?

Mr. Sabir: No.

Mrs. Pitt: Can you explain the almost \$10 million increase under line item 7.2?

Mr. Sabir: Ten million dollars has been allocated for new initiatives, including phasing in an evidence-based framework for quality child care. We will be using it to plan for our \$25-a-day child care program. We will use this money to engage with the stakeholders.

Mrs. Pitt: Does that really make sense when you don't have the current child care subsidy being used to full capacity?

Mr. Sabir: At this point there's a downturn in the economy, but there are still places where child care is in high demand; for instance, in Calgary. We need to have quality child care that is affordable, that is accessible to everyone, so we will plan for that . . .

Mrs. Pitt: But they're not using the subsidies that are available.

Mr. Sabir: . . . and as our finances permit and as demand increases, we will move to full implementation.

Mrs. Pitt: But the numbers show the demand isn't really there.

Mr. Sabir: We promised that we will implement a \$25-a-day child care plan.

Mrs. Pitt: So it's ideology.

Mr. Sabir: At this point there is a downturn in the economy, so there may not be demand, but having that space available also provides opportunity for the people looking for work to have that option and get out and look for work. We will be planning with these funds to move towards a more fully accessible, quality child care.

Mrs. Pitt: Just moving forward, these numbers show a very, very different story, something to consider before you put more dollars at risk.

Mr. Sabir: These numbers need to be understood in the context and the fiscal realities we are living in. At this point there is a downturn, and you may see that the uptake on these subsidies is low, but when the economy is fully functioning, there are employment opportunities, and demand increases. Then we need to have that quality care.

Mrs. Pitt: So we'll just waste the money in the meantime, hey?

Mr. Sabir: If you think that spending money on child care is a waste, I would disagree.

Mrs. Pitt: Child intervention services for children and youth: can you explain what line item 8.1 means in terms of services, program costs, et cetera?

Mr. Sabir: Early intervention and early childhood development?

Mrs. Pitt: Line item 8.1, yes.

Mr. Sabir: As the title suggests, that's the money for early intervention and early childhood development. We know that focusing on early childhood development and parenting resources improves children's opportunities for success. That money provides for our network of parent link centres, that provide early childhood development and parenting programs along with family support, information and referral, and developmental screening for families. There are 53 parent link centres across Alberta.

Mrs. Pitt: But that's not only parent link, right?

Mr. Sabir: For the most part, it's parent link centres and home visitation programs, but programming from this line item is focused on early childhood development. There's the triple-P, the positive parenting program, home visitation, as I mentioned.

Mrs. Pitt: What does youth in transition, line item 8.2, mean?

Mr. Sabir: What does youth in transition mean? It's the youth that are in transition out of our child care system when they turn 18. That's the program we were talking about earlier with the Alberta futures bursaries.

Mrs. Pitt: Those are the FSA agreements?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah, those agreements. When they're 18, these are the supports that are provided to them to successfully transition into adulthood.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Moving on to homeless and outreach supports, we see a nominal increase to lines 9.2 and 9.4. Can you explain where this money will be going?

Mr. Sabir: Money from line item 9.2 provides funding to support the operation of homeless shelters and short-term supportive housing sites throughout the province. We are funding around 3,200 homeless emergency spaces in 25 facilities across Alberta.

Mrs. Pitt: As it pertains to these line items, how will the carbon tax affect these shelters?

Mr. Sabir: How will the carbon tax affect these?

Mrs. Pitt: The shelters and the funding.

Mr. Sabir: The carbon tax is designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and one of the best ways to reduce those emissions is to put a price on carbon, so it's for the good of our society that we need to protect our environment. As we mentioned in our plan, around 60 per cent of Albertans will get rebates.

Mrs. Pitt: Does that include homeless shelters and their operations?

Mr. Sabir: It doesn't include them, but it will not affect the individuals. Whatever the cost of that carbon levy is on this program, that will be a matter for consideration going forward when that's implemented.

Mrs. Pitt: How many service contracts do these line items support?

Mr. Sabir: Line 9.2?

Mrs. Pitt: All of 9.

Mr. Sabir: Homeless shelters: there are 25 shelters across the province, so we support all of them, 3,200 spaces. Women's shelters: we fund 710 spaces; there are 30 shelters.

Mrs. Pitt: Sorry. How many women's shelters?

Mr. Sabir: How many shelters? Thirty shelters, 11 second-stay shelters, and five on-reserve women's shelters.

Mrs. Pitt: Will you be increasing your budget to reflect the carbon tax?

Mr. Sabir: The carbon tax isn't in effect yet, so that will be a discussion for the next budget.

Mrs. Pitt: So we'll probably see significant increases in homeless shelter supports, women's shelter supports?

10:10

Mr. Sabir: That's a discussion for another day, when that's in effect.

Mrs. Pitt: Can you point to a line item where you address youth homelessness?

Mr. Sabir: Under line item 9.4: \$87 million. Out of that, \$3 million is allocated to youth homelessness.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Line item 9.4 is youth homelessness.

We are quite concerned with this government's use of the business plan to propagate the NDP's political platform. Let's be clear. We are here today to discuss the Human Services estimates,

yet I find a substantial part of your business plan is aimed at blaming the low price of oil. In the third paragraph you reiterate this government's commitment to the NDP's \$15 minimum wage. This is not exactly what we wanted to debate here, but given that you brought it up as an important factor in your ministry's plan, we need to get some answers.

On page 72 of your business plan, strategic context, you state that your increases to the minimum wage will help "support families to live safe and healthy lives." Has your government conducted any studies on the impacts that the \$15 minimum wage will have on the number of jobs that may be cut as a result of this policy?

Mr. Sabir: First, it's an NDP government, and it's a business plan under that government, so you will see some policies of the NDP government reflected in the business plans.

Mrs. Pitt: Have you conducted any studies on the \$15 minimum wage?

Mr. Sabir: The \$15 minimum wage is for the Ministry of Labour and whatever their estimates are. I'm pretty sure that the Minister of Labour will be happy to talk to you about that.

Mrs. Pitt: In your business plan . . .

Mr. Sabir: In my business plan when I am talking about vulnerable people, they are people who do work and still need supports, so it's my understanding that this \$15 wage will have a better impact on them. They will have more money to meet their basic needs, and that's how that relates to supports we provide.

Mrs. Pitt: So your understanding of this impacting in a positive way: where do you get your information from?

Mr. Sabir: That's a matter for the Minister of Labour.

Mrs. Pitt: But you're using it in your plan.

The Chair: I'm going to interject. I'm just worried about the tone of the meeting between the minister and the members. I would just ask that you maintain decorum while in here and speak respectfully.

Mrs. Pitt: I'm just trying to get an answer that comes straight out of the business plan.

The Chair: Absolutely. Just be careful with the tone.

Mrs. Pitt: Have you conducted any studies on the \$15 minimum wage increase and the number of jobs that will be cut?

Mr. Sabir: I think the Minister of Labour will be happy to provide information on that. Certainly, the \$15 minimum wage will help vulnerable Albertans to meet their basic needs. I know this much for a fact.

Mrs. Pitt: Where are the facts?

Mr. Sabir: I worked as a minimum wage worker. When my wage was increased by \$1 or \$2, it made a difference in my life, so I'm speaking from my practical experience that any increase in minimum wage makes a difference in lives. I'm serving the people who are vulnerable, who are minimum wage earners. Any increase in the wages of those people will make a difference in their lives.

Mrs. Pitt: Again on page 72 of your business plan you state that

low oil and gas commodity prices are leading to economic hardship for many Albertans which, over time, may result in an increased demand for the ministry's income and social support programs and put pressure on ministry resources.

I'm wondering: why did your ministry also leave out the hardships from rising electrical prices, the increase to personal taxes, and the carbon taxes, which have been a result of your policies?

Mr. Sabir: These are the economic factors. The low oil commodity price will affect people's earning abilities, and when people don't have jobs, they look for government supports. That's why we included that as a risk.

Mrs. Pitt: Have you performed an assessment on how your tax on everything will affect our hardest hit?

Mr. Sabir: Which line item are we talking about?

Mrs. Pitt: Page 72 of your business plan, where you state, "low oil and gas commodity prices are leading to economic hardship . . . [and] may result in an increased demand for the ministry's income and social support programs."

Mr. Sabir: From my ministry's standpoint, when people lose their jobs, they come for supports from the ministry, and we get increased numbers of calls for support. That's how it's impacting my ministry, and that's why we are providing stable funding for those services.

Mrs. Pitt: I noticed that in your business plan you also left out the need to address the 10,000 jobs your government has killed by forcing the immediate shutdown of coal-fired generation plants. Do you have a plan to address the obvious needs that will now have to be covered through the programming in Alberta Works and income support?

Mr. Sabir: I think the coal-fired plants and shutting them down and everything around those coal-fired plants are matters for the Minister of Energy.

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but the time allotted for this portion of the meeting has concluded.

I would now like to invite members from the third-party opposition to speak freely with the minister for the next 20 minutes. Would you like to go back and forth?

Ms Jansen: Back and forth suits me fine. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Would you like me to set the timer for 10 minutes, the halfway point?

Ms Jansen: That would be terrific. I appreciate that. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. Go ahead.

Ms Jansen: Well, thank you, Minister, for taking the time to chat with us today. This is an estimates meeting that I look forward to, having been an associate minister in this ministry before. I think, certainly, you are supported by some pretty fantastic staff, as I well know, so you are well suited in this role to get the job done, with some great people behind you. Having gotten the niceties out of the way, we're going to have to talk about some, of course, serious issues here. I want to jump right into the conversation about PDD.

I apologize. I am going to interrupt quite a bit considering the fact that I only have 20 minutes, and I have a lot to get through, so I will apologize for that in advance. I'm going to have to move fairly quickly on some of these topics.

I do, of course, at the same time, want to introduce Leah McRorie, who is an advocate of mine in the PDD community here – if she can just put her hand up – and who’s been a source of inspiration for me on these questions and, certainly, has helped me to realize some of the intense challenges that families dealing with PDD supports have to go through.

I want to start out with page 74 of your business plan. Outcome 2 says – and I think this is laudable – “Albertans receive higher quality programs and services that are more coordinated, seamless and tailored to their needs to maximize their potential.” I think that that is a great goal to have. Unfortunately, we saw with the introduction of the procurement plan, which is now put on hold, something that was very counterintuitive to your goal here. I’m just wondering what kind of conversations you’re having right now around that procurement plan. You know, in the discussion and the move towards that, what kind of money did you spend, and what kind of consultation did you do?

Mr. Sabir: Thank you. It’s a very good question. As you mentioned, the procurement plan respecting PDD has been put on hold, and we will be consulting with PDD to make sure that whatever agreements we have in place will work for both the individual service providers and for the government.

Just to give you a bit of background, the procurement was given to me when I became minister. On November 19, 2014, there was a directive from Treasury Board that asked the entire government to look at their procurement policies . . .

Ms Jansen: Across the entire government?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. From Treasury Board. This was in 2014.

. . . and asked them to establish contract procurement committees in every department and to make sure that, where possible, procurement is competitive and doesn’t provide an unfair advantage to one party as opposed to . . .

10:20

Ms Jansen: Sorry. As I said, I’m going to interrupt here a little bit. When it came to PDD, specifically for procurement as related to that, before you decided to launch into it, who exactly did you speak with in the disability community?

Mr. Sabir: The initiative just started out of that Treasury Board directive. There were ongoing communications with the PDD community and my department. When I became the minister, after that I spoke to ACDS, I spoke to Inclusion Alberta, and I spoke to many organizations.

Ms Jansen: And they liked the idea of moving to procurement?

Mr. Sabir: We were in conversation. We need to streamline our contracts, and we are working with them. That would be a question for them. You can ask them whether they like it or not.

Ms Jansen: You stated last fall during this committee’s review of Human Services’ estimates that there were about 360 people on the approved waiting service wait-list for PDD services. Are you aware of what that number is today?

Mr. Sabir: Four hundred and thirteen.

Ms Jansen: Four hundred and thirteen. And the increased uptake expected this year: are you expecting it to go up at all?

Mr. Sabir: In PDD?

Ms Jansen: Uh-huh.

Mr. Sabir: I do not expect it to be influenced by the economic downturn. It’s usually steady.

Ms Jansen: I have stakeholders going through the line items in the budget, and they’re a bit confused because there’s not a lot of information in there about a breakdown, obviously. But if we wanted to look at the dollar amounts that were going to service providers out of that money, what kind of dollar amount might we be looking at? If you don’t have that information – and I can understand if you don’t – would you be able to get us that information?

Mr. Sabir: Human Services spends nearly \$1.5 billion . . .

Ms Jansen: Sorry; can you repeat that?

Mr. Sabir: . . . \$1.5 billion, about a third of our budget, on contracted services and support to Albertans. We have more than 3,600 contracts with 2,200 providers.

Ms Jansen: So you have about how many people actually receiving PDD supports now?

Mr. Sabir: Around 11,000.

Ms Jansen: And those are fairly accurate 2016 numbers?

Mr. Sabir: Yes, that’s fairly accurate. And around 12,000 children as well.

Ms Jansen: Have you had any form of consultation as a whole, you know, maybe questionnaires, maybe having some of the people who actually use these services in, to talk about the PDD transformation and how it affects them? What kind of dialogue have you had with them?

Mr. Sabir: We do satisfaction surveys with families, guardians of adults with developmental disabilities.

Ms Jansen: When was the last time you did a satisfaction survey?

Mr. Sabir: In 2014-15.

Ms Jansen: Okay. So it’s 2016, and you’re talking about a plan that you want to implement. I assume that when you’re talking about the transformation plan and procurement and these changes, these structural changes you’re looking at, you’ve done some kind of recent consultation in order to discuss with them some pretty powerful changes that will affect their day-to-day lives in a very pronounced way. You’ve done that lately as opposed to satisfaction surveys a year or two ago?

Mr. Sabir: On every issue that has any impact on PDD individuals, providers, that has been my approach. I have consulted them. PDD’s standard 8, which the previous government imposed on them: I consulted with them, and I repealed that.

Ms Jansen: So you consulted with whom?

Mr. Sabir: The PDD community.

Ms Jansen: You consulted with the PDD community and specifically – because I’m hearing from people that they weren’t consulted, lots of them, I’m just wondering.

Mr. Sabir: It was a public consultation, open to everyone, that we did around safety standards. More than 2,000 Albertans participated in that.

Ms Jansen: But I'm not talking about safety standards specifically.

Mr. Sabir: I'm talking about my approach.

When we heard concerns about their contracts, I still put a pause on it. I am consulting with all stakeholders who want to participate, and that includes their representative organizations. I am open to suggestions, basically, from anyone.

Ms Jansen: You know, when you talk about seamless and tailored programs, I think what I'm hearing very distinctly from the community is that it's pretty difficult to talk about a tailored program when a lot of these folks are pretty concerned about the whole transformation program as a whole and are very concerned about where it's going. I think that if you want to spend dollars effectively, then certainly making sure that they go where these families need them the most is pretty important. Would you not agree with that?

Mr. Sabir: I would certainly agree with that. If they have concerns, I am committed to working with them to address their concerns.

Ms Jansen: Let's talk about the supports intensity scale because this has been, you know, going back to our government, an issue. A lot of people are pretty upset with how that process unfolds. It's been called many things, demeaning and degrading amongst them. I think a lot of us would agree – and this isn't a judgment call – that it's something that really needs a closer examination. Are you familiar with SIS and what the folks are saying about it?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. Most of the issues, Member, I will agree, that I have inherited go back to your government. I've looked into the supports intensity scale, and I've heard some concerns ... [A timer sounded]

The Chair: Continue. That's the halfway point.

Mr. Sabir: ... from some individuals. What it does – it may not be the perfect scale, but it's a scale which helps you identify needs relative to other people receiving the services. It's a standard which ...

Ms Jansen: Well, it may be standard. I think people have complained about it, and I'm wondering if you're open to discussing other options as opposed to the SIS scale.

Mr. Sabir: I'm open to discussing other options, but every individual receiving services from PDD has gone through this, and there have been changes made to this scale in response to those concerns. There are other tools like SNAP, which is used in the United States, ICAP, also used in the United States, and I-CAN in Australia. I'm open to discussing that. It's one instrument that is used to identify the needs and that also makes sure that for two people receiving services from PDD, their needs are assessed in a manner that is fair, transparent, and that yields results which are comparable in similar circumstances.

Ms Jansen: One of the things – and I've asked you these questions before in question period – related to procurement that I did mention before: trade agreements like the New West Partnership specifically exempt social services from the competitive procurement process. Is that a conversation you're willing to have

in your government, to look at the idea of taking social services and removing it from that discussion?

Mr. Sabir: I think that, first, the intent of that move is not to implement a comparative tendering across the spectrum of our services. Yes, there are exemptions if you are procuring it from a nonprofit, but many of those providers also date back to the previous government.

Ms Jansen: There was a report called – and I tabled ...

Mr. Sabir: They are not a homogeneous group of people. There are for-profits as well.

Ms Jansen: Sorry. I tabled this report in the Chamber, Toward a Community Benefit Model of Procurement in Community Services, and it really goes into detail about B.C.'s experience with procurement. In fact, the learning experience they went through was that it actually wasn't a great fit for them. Now, certainly, that report was done, and it was available for anyone who wanted to look at it. Was your department familiar with that report, and did they consider it before you actually looked seriously at procurement for PDD?

10:30

Mr. Sabir: Yes. My department has advised me that they are familiar with it, that they have looked into it, but as you outlined in the very beginning, I have extended contracts till 2017. If there are any concerns, if there are any better models out there, that gives me enough time to work with the community, work with the sector to make sure that we get it right.

Ms Jansen: You talk about better models, and I'm just a little bit curious here. When you actually made the decision, because obviously at a certain point you made a decision based on the information you had – I'm sorry. I'm just a little confused about the thought process. Did you think that the outcome in Alberta would be better than what happened in B.C.? When you say that you're open to other models, did you not consider other models at the time?

Mr. Sabir: My staff was working on it, and they do consider evidence-based practices. Based on that, they move towards one or the other approach.

Ms Jansen: So you rated a number of different options, and that one came first despite the feedback that you saw from B.C.?

Mr. Sabir: I didn't say that I rated those, but we need to align our ...

Ms Jansen: Well, if you chose it, I'm assuming you rated it number one.

Mr. Sabir: ... contracting approach to make it more consistent and co-ordinated and transparent. As you will know, Human Services was created out of five different ministries, so within Human Services there are 50 different contracts. We need to align those services ...

Ms Jansen: Well, it's certainly a big job, and I commend you for taking it on. If you're open to having ongoing conversations about what models work best, I've got a lot of folks who would be delighted to have that conversation.

Mr. Sabir: I'm always open.

Ms Jansen: I only have about, I think, four minutes left. I do want to switch gears right now and talk a little bit about homelessness. I serve on the board of the Calgary homeless council and previously was co-chair of the Alberta advisory council on homelessness. This council actually provides a systems overview on homeless supports in the province.

I just want to mention, before I get into a couple of questions, that certainly the NDP government was invited to take part in this nonpartisan council and said no, and it's a little, you know, disappointing to me. The council is doing such good work on a nonpartisan level, and it is a resource that you could really take advantage of in the discussion about homelessness. Certainly, the Calgary Homeless Foundation in their 10-year plan to end homelessness has made remarkable strides in this province, and I would urge you to use them as a resource a little bit more and to consider maybe having someone sit on that council because it does some excellent work.

One of the things we talk about is that when it comes to spending money, when it comes to allocating funds for homelessness in this province, one of the big concerns is that the different groups who support homeless initiatives share more information so that we can actually get accurate numbers about who is homeless, what kind of supports they need. Have you looked at all at the idea of some kind of a systems overview on where the money is going?

Mr. Sabir: With respect to the overall programming in the province, we are working with seven CBOs, community-based organizations, including the Calgary Homeless Foundation. They are valued partners, and at the administration level, at the city level, they are the ones who make decisions. The priority is set by the government that we want to reduce and eliminate homelessness.

Ms Jansen: Well, it's not just the cities making these decisions. The Calgary Homeless Foundation certainly is looking for government partnerships. Are you willing to have that conversation?

Mr. Sabir: They are certainly our partner. We are the one providing them the resources, and with this new budget we will be announcing more initiatives around homelessness and housing.

Ms Jansen: There's not a lot of detail in this budget about how much funding is going to shelter spaces versus housing versus rent subsidies. Are you able to provide a more detailed breakdown of where the money is going?

Mr. Sabir: Certainly, I can provide that detail.

Ms Jansen: I want to talk to you a bit about permanent supportive housing, and we may end up having to come back to this if we run out of time. This is a crucial piece of the homelessness conversation that we are really missing the boat on in this province. These are some of the most vulnerable populations in Alberta. They need more than just temporary or affordable housing. They require wraparound supports, and they need them constantly. Now, the government has committed about \$13 million over five years for permanent supportive housing, but we fall short in a lot of areas. Is that a discussion that you are having in your department, and how are you looking to make up that shortfall?

Mr. Sabir: Actually, we are falling short on many things. We have inherited many social deficits. Only budget deficits are talked about, but we have inherited many deficits, and housing is one of them. For that reason, in our capital plan there is \$1.1 billion

allocated for that. That will help us improve that situation and make significant investments in that regard.

Ms Jansen: Well, it's \$13 million, as I said to you, but it falls short for cities like Lethbridge, Grande Prairie, Medicine Hat, Edmonton, and Calgary. They need more resources dedicated, as I said, to permanent supportive housing specifically. How are you going to address that specific issue within the homelessness framework and within the housing framework as a whole?

Mr. Sabir: I will be working with the ministry of seniors on overall strategy and overall housing and the homelessness issue.

With respect to the capital plan, it includes \$13 million . . .

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, Minister, but the time allotted for this portion has concluded.

We will now be breaking for the five-minute break, that we agreed upon at the beginning of this meeting. The timer will be set. See you in five minutes.

[The committee adjourned from 10:37 a.m. to 10:42 a.m.]

The Chair: All right. Welcome back.

At this point I would like to open the floor to the independent member from the Alberta Liberal Party. You have 20 minutes. Would you like to have me set the timer at the 10-minute mark to identify the halfway point?

Dr. Swann: That would be great. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: And would you like to go back and forth with the minister?

Dr. Swann: Back and forth if the minister is willing.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Dr. Swann: At the risk of sounding like a cheerleader for your department, I have to say thank you for the work that you do, one of the most difficult jobs in the province. My daughter has been involved with the social services support system through the health system and through some charitable organizations, and I have a sense personally of just what a challenging, challenging job it is, especially during this economic downturn. But given the fact that historically and dating back to the '90s Alberta has been spending approximately 20 per cent less on social services than the rest of the country, one has to put all of this into context and recognize that you have in this year made dramatic changes that are improving the investment in social services in this province. I'm talking about income support, child benefits, women's shelters, increased homeless supports, and increased supports for AISH.

There are, obviously, ways that one could talk about improvements and questions about where you're spending, but my first comments are to thank you for doing what you're doing and to thank you for increasing investment in the tremendous social deficit we've inherited in this province over the last 20 years, since Ralph Klein made the decisions he did under similar circumstances: a fall in oil prices and a cut across the board, with returns of funding to health care and to education but not to social services. So we are well behind the eight ball in this department, and we are paying dearly for it with homelessness, with mental illness, with the challenges that I know your staff are facing every day with great courage and, obviously, with some trepidation, having looked through some of the child advocate reports and seen the level of I think what former Minister Manmeet Bhullar called a culture of

shame and blame, which you also inherited. There's a recognition that somehow we need to turn around the culture in your ministry and, I would dare say, in Health as well, where there's a culture of shame and blame and uncertainty.

Your corporate surveys over the past five years have demonstrated that there's a lot of dysfunction in terms of relationships, in terms of confidence in leadership, in terms of respect, and in terms of the culture of shame and blame that has evolved over many years. I don't know how you turn that around, but I applaud you for doing the corporate survey, that shows the problems in your department.

The question I guess I have is how you're going to start to address it. When are we going to see the corporate survey from the past year? I think it has now been done and, I would assume, would not show a whole lot of change from previous years but needs to be acknowledged as indicators, and helpful indicators, of where we need to go to get a better work atmosphere, an atmosphere of well-being, mutual support, teamwork, learning together, and prevention, which I know you're committed to.

Those are preamble comments. I think one of the other things that has come out of that survey in the past is that there's so much emphasis on documentation and data gathering that there's almost nothing left for front-line care service. Many of the people that work in your department say that they are so pressed by the data gathering and that the outcomes-based service delivery model, in some cases, has aggravated that. It's obviously something that – we have to evaluate what we're doing, but there may be too much emphasis on outcomes and documentation at the expense of relationships, at the expense of quality services on the front lines. So it's something to think about.

To get to some of the questions around budget: 4.3, PDD. I've heard significant comments already and questions that were helpful, including about the SIS system and complaints we have around its use as a criterion for inclusion or exclusion of certain programs, which it wasn't designed to do, so needing to look at that.

I still don't understand the auction process that the Member for Calgary-North West talks about. I don't know what's happened there. I would welcome an explanation of that.

Thirdly, the safety standards review has been terminated. What's replacing it? Because there are safety concerns in some of these places.

So can you comment on those under item 4.3, PDD: number one, the SIS system impact; number two, the auction process for services; and number three, what's happened to safety standards?

Mr. Sabir: Okay. Thank you, Member. Thank you, really, for your comments and encouragement.

Dr. Swann: I may cut you off as well since I only have 10 minutes.

Mr. Sabir: I will be really quick. Respecting corporate surveys, I will have them out in a few weeks.

Dr. Swann: Corporate surveys?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. There are existing services. I won't go into the details, but if you need them, I will certainly provide information just in the interest of time

Dr. Swann: Existing?

Mr. Sabir: There are existing mechanisms that I am committed to working on with the staff, with the front line, with representatives of unions, and whatever needs to be done. I will make sure that we

get this right and that we boost employees' morale and their working conditions.

Second, respecting SIS, I explained it, that ever since that tool was used, there have been changes made to that tool. It's a continuous improvement process, but we are open to suggestions, and we are open to working with the sector to make further improvements.

Dr. Swann: For the foreseeable future that's what you're going to be using. Is what you're saying?

Mr. Sabir: At this time we are using this.

Dr. Swann: Because you've seen nothing better.

Mr. Sabir: We base our decision on evidence, so if there are any things that we can do to improve the system, we will certainly do that.

Third was safety standards. I agree with you that safety is still of paramount importance, but in no way should those standards compromise the dignity of the individual who is receiving the services. We need to strike the right balance. It's in the second stage of the consultation that is under way, and we are hoping that through that consultation we will be able to get the standards that are right for the individuals.

Dr. Swann: Thanks.

10:50

Mr. Sabir: Regarding the auction process, I think that's too strong a term. There was a GOA policy that there should be a competitive procurement process, where possible, under the internal trade agreement, the New West Partnership agreement. So there is no auction of services at all. What we have done is to instead move towards one exemption there that gets the service providers on a prequalified resource list, and those people still continue to provide the services as usual that they were providing before. But Albertans and any others willing to provide those services will be able to see quite transparently who is providing those services, and if they wish to be on that list, they can be on that list. Where we procure services from many services providers, that's not a homogeneous group of people. There are exemptions for nonprofits.

But previously services were procured from for-profit organizations as well. We can't keep sole-sourcing.

Dr. Swann: No. I guess the question is: who makes the decision for the client about who they're going to procure for their services? Is it the client that makes the decision, or is it the government that makes the decision?

Mr. Sabir: It's the client that makes the decision.

Dr. Swann: That's fine. That's all I needed to know.

Mr. Sabir: They can procure services from whomever they like.

Dr. Swann: Even if it's more expensive.

Mr. Sabir: There will be no auction whatsoever.

Dr. Swann: Thank you.

Under 10.2, FCSS, a great investment. Thank you for boosting its funding last year by \$19 million. It hadn't had any previous funding for, as I understand it, at least almost a decade. Maybe I'm wrong about that. Maybe it was five years. In any case, it's the preventive aspect of our municipal services. I just don't know how it's evaluated. How do you decide whether what all these different

preventive social services are doing is meaningful, is resulting in better outcomes? I don't see an evaluation.

Mr. Sabir: It was the first increase since 2009. These are the programs, and the communities put together a plan. They do put in certain measures of how they will evaluate outcomes, how they will report the outcomes. All programs across Alberta are different, and they will have different reporting mechanisms. They will have different outcome measures depending on the needs of the communities. There won't be an overall evaluation, but every program will have built-in accountability. [A timer sounded]

The Chair: Continue. That's the 10-minute warning.

Dr. Swann: Thank you.

I guess I would wonder: have organizations been removed from your funding as a result of the evaluations, or is it simply a pro forma evaluation that doesn't actually get acted upon? Has anyone lost their funding?

Mr. Sabir: No. No organizations have been removed, so I take it that within their funding agreements they were doing what they were supposed to do and they were submitting the reports and measures that they said they would.

Dr. Swann: But I guess everybody believes they're achieving their own goals. The question is: are you evaluating whether they're achieving the goals they say that they're achieving? Who's overseeing?

Mr. Sabir: We enter into the contracts, and when they submit the program plans, they do provide that that's how they will report and that's how they will measure. So we do get those reports and those measures.

Dr. Swann: Are there independent measures, I'm asking? Are there independent measures that they are achieving the goals they say that they're achieving?

Mr. Sabir: Based on the 2013 outcomes report for FCSS programs 97 per cent of the participants reported experiencing personal well-being, including improvement in resilience, self-esteem, and optimism; 98 per cent reported that they connected with others; 95 per cent of children and youth reported positive development; 91 per cent reported positive changes and healthy functioning within the families.

Dr. Swann: Okay. Those are the reportings of the organizations themselves?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah, collectively.

Dr. Swann: And do you have checks and balances on that reporting? Do you go into those organizations and actually look at the raw data?

Mr. Sabir: Yes, we do. We do look into whether they are compliant with the agreements.

Dr. Swann: Okay. Thank you.

Under 4.7, FASD, I was really shocked to see a 40 per cent reduction in funding for FASD compared to 2014. I mean, there's no indication in my world that FASD is reduced. There's no indication that I have that FASD needs are declining. How can we get away with a 40 per cent reduction in FASD supports compared to '14-15?

Mr. Sabir: Just one second. That's 4.7?

Dr. Swann: Yeah. Are these people going elsewhere? Are they not coming for help? What is happening? That's FASD.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. So the reduction is because of the prepaid grants that were advanced last year. That reduction is because of the grants that were prepaid through the previous year.

Dr. Swann: My question is: how was it that you were able to spend that much on FASD in 2014 and you can reduce it by 40 per cent this year?

Mr. Sabir: I'm informed that it was not reduced; rather, it was just prepaid.

Dr. Swann: I don't understand what that means, I guess. What does that mean that you're prepaid?

Mr. Sabir: I can provide a more detailed answer.

Dr. Swann: Has the real spending on FASD reduced over the last three years or not?

Mr. Sabir: No.

Dr. Swann: It's the same as it was in 2014 or a little bit increased?

Mr. Sabir: It's maybe a little bit increased.

Dr. Swann: Can you give me any data on how FASD has increased or decreased in your roster? And how accessible are FASD services?

Mr. Sabir: We've worked through those 12 FASD service networks, and they are funded through these programs. They focus on public education and the impacts of FASD on the parents and the child. Do you need more specific data around that?

Dr. Swann: I would like some more if I could. I need to know more about it.

Do you have any numbers on the number of families or the number of FASD clients that you deal with and how that may have changed in the last few years? My impression is that it continues to go up, but maybe I'm wrong.

Mr. Sabir: I have the information now. I can give you that information. Basically, it's the 10-year plan, that was evaluated at the five-year point, the seven-year point, and it will be evaluated – it's the last year, right? That's the tenth year, so it will be evaluated at this point as well.

Preliminary results at the seven-year evaluation indicate that it was effective in educating Albertans about FASD. In survey results 94 per cent of the women who participated in our profiling events intended to eliminate alcohol use during current or future pregnancies after learning. For pregnant women enrolled in the parent-child assistance program, data suggests a 70 per cent reduction, so 70 per cent in their first quarter in PCAP to 18 per cent in their third quarter.

The network evaluation survey of parent caregivers on behalf of a dependent child found that 91 per cent said that overall they are happy with the support services they received and that their dependent child has received, 100 per cent said that people working at the agency treated them with dignity and respect, and 86 per cent said that they were involved in planning the services their

dependent child received and that they received the kind of service they wanted.

Dr. Swann: Okay. Maybe I'm misunderstanding that line item. What is it used for? What is that line item used for, the \$24 million?

Mr. Sabir: Line 4.7?

Dr. Swann: That's 4.7. What is that spent on?

Mr. Sabir: That's spent on 12 FASD service networks across Alberta around prevention, diagnostic, and service delivery. That is focused on achieving the results.

11:00

Dr. Swann: Okay. The number of affected children with FASD: has it increased or not increased over the last few years, or do you have that number? You don't have that number.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. It is estimated that 46,000 Albertans are affected by FASD, and the FASD rate in Alberta is 1.2 per cent. In Alberta the estimate is that there are 680 babies every year born with FASD.

Dr. Swann: Do you have any sense of whether that's increasing, decreasing, or staying the same?

Mr. Sabir: It's tied to diagnosis and a bit difficult to know.

Dr. Swann: You don't know whether it's increasing. Could you look into that? Could I get some numbers at some point? What's happening over the last . . .

Mr. Sabir: They're not tracking it . . .

Dr. Swann: We're not tracking numbers?

Mr. Sabir: . . . until after the diagnosis.

Dr. Swann: That's what I mean, after the diagnosis. Have the new cases increased over the last three . . .

Mr. Sabir: That was the number I was giving you: 680 babies.

Dr. Swann: Per year.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah.

Dr. Swann: That's last year, or is that 10 years ago? Has it changed?

Mr. Sabir: No. It's last year, and I guess it's modestly increasing.

Dr. Swann: Modestly increasing, but your funding doesn't appear to be increasing to deal with these.

Mr. Sabir: Our funding is stable for those 12 networks.

Dr. Swann: Okay. What's the level of dissatisfaction with FASD supports? Do you have any surveys, any evaluation of what the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with FASD services is? It sounded like you had pretty high satisfaction in the '90s, but does that apply to all of those services you're providing? You can send it to me later if you don't have them here.

Mr. Sabir: So 100 per cent said that working at the agency treated them with dignity and respect, so dissatisfaction would be zero.

Dr. Swann: Okay. Those are all my questions. Thank you.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, hon. member.

The next 20 minutes will be spent with members from the government caucus. Would you like to go back and forth with the minister?

Mr. Hinkley: MLA Horne will start the questions, and I will come in as well.

The Chair: MLA Horne, would you like the timer set for 10 minutes?

Mr. Horne: Please. Yes.

The Chair: Will you be going back and forth with the minister?

Mr. Horne: If that's fine with the minister, I would love to.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Horne: Certainly, your ministry is one of the ones we hear about the most in my constituency, especially given the current economic times. I admire your work and don't envy the position of making all of those decisions.

Minister, on page 148 of the government estimates it details that \$147 million from Human Services is the Alberta child benefit. How will this program make a difference in the lives of lower income families in Alberta?

Mr. Sabir: The Alberta child benefit program is a new program, and it will provide direct assistance to all lower income families with an income below \$41,220 per year. That includes families who are receiving AISH income support and a child care subsidy. This new benefit will support the well-being of all Albertans in lower income families, helping parents to make ends meet and provide a better quality of life for their children. As a government we believe that no child should grow up in poverty and every child in Alberta deserves opportunities to succeed, so families will start receiving this benefit in August. It will be delivered in four payments, starting August, then November, February, and May. The maximum annual benefit is \$1,100 per year for one child up to \$2,750 for a family of four.

Mr. Horne: Okay. I'm certainly optimistic that it will help many families, both rural and urban.

Minister, looking to section 4 on page 144 of estimates, could you provide some details on the funding Human Services is providing persons with developmental disabilities in Budget 2016 and how many Albertans this increased funding will support under the PDD program?

Mr. Sabir: Are we talking generally about line item 4 or any line item underneath that?

Mr. Horne: Any under.

Mr. Sabir: Okay. Under 4 you will see that we have increased the budget for that line item. As a government we are committed to ensuring that Albertans with disabilities get the supports they need to strengthen their independence and inclusion in communities. This increased funding will help us deal with the caseload growth and cost per case growth, and they will have the supports they need to live with dignity and respect in their communities.

Mr. Horne: I see following that a decrease in PDD direct operations, line 4.4.

Mr. Sabir: Line 4.4. That's the direct operations line, and that reduction just reflects the decreasing requirements as fewer people are living in government-owned facilities such as Michener Centre as we move towards supporting more clients in the communities. As you may know, the Michener Centre has a no-intake policy. We are not taking any more clients. Rather, we are promoting more inclusion into the community. If the persons in Michener Centre and their guardians, their families choose to live there, we will certainly support them as much as we can and with as much support they need, but if they choose to move out into the community, that option is available, too. Essentially, direct operations are directly related to the choice of people who are receiving those services. If they choose to receive services, then we will provide those services, and if they choose to move out into the community, we will facilitate that move.

Mr. Horne: It definitely sounds like that even with this decrease in direct operations these clients will . . .

Mr. Sabir: It's just that fewer people are receiving those services.

Mr. Horne: Yeah. Okay.

Mr. Sabir: There is no cut to the service.

Mr. Horne: Okay. Looking to section 3 on page 144, Budget 2016 is investing \$29 million in increased funding for assured income for the severely handicapped. Can you explain how many Albertans this increased funding will assist under the AISH program?

Mr. Sabir: Line 3, right? This provides financial assistance to adult Albertans with severe and permanent disability that causes a substantial limitation in their ability to earn a livelihood. Benefits are provided to assist clients with their living needs and to make sure that they're able to live as independently as possible. They receive a maximum benefit of \$1,588 per month, which is the highest in Canada. The next highest is Ontario, which provides \$1,098, and Quebec, which provides \$1,016. That \$1,588 is just the monetary amount. They do have other supports available as well. They are provided health benefits through Alberta Health. Their prescription drugs, their medications, dental, optical, emergency ambulance, and essential diabetic supplies are covered through that, too. The increase in this line item will help us deal with the increasing caseload growth and the cost per case. At this point, overall, we are providing services to 54,000 Albertans through this program.

11:10

Mr. Horne: The 54,000: how big of an increase is that in caseload?

Mr. Sabir: It's usually 3 to 4 per cent.

Mr. Horne: Four per cent increase?

Mr. Sabir: Upward of 3 per cent.

Mr. Horne: Okay. I believe that MLA Hinkley had a couple of questions he wanted to ask.

Mr. Hinkley: Some of the questions I'd like to ask actually have been asked, but I'd just like it if you could elaborate and expand on them. That would be great.

The first one I'd like to look at is in section 7, page 145, in the government estimates. That's the child care. What will the government investment, which I see has increased in child care,

achieve, and how will it bring government closer to its goal of expanding access to affordable, quality, licensed child care?

Mr. Sabir: First, Budget 2016 maintains the stable core funding for child care, including those for subsidies and child care accreditation. There was an increase, which we will use to develop programs and projects to move towards our commitment to \$25-a-day, quality child care. Raising kids is expensive, and we believe that Alberta needs to have that option of accessible, affordable, quality child care. That money will be used for planning purposes and to develop programs that can be implemented across Alberta when our finances permit.

Mr. Hinkley: Well, it looks like maybe with the child tax credit it's about \$16 million more. Is that actually enough? Do you think that's going to be enough?

Mr. Sabir: Can you repeat the question?

Mr. Hinkley: In section 7, your increase for that whole section was about \$16 million. I'm just wondering if that increase is going to be enough for the child care section.

Mr. Sabir: Yes. According to our forecasts that increase should be enough and it will improve outcomes for children and access for parents to child care programs.

Mr. Hinkley: Okay. Well, can you explain why these investments are important to children and families in Alberta? Like, why did you make that increase?

Mr. Sabir: I think today what we are investing in our children – they're our future, and our children need to have a good start. Research shows that the more you focus on the early years of a child, you will have a better chance of having better social outcomes down the road. So we are committed to providing children in Alberta with every opportunity to succeed, and that's one of the things that we are focusing on.

Mr. Hinkley: Okay. Thank you.

In section 9, particularly 9.4, on page 145, it shows an increase of more than \$3 million for homeless and outreach support services. Can you explain how that additional funding will be used to support vulnerable Albertans?

Mr. Sabir: That's 10 point . . .

Mr. Hinkley: It's 9.4.

Mr. Sabir: Oh, 9.4.

Mr. Hinkley: It had an increase of more than \$3 million.

Mr. Sabir: That increased funding is for services supporting Albertans experiencing homelessness. It's a \$3.4 million increase for a total of over \$181 million in homeless and outreach support services. Provincial funding for Alberta's homeless serving system is now more than \$127.5 million annually. This includes funding for supports to homeless shelters and the delivery of housing for supports that help break the cycle of homelessness.

New funding in this budget will be invested to address local and provincial priorities and pressures, including responding to housing first caseload pressures; emerging trends in our communities, including the need for specialized responses for families and youth; as well as addressing the pressures in homeless and emergency shelters. Our ministry staff will work directly with the community

service delivery partners to identify and respond to these pressures using the available funding.

Funding for homeless shelters of \$40 million will be provided to support the operation of 25 adult emergency shelters and to support nearly 3,200 overnight emergency shelter spaces, and funding of \$87 million for homeless support outreach services will help homeless Albertans reclaim lives of dignity and independence. That funding is provided through seven community-based organizations and goes towards providing permanent supportive housing along with wraparound support services such as rent supports, mental health services, addictions treatment, and employment/skills training so they can regain their independence.

The housing first caseload for 2015 was approximately 5,800 people. Using this approach, so far we have served 12,250 homeless Albertans.

Mr. Hinkley: Thank you. That's impressive.

I was also very happy and so was the executive director and coordinator of the Camrose Women's Shelter, very impressed and very happy after many years to finally get that \$15 million injection last year. On line 9.3, page 145, it looks like you have continued that. You haven't increased it, but it certainly did not go backwards.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. That funding was increased \$15 million.

Mr. Hinkley: Yeah, and it's continuing. That's really appreciated; I guarantee you that.

Can you explain how these funds that you've invested this year will continue to protect vulnerable women? Do you do any accountability for that money that's being spent?

Mr. Sabir: Certainly, every public dollar we spend: we are accountable for that. That funding, as you indicated, is an increase of \$15 million, making it a total of \$49 million. This funding will support the operation of 710 beds in 30 women's emergency shelters. It's the first time that we will provide program funding in all 11 second-stage shelters. What that funding really means for these shelters is that this will enable them to hire 84 case management positions and 40 child trauma counselling service workers. It will enable them to provide the wraparound support for the persons who come to those shelters. We do have five shelters on First Nations reserves, and we do provide child care programming in 26 women's shelters. So that much-needed funding will help us strengthen our support system for women who are fleeing violence and addressing that violence.

Mr. Hinkley: That's an interesting thing. Is one of those five in Maskwacis? Is that one of the five?

Mr. Sabir: Yes, one of the five.

Mr. Hinkley: You can get back to me on that. I am curious because that's part of my constituency.

Mr. Sabir: Yes, one of them is in Maskwacis.

Mr. Hinkley: Okay. Then I would also like to get back sometime to what's happening in Wetaskiwin. That could be a later question.

Mr. Sabir: Okay.

Mr. Hinkley: I'd appreciate that.

Looking now at line 10.3, I recall from the 2015 budget that there was a one-time increase to family and community safety programs, the grants for those. Can you explain how the budget before us will continue to strengthen communities in the 2016-17 fiscal year when

there's actually been a significant drop in line 10.3? How are you going to maintain those programs?

11:20

Mr. Sabir: That was a one-time increase in the last budget, and that increase has helped us fund many community-led initiatives to prevent family violence, sexual violence, child sexual abuse and supports for those who are affected by these issues. The stakeholders were informed at the time we provided that increased funding that this funding was not available in the future, but we still have \$6 million in ongoing funding in 2016 that will help us extend a number of those grants this year and allow for new investments in programs that support the safety and well-being of Alberta families. It was a difficult decision to make, but we are going through fiscally challenging times, so that's one area where it was not possible for us to continue that one-time funding. But we still have \$6 million to support that programming.

Mr. Hinkley: Do you foresee any future deliberations on those kinds of projects? I guess that's speculative. We'll pass.

Mr. Sabir: At this time I guess we will talk about the budget numbers in this estimate.

Mr. Hinkley: Speaking about hard times, even though some people don't agree that the commodity prices have had an impact on the economic hardship, it is very true that it's causing lots of unemployment and people needing to retrain and get their skills updated. With regard to budget line 2 on page 144, employment and income security, can you explain how we are ensuring that Alberta Works and income support are able to accommodate that increased demand?

Mr. Sabir: It's a fact that commodity prices have dropped significantly. Two years ago oil was trading above \$90, and we saw it trading at \$27 just a few months ago. So that has an impact on our ...

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption. However, the allotted time for this portion of the meeting has expired.

I would now like to turn the next 10 minutes over to the Official Opposition. Would you like the timer set for five minutes to advise of the halfway point?

Mrs. Pitt: No. I'll just go 10.

The Chair: Okay. Are you going to be going back and forth with the minister?

Mrs. Pitt: Yeah, we sure are.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Mrs. Pitt: All right. Outcome 2: "Albertans receive higher quality programs and services that are more coordinated, seamless and tailored to their needs to maximize their potential." Given this government's commitment to higher taxes, the costly carbon tax, and the economic reality that many Albertans are facing, there are certainly going to be pressures on this ministry. Alberta Works: "Improve access to integrated services through Alberta Supports' Call, Click and Come-in channels." This is something we certainly are glad to see addressed as a strategic priority, but we are not seeing how this priority is being reflected in the budget. Turning your attention to page 144, line items 5.1 and 5.2, we see that despite this priority in increased demand, you will be cutting the delivery budget of Alberta Supports by \$1 million. Can you give me some details on how this reduction is possible?

Mr. Sabir: The planning and delivery budget has been reduced, but for the most part it's in salaries and supplies. The services that Albertans can receive are still the same. It will not impact. We will make sure that it will not impact the services Albertans receive. It's just hiring restraint, and we are only hiring for the positions that we critically need.

Mrs. Pitt: On the same page, line item 2.1: you will be cutting the funding for delivery of income supports and employment supports by \$5 million. Is that still the same case?

Mr. Sabir: For the most part, wherever you see the decrease in program planning and delivery items, that is due to the hiring freeze in management salary, and that is due to the hiring restraints by hiring only positions that are critically needed, and, wherever possible, controlling spending on supplies, controlling spending within the department.

Mrs. Pitt: You said, "For the most part." Are there line items where that's not the case for a reduction?

Mr. Sabir: For this one that's the case. I may have said, "For the most part," but that's the explanation. I was just trying to generalize that wherever you will see those reductions, those reductions are achieved through . . .

Mrs. Pitt: No, I understand that. But you just mentioned, "For the most part." Instead of asking about every single one, is there one you could point out in program planning and delivery where that is not the case?

Mr. Sabir: For instance, for the family and community safety program that was not the case.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. In terms of general performance measures are you reusing the same survey for performance measure 2(a) as the biennial survey for performance measure 1(c) of outcome 1?

Mr. Sabir: Am I using the same measures?

Mrs. Pitt: Yeah, the survey.

Mr. Sabir: Yes.

Mrs. Pitt: They're the same?

Mr. Sabir: Is the one you're asking about 2(a), "Satisfaction of families/guardians of adults with developmental disabilities with Persons with Developmental Disabilities funded services"?

Mrs. Pitt: It's 1(c), outcome 1, and 2(a). Are you using the same survey to evaluate?

Mr. Sabir: No. They are different surveys, but they are not new surveys.

Are we not clear? Can you ask, please, one more time?

Mrs. Pitt: No. Are you reusing the same survey for performance measure 2(a) as the biennial survey for performance measure (c) of outcome 1?

Mr. Sabir: You mean the consistency in surveys, what we are trying to measure?

Mrs. Pitt: No. Are they the same?

Okay. Don't worry about it. I'm going to move on.

Mr. Sabir: My answer is no.

Mrs. Pitt: That's okay. I'm going to move on.

Employment and income support. Under 2.1 it shows that there's a \$5 million decrease from last year's budget to planning and delivery, income supports, and career and employment services. Are these the same savings, planning and delivery?

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. It's a \$4.3 million reduction in both salaries and supplies. Manpower reduction accounts for almost \$3 million.

Mrs. Pitt: Under 2.2 it shows there's going to be a \$12 million increase from last year for income support to people expected to work or working. Is this representative of more people needing access to supports?

Mr. Sabir: We are seeing increased pressure in this area, so that's why we are providing for that.

Mrs. Pitt: How many more people are accessing this service?

Mr. Sabir: Twenty-nine per cent.

Mrs. Pitt: Twenty-nine per cent.

Can you explain why you're cutting delivery and planning and then increasing the size and scope of the support program?

11:30

Mr. Sabir: We are trying to find efficiencies wherever possible, and that's why I said that wherever we can not fill the positions, we will not unless they are critically needed. In challenging economic times we need to be fiscally prudent and find every opportunity to find efficiencies, find savings. That's why the budget in that area is reduced. At the same time, we are trying to make sure that we maintain the services that Albertans need when they need them, so there is no size or scope increase.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Moving on, the same line item in the 2015-16 forecast will be coming in under budget by about \$3 million. Why weren't these funds used or expected to be used?

Mr. Sabir: What's the line item?

Mrs. Pitt: Line 2.2.

Mr. Sabir: Line 2.2?

Mrs. Pitt: Minister, can you just get back to me on that one?

Mr. Sabir: I didn't get the question, actually.

Mrs. Pitt: Line item 2.2 is forecasted to be coming under budget. I want to know why those allocated funds aren't used. We can go back to that. I just have a few minutes left here.

Mr. Sabir: The forecast is \$257 million. The budget was \$231 million, so it's not under budget. We have seen increased pressure in this area, in particular, reflected in our caseload.

Mrs. Pitt: Why isn't that portion of the budget expected to be used in your forecast?

Mr. Sabir: Well, \$231 million was budgeted. The forecast was \$257 million, so it has been used. That's what we are forecasting, that that much will be used, and that reflects and represents the pressure in this particular area.

Mrs. Pitt: Sorry. My apologies. It's line item 2.4.

Mr. Sabir: It's 2.4? Career and employment services?

Mrs. Pitt: Sorry. I want to move on from here.

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but the time allotted for this portion has expired.

I would now like to invite the third-party opposition to speak with the minister for the next 10 minutes. Would you like the timer set for the half point?

Ms Jansen: No. Thank you. I'm fine.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead.

Ms Jansen: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I'd like to talk to you a little bit more about the child care line items. There's an increase, and I was actually very happy to see that because, certainly, when it comes to child care programs, as a single mom I think there's a lot in here that we could build on and that I certainly would love to see families I know taking advantage of. Can you give me a broad sense of that? It's an increase of – what? – \$15 million? Are we talking of \$15 million?

Mr. Sabir: It's an increase of \$15 million.

Ms Jansen: Give me a sense of what that's going to improve for Albertans.

Mr. Sabir: It will do three things. One, it will have funds for Albertans who are accessing subsidies, so they will have that access. Second, it will have money for child care providers who want to get accreditation; it will have supports for them so that they can retain quality staff. Third, it will provide for a new initiative, including phasing in an evidence-based practice framework for a child care model that we can move on as our finances permit pursuant to our commitment to bring in \$25-a-day child care, quality, affordable child care.

Ms Jansen: Let's talk about that. That \$25-a-day child care program was very appealing to people when they heard about it during the election. Why is it on hold right now?

Mr. Sabir: I think that we are not able to do as much as we want to do. That was the commitment; that was contingent on our finances permitting it. This \$10 million will provide us with the money to lay the groundwork. As soon as our finances permit, we are still committed to moving towards that.

Ms Jansen: What does that dollar amount look like in the longer term? You know, what would you then have to put into it in order to make that kind of program accessible for Albertans?

Mr. Sabir: I think that's a very good question. Initially we did provide some dollar amounts, but this work that we will do with this \$10 million while we look into ways of how we can bring in that framework will give us an opportunity to better assess the value of what's needed.

Ms Jansen: Now, did I hear correctly? Earlier on in this session you said something about: the state of the economy means that there is less demand for child care. Did I hear that right?

Mr. Sabir: I was telling about the existing spaces and their uptake. At this point we are at 85 per cent capacity, so there is still some room available. It can mean different things. It can mean that people are not accessing it. It can mean that some centres are at capacity and don't have staff to have more people in, and at the same time some areas are feeling more pressure than others.

Ms Jansen: I would argue, certainly – and I hear about this a lot in my community – that a lot of folks can't access it because it costs too much. There are lots of people I know in my communities where one spouse is heading back to work after a long time because of necessity. They're in a family now where maybe one of the spouses has lost their job, and the other one now has to go back to work. Of course, when folks lose their job and they're both looking, oftentimes they have to take a position where they make less money, so now the strain of child care becomes even more acute. At the current cost it's not affordable for all Albertans, which is why I think that \$25-a-day child care was so appealing to so many people.

I'm just wondering. You know, when you look at the dollar amount in the long term and say, of course, that in the budget we can't make it fit right now, I would argue that there are probably some elements to that discussion that should maybe include the ability for more Albertans to be able to access employment when they can access more affordable child care. There is a ripple effect to the child care story. Have you had any discussion about that?

Mr. Sabir: That certainly will be a subject for discussion when we move forward with the planning process, gathering evidence and moving toward some model projects. That will be part of that.

About the affordability of it: at this point we are providing full subsidy for parents making up to \$50,000, and that means that in some cases where they get full subsidy, the cost of the child care can be as low as \$13 per day, which is well below \$25 a day.

Ms Jansen: Exactly.

One of the other things, one of the big challenges, too, I hear from a lot of working moms that I talk to is the accessibility in terms of hours. There are not a lot of daycares in the province that really offer, first of all, 24-hour daycare to accommodate folks who work shift work. Also, the women I talked to who want to be able to access really good-paying jobs in the trades require a whole different conversation about what child care looks like. Are you in the process of having any of those conversations?

Certainly, some of the staff in your department have some pretty good institutional knowledge of these conversations from past discussions with Women Building Futures and groups like that. You have some folks in your department with some really wonderful institutional knowledge about where we might go with the idea of daycare options that include more women so that they can get out and take advantage of these jobs. I'm wondering if you are looking at tapping into some of those conversations with some of your people, who could, quite frankly, come up with a pretty terrific plan.

11:40

Mr. Sabir: Certainly, I do have an amazing staff. We had that conversation, and we will continue to have those conversations.

As a government I will say that we are committed to making sure that whatever plan we bring forward responds to the needs of Albertans, not the need as perceived by us sitting in an office but the needs as described by the people out there. Part of this money, for that reason, will be used to engage with the community to assess those changing needs and to make sure that institutional knowledge corresponds to the current realities of the economy.

Ms Jansen: I want to quickly zip back to homelessness and ask a question on behalf of someone who put this to me on social media. Homeless supports for rural areas of the province: certainly, I'm getting calls from people who are saying that it hasn't been enough of a focus. What are you doing in that area?

Mr. Sabir: With homelessness any strategy prior to us becoming government has always been centred on urban centres; rural areas were completely ignored. I have been working with the Alberta Rural Development Network and the Interagency Council on Homelessness to better understand that issue and the extent of that problem. We will be moving towards a program, which we will announce fairly shortly.

Ms Jansen: Okay. I just want to reiterate, because I know I have less than a minute left, that certainly there's a lot of really good work being done around homelessness by some groups that would love to be able to have a more in-depth conversation with you and certainly your government members. I would hearken back to the Calgary council on homelessness. Really, we would love to be able to have some of your folks have a seat at that table. It is not partisan. It is a well-meaning discussion.

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption. However, the time allotted for this portion of the meeting has concluded.

I would now like to invite the independent member for the Alberta Party to speak for the next 10 minutes. Would you like to go back and forth with the minister?

Mr. Clark: Yes, please, if that's all right with the minister.

The Chair: And would you like the timer set at five minutes?

Mr. Clark: That's fine. I've got my timer here. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Minister. Thank you to your staff for being here. Again, like everyone, I know all of our thoughts are with our friends in Fort McMurray, hoping everyone is safe there.

I'll dive right into your business plan, page 72. In the third paragraph you state that "approximately 16 per cent of Alberta's children live in low-income households and 29 per cent of kindergarten-aged children in Alberta are experiencing great difficulty in one or more areas of development." Can you speak briefly about some of the strategies that you are considering to address those challenges and if those strategies will include a formal poverty-reduction strategy at some point?

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Member, for a very important question. As a government we believe that no child should ever live in poverty, and there are still a number of children who are living in low-income households. For that reason, we have announced the Alberta child benefit, that will reach 130,000 families, 195,000 children. So that's a new investment that will help us address that one.

Mr. Clark: Can I ask if you have any specific measures – I don't see that in any of your performance measures specifically – so we can all track whether that's, in fact, being successful? You've talked about the 195,000 children, and you've talked about those measures. How are we going to know that that 29 per cent has gone down?

Mr. Sabir: That data is collected through EDI, through the school system. It's the biannual measure, and they do publish that one. How we address that is that we base our parent link centres and our early childhood development resources on EDI measures. Where children have difficulties in more than two areas, then we assess the available resources, and that's what our decisions are made around.

Mr. Clark: Will you be assessing whether the \$15 minimum wage has an impact on any of these or other statistics within your department?

Mr. Sabir: Certainly, we will be assessing what impact it will have on our department.

Mr. Clark: I'm going to move to page 75, 2(c).

Sorry. You know what? Apologies. I'm going to take a slightly different tack here. One thing I would ask is that as we go through the budget preparing our shadow budget – others, I know, do deep research – it'd be very helpful to have these numbers, all the numbers in this giant book here, electronically. I've asked that of all of your other cabinet colleagues. If you could advocate, please, within cabinet to provide these, as part of Budget 2017, in electronic format for all of us, it would be tremendously helpful and save my researchers countless hours and, I'm sure, the same for all members. It would be very, very helpful.

The same, I think, as we look at performance measures: there's a gap between last year's actuals and the targets, so I've had to go back and grab Budget 2015. I note that there are some significant differences in targets, and they've changed even in the last two or three months. The one I really want to point out is 2(d) on page 75 of the business plan, the AISH quality of life index. In Budget 2015 the target for 2016-17 was 80 per cent, but scarcely six months later the target has been dropped by 4 per cent for '16-17 and '17-18. Can you tell me why you've dropped the targets by such a large amount?

Mr. Sabir: I think that target was set relative to what the actual was last year, so that was a reasonable target. But we can always do better. We will always try to go above and beyond the target, so rest assured that the target doesn't mean that we will never go beyond that.

Mr. Clark: Well, I get that, but I think that we're here at the – interestingly, the last actual was 78 per cent in 2013-14, according to Budget 2015, and 73 per cent in '14-15. That's a substantial drop. Really, it seems like your targets are not actual targets; they're just a number relative to what it was last year.

Mr. Sabir: There is another reason for that. That measure, the AISH performance measure, the quality of life index, is also going through a transition to improve the methodology and quality of the measure. Based on questions from the annual AISH client survey, the index includes the following four equally weighted components – previously it had only three; now it has four – managing health issues, being able to live more independently, being able to get involved in the local community, and meeting their basic needs. First, they were only doing it for three. We have increased it by another one, so that has an impact on that.

Mr. Clark: That's a fair answer. Thank you very much.

Again, it would be good if you included the previous year's target directly in each budget so we can compare in the same way that you present financial numbers as budget target versus forecast. That would be tremendously helpful. Again, that's something I'm asking your other colleagues.

I'd like to move on to the next measure, 2(e). I'm curious about why that number, that 91 per cent of housing first clients remained housed in the current fiscal year, seems steady. Is that a logical maximum? Does that represent the fact that the homelessness 10-year plan needs more resources? Can you speak to why that number is steady going forward? Again, is that 91 per cent number just a natural turnover – is that the explanation? – or is there some other intervention that's required to increase that number?

Mr. Sabir: I've been advised that it's a natural kind of turnover. That's the number we've been getting consistently, and that's the number being set as the target, but we will try to do better.

11:50

Mr. Clark: Okay. I want to continue talking in general terms, then, about the 10-year plan to end homelessness. There was talk previously – in fact, I’ve written you a letter on this, which I hope you’ve received – by the Edmonton chief of police. This was something raised by the hon. Member for Calgary-North West previously in the House, the idea of a, quote, unquote, wellness centre in Edmonton, which feels to me like a warehouse for people who are not homeless. This seems to be counter to the principles of the 10-year plan and the housing first model. The chief indicated that he’s had conversations with you and your ministry. Can you speak to that? Are you in favour of a, quote, unquote, wellness centre in Edmonton, or do you believe still in the housing first model?

Mr. Sabir: I recognize that the housing first model has achieved many successes, but at the same time I am open to discussions, suggestions. The suggestion of the police chief was more within the jurisdiction of the Minister of Justice.

Mr. Clark: What he’s talking about is housing people who have chronic addiction problems and who are, quote, causing trouble. You know, I don’t need to tell you or your ministry that there are a lot of root causes as to why that is. Housing first, things like permanent supportive housing: those are things that your government can do to address that problem in a much more progressive way than simply by chucking people in jail, in the drunk tank, for 24 hours, which is really how I interpret that. I’ll just put that out there. I’ve written to your ministry, and I would hope I get a response, but I would use this platform to encourage you, please, to reconsider support for such a program.

I want to ask another question here in light of the disaster that’s going on in Fort McMurray, and I want to be very sensitive, recognizing that we’re still in crisis mode and we’re not yet in recovery. But as we move towards recovery and as people leave Fort McMurray and access services, many of them are calling 211, a very important line. They have 211 in Fort McMurray. It exists in Edmonton, it exists in Calgary, but it is not a provincial service. This is something I’ve advocated for. One of the first things I did was to advocate for a provincial 211, which would accommodate the people who have fled Fort McMurray, who are in Lac La Biche or other areas that don’t currently have that. It’s relatively inexpensive, a million or two, to get the 211 provincial service up and running. The benefits of that are very clear. Will you support creating a provincial 211 as soon as possible?

Mr. Sabir: I think that we are committed to providing all those evacuees all needed and necessary supports. At this point the government efforts are mostly geared toward the suppression of the fire and the safety of the individuals. But what the consequences are – we will be assessing the situation . . .

Mr. Clark: I understand that, and I want to praise . . .

Mr. Sabir: . . . and we will deploy the resources where they’re needed.

Mr. Clark: Yeah. I don’t doubt that you will. I’m sure you will. But something like provincial 211 as a single number to call for all crisis and support services would be very useful in future incidents.

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption. The time for this portion of the meeting has concluded.

I would now like to invite the government caucus to share the remainder of the time for the meeting for your questions. Are you wanting to go back and forth with the minister?

Mr. Horne: If the minister is still okay with that, then certainly.

Mr. Sabir: Sure.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead.

Mr. Horne: Minister, before our time ran out previously, I believe MLA Hinkley was asking you a question about income support, and I would like to follow up with another question on income support because it’s a big issue for my constituency. On page 144 of estimates, budget item 2, there’s an increased demand for income support, especially in our economic circumstances, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s some coming out of the fires as well. Given the increased demand on other services provided by Alberta Works offices, can you explain some of the steps your ministry – well, the front-line staff – have taken to accommodate these increased demands?

Mr. Sabir: Albertans can be confident that their government will be there to help them if and when they fall on tough times. For that reason, we stabilized funding for employment and income supports to help Albertans affected by the economic downturn while implementing our plan to get Albertans back to work. Albertans can get help with income supports, health benefits, and employment training services at more than 60 Alberta Works and Alberta Supports centres across the province. With more people seeking services, these centres are taking an all-hands-on-deck approach to serve Albertans, and some centres have extended hours, and staff are assisting where the demand is high.

Also, a 24-hour call centre has been set up for Albertans who require one-time emergency benefits for basic needs like temporary shelter, food, transportation. Albertans can find and apply for many benefits and services by clicking on My Alberta Supports online, too, or by calling the Alberta Supports centres. So there are many resources that government is making available to make sure that Albertans have the needed and necessary supports.

Mr. Horne: Okay. Moving on from income support for now, on page 72 of the business plan your ministry emphasizes the need for preventative initiatives, explicitly mentioning “poverty, family violence, sexual violence, bullying and homelessness.” In addition to addressing the immediate needs of Albertans, can you explain how this budget supports both of these intended directions?

Mr. Sabir: Budget 2016 makes investments in many prevention programs and supports for individuals and families who are struggling. We know that focusing on early childhood development and parenting resources is very important, so we have provided and maintained supports in that area. We also support families and communities to help not just their children’s development but to build their skills and knowledge in a positive parenting environment, and those supports are provided through parent link centres.

We have also invested in FCSS programs, family and community support services programs. These programs are initiatives where communities identify their issues, the root causes. They do program planning, and that is directed more at prevention.

We have also increased funding for women’s shelters, which will give them the capacity to hire outreach workers and trauma counsellors, and that effort will also help us deal with many root causes of many issues.

There are supports for homelessness. Homelessness is often a root cause of other social issues, so we have stable funding for that. We also provide funding for wraparound supports so that people have the needed and necessary supports.

Our government will also work on a comprehensive approach to prevent and reduce poverty and help lower income families. The new Alberta child benefit: I can point to that as well. That will also help families make ends meet.

There are many programs, and that's the policy of the government, to focus more on the prevention side of things, to make sure that people have better starts, that people have better resources, that people feel supported, and that we face less pressure down the road on our services, intervention services.

Mr. Horne: Okay. Now to jump back to the government estimates, on page 144, item 6 . . .

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this item of business has concluded.

I'd like to remind all committee members that we are scheduled to meet next on Tuesday, May 10, 2016, to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Seniors and Housing at 9 a.m.

Thank you to the minister and staff for joining us this morning.

This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

