



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Fourth Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Children's Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

Thursday, March 16, 2023
9 a.m.

Transcript No. 30-4-10

**Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature
Fourth Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Sigurdson, Lori, Edmonton-Riverview (NDP), Deputy Chair
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Also in Attendance

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Children's Services

Hon. Mickey K. Amery, KC, Minister

Leann Wagner, Assistant Deputy Minister, Child Intervention

9 a.m.

Thursday, March 16, 2023

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

**Ministry of Children's Services
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Children's Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2024.

Before we proceed to the business on our agenda today, I'd like, with the consent of my colleagues, to acknowledge the tragic loss of two Edmonton police officers who were killed in the line of duty last night. Our thoughts are with their families, friends, and colleagues at this difficult time. Please join me in a moment of silence to honour their sacrifice.

All right. Let's proceed. I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials who are joining you at the table. My name is Jackie Lovely, and I'm the MLA for the Camrose constituency and the chair of this committee. We'll begin, starting to my right.

Mr. Yao: Tany Yao, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Turton: Morning, everyone. Searle Turton, MLA for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

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

Ms Fir: Tanya Fir, Calgary-Peigan.

Mr. Yaseen: Muhammad Yaseen, MLA, Calgary-North.

Mr. Gotfried: Richard Gotfried, MLA for Calgary-Fish Creek. Good morning.

Mr. Long: Martin Long, the MLA for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Amery: Good morning. Mickey Amery, Minister of Children's Services. The officials that I have joining me here this morning are Children's Services deputy minister Sherri Wilson to my right; assistant deputy minister for child intervention delivery, Leann Wagner, to my left; the assistant deputy minister for child care and youth services, Joni Brodziak, to my further left; and senior financial officer Darren Baptista to my further right. Behind me is assistant deputy minister for Indigenous partnerships and strategic services, Cynthia Dunnigan.

Ms Sigurdson: Good morning. Lori Sigurdson, Edmonton-Riverview.

Ms Pancholi: Good morning. Rakhi Pancholi, MLA for Edmonton-Whitemud.

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

The Chair: I'd like to note the following substitution for the record: Mr. Turton for hon. Mrs. Armstrong-Homeniuk.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audiovisual stream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are

encouraged to turn your cameras on while speaking and mute your microphone when not speaking. Remote participants who wish to be placed on the speakers list, if there are any in the future – right now we don't have any – are asked to e-mail or message the committee clerk, and members in this room should signal to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

With regard to speaking rotation and time limits, hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. A total of three hours has been scheduled for consideration of estimates for the Ministry of Children's Services. Standing order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation and speaking times. In brief, the minister or members of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of the minister's comments a 60-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition begins, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for independent members, if any, and then a 20-minute speaking block for government caucus. Individuals may only speak for up to 10 minutes at a time, but speaking times may be combined between the member and minister.

After this, speaking times will follow the same rotation on the Official Opposition, independent members, and government caucus. The member and the minister may each speak once for a maximum of five minutes, or these times may be combined, making it a 10-minute block. If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please send an e-mail or a message to the committee clerk about the process.

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 object to having a break? No? Okay.

Ministry officials may be present and at the direction of the minister may address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting.

Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

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

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused; however, the speaking block time and overall three-hour meeting 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.

The vote on the estimates and any amendments will occur this afternoon in Committee of Supply. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk with 20 hard copies. An electronic version of the signed original should be provided to the committee clerk for distribution to the committee members.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both questions and answers without interruption during estimates debate. Debate flows through the chair, please, at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now invite the Minister of Children's Services to begin with your opening remarks. Sir, you have 10 minutes.

Mr. Amery: Good morning, and thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to begin my remarks by recognizing and expressing my deepest condolences on the tragedy that we heard about this morning on behalf of the government of Alberta, on behalf of my caucus colleagues and indeed all Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta.

Madam Chair, it's my great pleasure this morning to present the 2023 budget estimates and 2023-2026 business plan for Children's Services. Budget 2023 underscores our government's commitment to securing Alberta's future by maintaining a strong fiscal track record with yet another balanced budget while also making historic investments in our province's greatest asset, our people. The last few years have been incredibly difficult for Alberta families, and that's why this government is stepping up to provide the stability and supports that they need. This includes affordability payments for parents with children under 18, totalling \$600 per child; increased investments in child intervention to ensure that children and youth are safe, supported, and set up for success; additional funding to make it more affordable for Albertans to consider adoption; record investments in our child care system, making child care more accessible and affordable for Alberta families; and much more.

From day one our government has committed to making life better for Albertans. We immediately got to work on restoring the Alberta advantage, and thanks to our entrepreneurial spirit and the resilience of Albertans our economy is back on track and indeed stronger than ever. Having access to affordable, inclusive, and high-quality daycare played a critical role in this success. That's why in Budget 2023 we are continuing to support Alberta families by investing \$1.3 billion in child care, \$200 million more than last year. This investment will ensure child care continues to become more affordable and accessible throughout the year.

Part of that commitment to Albertans was also to ensure, regardless of where these spaces were created, that we respected the rights of parents to choose what child care options work best for their family. We are on track to create up to 68,700 new licensed child care spaces by 2026, with child care costs dropping to an average of \$15 per day in 2023-24 and \$10 per day by 2026. This wouldn't be possible without our government's efforts to ensure that private operators were included in the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide early learning and child care agreement. At a time when many Albertan families are struggling with the costs of living, they can count on their child care fees going down.

This investment will also strengthen our efforts to recruit and retain early childhood educators, that continue to be the backbone of our system. As we look to create tens of thousands of new affordable child care spaces, we will need thousands more child care professionals working in the sector. Budget 2023 allocates nearly \$230 million to support the child care workforce through certification, professional development opportunities, and wage top-ups.

This budget also makes significant investments to support some of the most vulnerable in our province. With more than \$63 million in Budget 2023 our government is continuing to support the tremendous work that family resource networks do to support our families. Through this program we have been able to connect thousands of children, youth, and families to supports and services that help them build their resilience and reach their fullest potential.

Increasing the child intervention budget by \$43 million, which now amounts to a total of \$871 million and growing to more than \$900 million by '25-26, ensures that the safety of our children and youth from every corner of the province is prioritized. Children's Services continues to focus on keeping children safe with their families and communities wherever possible while providing the

supports they need because all Alberta children have the right to feel safe and cared for. We are increasing the amount of funding available to address the rising number of complex cases receiving child intervention services. Thirty million dollars in new funding will help to ensure that all children and youth receiving child intervention services receive the supports that they need.

9:10

Budget 2023 also recommit's our government to reconciliation and meaningful change. Reducing the number of Indigenous children in care continues to be one of our top priorities. Our government has taken steps to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child intervention through policies and practices which prioritize children being connected to their culture, their families, and their communities.

We have committed to reviewing the spectrum of supports for kinship caregivers and developing a made-in-Alberta solution that better supports caregivers and children across the province while also increasing supports and training for foster and kinship caregivers. Having more children placed with kinship or family helps children maintain family and community connections and demonstrates that we're moving in the correct direction.

We are focusing on providing culturally appropriate prevention and early intervention services to support families and provide targeted help early, reducing the need for greater interventions further down the road.

As part of our commitment to keep children connected to their families and their culture, Alberta's government has also committed to working with First Nations and the federal government when requests to enter into co-ordination agreements are received from First Nations in Alberta under the federal act. In January 2020 the federal government's An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Children, Youth and Families came into force, providing the opportunity for Indigenous communities to exercise authority over youth and family services. So far, the Louis Bull Tribe has assumed authority over their child, youth, and family services, and other negotiations with First Nations are ongoing. Through 2023-24 we will continue to support this First Nations led process.

Our government has also taken steps to bolster supports for youths transitioning into adulthood through the youth in transition program, which allows us to provide youth with more co-ordinated and specialized supports. This program includes the transition to adulthood program. Increasing funding by \$5.5 million for TAP this year will allow our government to support a growing caseload in TAP, including supporting youth previously in care to receive postsecondary education through the advancing futures program. We have fully implemented the transition to adulthood program because we know that transitioning to adulthood can be challenging for youth in care and young adults formerly in care. This program provides additional supports to prepare young adults as they live independently, pursue education, and build careers. The new TAP program continues to improve outcomes for young adults by helping to find mentors, develop employment and life skills, attain postsecondary education, and maintain emotionally supportive connections.

Budget 2023 also invests an additional \$4 million to make adoption more affordable. With this increase in funding, Alberta will become the first and only province in Canada to cover dental, drug, vision, and other supplemental health benefits for children adopted in Alberta. To further reduce adoption barriers, we are increasing the adoption expense credit by nearly \$4,000 and subsidizing the cost of private adoptions through licensed agencies in Alberta by \$6,000 per adoption to help cover the cost. These two new measures will help reduce barriers to adoption and make it

more accessible for all Albertans interested and looking to grow their families.

Our government has also committed to supporting Alberta families with the high cost of living, and Children's Services is playing a large role in these supports. In addition to reducing the cost of child care for parents, we have allocated \$271 million in Budget 2023 to provide affordability payments of \$600 per child over six months to help Alberta families that have been disproportionately impacted by inflation. To further support Albertans most in need, we've added funding to support the indexation of the Alberta child and family benefit, which is providing \$345 million in additional and much-needed support to lower and middle-income families with children under the age of 18. These measures, in addition to numerous other supports in Budget 2023, will help ensure that children aren't the ones that are paying the price for inflation.

Nearly four years ago our government was elected to get Alberta back on track. Since then, thousands of jobs and billions of dollars of investment are coming right back into this province. We balanced the budget, and we are paying down the debt so future generations do not have to bear the cost of out-of-control spending. We're investing in health care, education, child care, critical infrastructure, and so much more. The Alberta advantage is back. While there is still a lot more work to do, this budget delivers for Albertans. Investing in affordable child care, prioritizing the safety of our children and youth, providing relief through the inflation crisis for Alberta families, and recommitting ourselves to meaningful change and reconciliation are just a few of the many ways that we are securing Alberta's future.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams.

Member, would you like to combine your time with the minister's?

Ms Pancholi: Sure.

The Chair: Minister, what's your preference?

Mr. Amery: My preference is to do block time.

The Chair: Block time? Okay. We'll go with block time, then.

Please proceed, Member.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd also like to begin by acknowledging the devastating loss of the two police officers. As Edmontonians we know how critically important and how much bravery and courage it takes for police officers to do their work every day. My sincere condolences and on behalf of all of my colleagues here and all of the colleagues in this room to the families and the friends and the colleagues of the fallen officers. Really devastating news to hear this morning.

I'd like to thank the minister and staff for being here today to talk about the 2023 budget for Children's Services. For all the stakeholders who are currently watching – I know many of them do watch the estimates debates – I do want to note that by doing block time, as the minister has opted to, it does mean that the minister gets to pick and choose which questions he answers. I do hope that the minister will take clear notes of all the questions being asked so that he does endeavour to answer all of them.

I'd like to begin with child intervention. Of course, as the minister knows, in the business plan for 2023 outcome 2 indicates that "the safety, resiliency, and cultural connections of children,

youth, and families are supported and children and youth are protected." In line 2.2 of the budget, which is for child intervention delivery, it notes that that specific line item is increasing by approximately \$26 million for 2023. Can the minister indicate how much of that increase is attributable to caseload increase? Is the minister expecting to serve more children and more families in 2023?

The ministry has moved a number of significant parts of child intervention work from child intervention agencies to within the ministry, particularly kinship support and working with young people transitioning out of care. Ministry staff make more than comparable agency staff in terms of their salaries. We know that a report prepared for agencies indicates that a human services worker 4 caseworker working for the GOA earns 31 per cent more than the same qualified worker working for an agency. What amount of the budget increase in line 2.2 accounts for the additional costs associated with bringing this work into the ministry? What assessment did the ministry perform to indicate that the outcomes and results for families, children, and youth in the system would improve by bringing the delivery of these programs into the ministry from service agencies?

We also know that recruitment, retention, and caseload of front-line staff continue to be directly related to the outcomes for children and youth in the child intervention system. In the 2021 fiscal year the vacancy rate in Children's Services went from 14.9 per cent at the beginning of the year to 20.8 per cent by the end of the year. Can the minister tell this committee what the current vacancy rate in Children's Services is as of the most current data that the minister has? Also, has the ministry lowered the classification, qualification, and education requirements of caseworkers in order to recruit more staff? In particular, how many front-line caseworker staff are currently registered social workers? How many are child and youth care workers? How many are human services workers 4, and how many are human services workers 3? What is the average caseload right now for front-line workers, and how does that compare to 2022 and 2021?

Going back to outcome 2 and the focus on the safety, resiliency, and cultural connections of children and youth, as of today's date the number of children and youth receiving child intervention services who have died in the 2022 fiscal year is 45. This means that 2022 was no better for the children and youth who are the responsibility of this government than 2021 was, and that year was the deadliest year on record. And this month is still not over, so we may actually match the numbers in 2021 and 2022. Essentially, the ministry has made no progress towards making children and youth receiving child intervention services safer in Alberta. Zero progress in two years. In fact, the record of this government will be that the two deadliest years for children and youth in care will be on their watch.

To date this year 18 of those deaths occurred among children under the age of 18 who are actually in care, meaning the government is their legal guardian. That is a sharp increase from the year before; it has more than doubled from seven last year. The worst year on record for this stat was actually 10. How does the minister account for that, and what new strategies are implemented within this business plan – there are none that are evident from the business plan – to address this ongoing crisis, that is the responsibility of the government?

9:20

This comes after a year of the ministry implementing actions from the former minister's review of deaths of children in care. So here we are, two years of unconscionably high numbers, yet there are no new strategies or objectives identified in the business plan.

How can Albertans be assured that this government and this minister's priorities are addressing the safety of children and youth in care when there are no clearly identified strategies or goals for improving safety?

When asked about the high rate of deaths last year, this government has tried to blame it on the opioid crisis and on COVID, but so far this year 19 of the deaths have been of children aged 12 and under. What does the minister attribute the high death rates to this year? Again, there's nothing in the business plan. Can you point me to any strategy specifically around what they're doing to address these issues?

I want to look at the intakes in the child intervention system. Over the last two years the ministry has seen a sharp decline in the number of intakes that it has started. In fact, as of December 2022 the ministry saw a 33 per cent drop in intakes compared to the previous year. That is a big drop. As the minister should be aware, an intake is only officially started when a report is made to the ministry of a child in need of intervention, and whoever takes the call within the ministry determines that there is reason to begin an investigation. We received confirmation from ministry staff at Public Accounts that if an intake isn't started, no resources are provided directly to that family or child, and no follow-up is done with that family to see if there are any other supports the family may need. First of all, to what does the minister attribute this dramatic but consistent – because this has been going on for a number of years – decline in intakes? What is the reason for that?

The goal, of course, is to provide supports and resources to families through early intervention so that children do not need to come into care and families can stay together. However, multiple organizations that work with families and children have brought several situations to my attention where several reports are made to the ministry but an intake hasn't been opened by Children's Services, and then no early intervention supports are provided. So these families are simply just lost. We don't know what happens to them – they don't get any services – and we don't know until perhaps another report is made.

Line 4.1 of the budget is for early intervention, yet this line is flat. It doesn't look like the minister is focused on increasing early intervention, nor is he anticipating that more Alberta families will receive early intervention services. More families are under financial strain, opioid use continues to be a significant concern, mental health issues continue to be a significant concern, and finding safe and affordable housing is a growing issue, so it strains credulity, really, to suggest that there are simply one-third fewer families or children who may require intervention of the ministry. Can the minister advise whether or not the screening requirements have changed for an intake to be started by the ministry?

Along that line: how many family enhancement agreements did the ministry enter into in 2022? How does that compare to the number entered into in 2019, 2020, and 2021? How many does the minister anticipate will be entered into in 2023? Are the costs associated with that indicated on line 4.1 of the budget, or which line of the budget would family enhancement agreements fall under?

Performance measure 2(b) sets out a performance measure for the percentage of Indigenous children placed in family-based care. But, as the minister should be aware, if the goal is to maintain cultural connections, as outcome 2 suggests, the goal should be, actually, family reunification and even family preservation. Of course, it's not really the number of Indigenous children in family-based care that is the sole priority; it's the number of Indigenous children in kinship care that matters. First of all, how many Indigenous children – a number, not a percentage – are in family-based care, to begin with, how many Indigenous children are in a

foster home, how many Indigenous children are in a kinship home, and how many are in a group home?

Line 2.4 of the budget reflects an increase of around \$12 million for kinship and foster care support. Can the minister advise whether the affordability payments that were announced earlier this year – we know that foster parents were eligible for these affordability payments. Which line item are they included in? Are they included in line 2.4 or line 6 of the budget, the supports for foster families under the affordability payments? Were kinship homes eligible for the payments, and if so, which line of the budget is that indicated in and how much?

We know that the ministry is currently doing a recruitment drive for foster homes. How many does the ministry believe are currently needed to match the number of children that are in care or are anticipated to come into care? The ministry is putting efforts into, of course, recruiting foster homes, but why is there not a similar effort – or what efforts are being made? – to recruit and to identify more kinship homes, and is that affected by the decision to move that work within the ministry rather than have that conducted by agencies who are already in the community working directly with many of these communities and families?

We know that there's been a steady decline in the last three years in the number of foster homes and kinship homes. It's quite remarkable by the statistics, and it has been a consistent pattern. If the minister looked at his campaign efforts to try to recruit foster homes and the comments under that, you would see that there were very repeated and consistent comments from current foster homes about the low compensation rates as to why they no longer foster. How much of Budget 2023 is going to increase both foster and kinship home rates to reflect the persistent increases in the cost of living?

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll head over to the minister now for a response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for the questions that were provided. I'll begin in the order that the hon. member asked, and I'll try to address as many of those questions as possible in the time allocated.

The member referenced section 2.2 in the child intervention budget and referenced the increase, a \$26 million increase, and I did want to elaborate on that. So \$23.4 million of the budget in that particular line item has been allocated to support caseload complexities, caseload complexities being the number one thing that we're seeing increasing in this ministry rather than caseloads themselves. The additional money has been allocated towards the adoptions initiative, and that is the \$4 million allocation that I spoke to in my opening remarks.

In addition to that, there are a number of different increases in this particular line item, but that, I think, comprises the number that the member was asking about in terms of why there is an increase. What we're seeing in the ministry and indeed in the department itself is that caseload complexity continues to be the number one reason why costs are increasing in that particular area. We're finding that case complexities are increasing. While the caseload numbers may not be increasing in the same amount, we know that complexities are becoming more and more prevalent currently, right now.

The member asked some questions about employment strategies, employment and recruitment, retention strategies. I think it's important to note that the vacancy rate that we currently have within child intervention is approximately 9 per cent, and it represents over 265 full-time equivalent vacant positions as of March 1, 2023. The majority of those vacancies that the member was asking about are

in child intervention and child care programs. However, we continue to work towards filling our front-line positions through a recruitment process and/or internal movements as we recognize that these positions have a large impact on the outcomes for children, youth, and families.

I know that Assistant Deputy Minister Leann Wagner has been undertaking significant efforts to streamline our recruitment processes so that we can fill positions in a more timely and efficient manner as well as attract the best talent that we possibly can. We are in fact hiring an average of 96 staff per month in the department, and I think that demonstrates our commitment to addressing these vacancies and attracting the best talent that we possibly can.

The member spoke about salaries and wages, and certainly that is something that, you know, we recognize to be incredibly important when it comes to attracting the best talent within Children's Services. We are working diligently to make sure that staff are well compensated and adequately compensated in order to make sure that we have a sufficient workforce that not only is attracted to these positions but also is retained for the long term. We know that the value in having a long-term workforce is incredible, especially in the area of child intervention, where experience, I think, is incredibly important.

We also have programs to allow for growth within the department as well as to allow for staffing to grow through the department. I think that it allows for personal development of those staff members in order to achieve greater responsibilities and greater roles. I think that is a fundamental key to making sure that staff in this department and child intervention remain for the long term. I think the value in having long-term staff speaks for itself, and we will continue to employ strategies for the long term to help keep staff members within the department for the long term.

9:30

When the hon. member mentioned and had questions about the tragedy of child death in care, I think that, you know, if I can say anything about that, it is one of the most difficult things as minister to deal with and to hear about and to read and review the reports that happened when we have young children in care dying. It is certainly a tragedy for the families, and I express my sincerest condolences.

As the member knows, whenever there is a death of a child in care, a number of mandatory reviews are automatically triggered whenever there's a case involving the death of a child that has received intervention services or is currently receiving intervention services. In addition to those mandatory reviews, an internal review was conducted in 2021-2022 to address the increase in deaths. We know that when children go through difficult life experiences such as witnessing violence or abuse, they can be at greater risk for mental and physical health issues. We know, and we certainly must help them overcome these adversities. My department continues to work closely with our community and government partners to make sure that children and youth have the supports that they need, and we are absolutely committed to continuing with that work to help address some of those issues.

One of the specific questions that the member spoke about was what the deaths can be attributed to. Certainly, there are a number of different reasons for that: some are accidental, others can be in the form of suicide, and some are through mental health and addictions issues. What we're doing, as all of the colleagues in this committee know, is that we've employed, I think, a comprehensive mental health and addiction strategy, through the Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction, to help address some of these things. We have made a number of recent announcements with respect to mental health and addictions funding. In particular, the most

recent one, involving CASA for kids: a \$92 million investment to help specifically deal with addictions and opioid use and abuse has been announced, which really highlights and underscores the commitment that this government has towards dealing with mental health and addiction-related issues as they continue to plague our province.

We recognize as a government that in Alberta and across Canada drug addiction is a real problem, and we've introduced a system for early identification of youth who may need extra support and attention. We've expanded access to addictions programming for vulnerable children and youth. The department has provided Narcan and training for its use to CS staff working with youth in provincial residential facilities. We have increased placement options for children and youth in care with significant addiction, mental health, and behavioural needs. Children's Services is also working, as I just mentioned, very closely with the Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction on implementing a recovery-oriented system of care, a co-ordinated network of community-based services and supports that is person centred and builds on the strengths and resilience of individuals, families, and communities to achieve improved health, wellness, and quality of life for young people with mental health and addictions issues.

When we talk about the issue of intakes and assessment, I think it would be helpful to speak a little bit about how and why Children's Services changed the intake and assessment process, that resulted in a reduced caseload. Children's Services has implemented changes to intake to ensure that we are serving those that we are mandated to assist.

This includes the implementation of a common intake processing tool, and that facilitates greater consistency in decision-making, that has resulted in fewer files being opened. The practitioner who receives the information gathers as much as possible about the child's circumstances – and this includes contacting the referral source, which is often a teacher, a community member, another child care worker, or others – to make an early determination of risk to the child. This information is used to evaluate whether a file should close or open for assessment. Practitioners are now intentionally asking more questions, gathering additional information, as much as possible, from the outset to make sure that they find out what the worries are and what is going well in the family.

This allows for a more balanced perspective. It is in the best interests of the child and potentially less traumatic and intrusive for families. There was a concern raised through schools that teachers ...

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll head back over to the member now. Please proceed.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. I will note that there were a number of questions that I asked that were not answered, specifically: what assessment was done to bring a lot of that kinship work and transitions out of care work into the ministry from agencies; whether the ministry lowered the classification qualification of the individuals they're hiring. I asked for numbers around front-line caseworker staff and average caseloads and their classifications. I would appreciate it if the minister could provide answers to those questions in writing unless the minister does not intend to answer those questions. I also asked about family enhancement agreements and how many there are.

I just want to clarify a couple of things. It sounds like the minister is not anticipating a caseload increase, based on that answer that most of the increase that we're seeing in line 2.2 is actually related to caseload complexities. If the minister can confirm that the ministry is not anticipating a caseload increase in the 2023 year.

I'm also curious as to why the additional adoption funding that was discussed is included in child intervention delivery. It seems like an odd place for that funding to come from unless we're talking specifically about adoption of children who are in the child intervention system and those are the only ones who'll be eligible for that funding.

The minister stated, you know, with some level of confidence that the increase in the number of deaths was related to mental health and addictions issues. However, we know that of the 38 that are documented so far, deaths that have happened this fiscal year, 22 of the causes of death are pending. One of the challenges is that we don't actually know what the causes are, so I'm curious still to know what the minister feels about why so many of the children who have died this year are actually in care. Those are children who are in a foster home, a kinship home, a group home. They are the responsibility of the government. That is an incredible increase, and the minister's comments did not respond to that. I would ask him to either table those responses in writing – but that's pretty critical information.

On the intake drop, it sounds like the minister is saying that they've been more consistent in how they're applying the screening mechanisms in the questions, which suggests – I guess I'm questioning, for the minister: does that mean the ministry believes too many cases were open before that shouldn't have been opened, that intakes were started when they shouldn't have been? Because 33 per cent is still a significant drop. Again, the concern is that when a report is made and no intake is opened, there are no supports being provided to those families or to those children, and multiple reports are required before an intake is started. That puts those children and those families at risk, and it also suggests that the focus on family preservation is lost, because we're actually talking about getting to the point where apprehension may be the only option. I'll ask the minister to respond to that.

Also, there were no answers in response to my questions around the number of foster and kinship homes and Indigenous children placement in those homes, so I'll ask the minister to go back and answer that as well as questions around the recruitment drive for foster homes.

Line 5.1 of the budget is for policy and partnerships and includes funding for leading "partnership and agreement discussions with Indigenous stakeholders." Key objective 2.2 in the business plan is to work with First Nations and Canada to implement Bill C-92. Ministry staff have very openly and repeatedly told stakeholders in child intervention that they anticipate that, quote, 70 per cent of the current children in care will be transitioned over to the responsibility of nations and Indigenous governance bodies in the next few years. The budget is flat at \$7.637 million for policy and partnerships under line 5.1.

With Bill C-92, why isn't the ministry planning for more support and resources to negotiate agreements with Indigenous governance bodies? How many IGBs – I'm going to call them IGBs for short – is the ministry currently at the table with under Bill C-92? What financial and resource support is the GOA providing to those nations exercising their authority under C-92? Can the minister provide examples of what funding and resources are being provided and could be provided in the future?

What supports were specifically provided to Louis Bull First Nation in 2022 as they took over responsibility for their children, and where does that appear in the budget? How many children does the ministry anticipate will move from the responsibility of the province to an IGB, either wholly or partially, in 2023, and how many children over the next three years does the ministry actually

anticipate will move from the responsibility of the province over to First Nations?

9:40

I want to move on to permanency outcomes. If we look at the business plan – and I noted this in discussion in Public Accounts with Children's Services – the business plan doesn't seem to look at family preservations or family reunifications as a performance measure of success. In fact, there are no performance measures, really, to address what 10,000 children are living with every day in the child intervention system.

I want to talk about permanency outcomes because the most recent statistics with respect to permanency outcomes from the ministry are quite terrible, to be quite honest. There has been a huge drop in permanency outcomes under the last four years of this government. For example, family preservations: that's where an apprehension is not made, where the family stays together because they receive supports and resources to successfully stay together. Family preservations have dropped 56 per cent in two years. Family reunifications – that's where a child may come into care but then is reunified with their family – have dropped by 34 per cent in two years. Adoptions have dropped 39 per cent. This means far fewer children are being kept or returned to their families than ever before. Why are there no strategies in this business plan specifically around preserving families, reunifying families? That does not seem to be a key objective of this ministry.

I want to talk about the transition to adulthood program. Line 4.2, youth in transition, is the line associated with the transition to adulthood program, or TAP. How many young people aged 18 to 24 are currently enrolled in the TAP program? How many of them are aged 18 to 22 and receiving financial supports? How many young people who are eligible for TAP – sorry. And then how many of them are aged 23 to 24 who are not receiving financial supports? How many young people who are eligible for TAP, meaning they are between the ages of 18 and 24 and were in care at the time they turned 18, are not currently enrolled in the program?

The TAP program has four streams of service: education, employment, stability, and adult supports. Can the minister confirm: when a young person in care turns 18, are they required to choose just one stream, or can they receive services under more than one stream? What are the costs and number of young people accessing supports under each of these streams? What measures are in place to assess the success of the transition to adulthood program, particularly for those young people who do not access advancing futures?

I'd like to ask about why the ministry is now including in the business plan performance indicator 2(c), which is the number of First Nation children and youth served by delegated First Nation agencies, or DFNAs. If a nation enters into a co-ordination agreement under Bill C-92, is the ministry reporting on that arrangement as if those children are with the DFNA? What is the indicator? What does this indicate when we're tracking now and publicly reporting on the number of children within a DFNA?

If you look at the provincial statistics, the quarterly statistics – you know, the minister in his opening comments mentioned that they're working to reduce or to address the disproportionate number of Indigenous children in care. But as we see, the numbers over the last little while and particularly the numbers right now indicate that, actually, 74 per cent of the children in care are made up by Indigenous children, but Indigenous children only make up 10 per cent of the population. This is again an increase in terms of the number, the overrepresentation of Indigenous children, as compared to when this government took office.

This is the fourth budget presented by this government with respect to child intervention. In that time period we have seen record-breaking numbers of deaths of children in care, an incredible increase in the number of Indigenous children in care. We've seen a drop in intakes. We've seen a drop in permanency outcomes for young people. This is my fourth time sitting in budgets – yeah, my fourth time sitting in budget debates – and I still don't see anywhere in this business plan, in this budget, strategies to address the very pressing crisis. The minister took some time to outline the process when a death occurs in care; we're all very familiar with that by now. The point is that over the last two years things have gotten exponentially worse, and I do not see a change in practice. I do not hear from the minister a change in practice. I do not see it in the budget, I don't see it in the business plan, and we're not seeing it in terms of outcomes for young people in care and those transitioning out of care.

Can the minister really, truly provide any strategies, objectives, changes? Not just putting more dollars in certain lines of the budget. What has changed that is actually going to make children and youth in Alberta in our child intervention system safer, improve their well-being, and ensure they have better outcomes? The government's record on this to date is abysmal.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll head over to the minister now for a response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much to you, Madam Chair, and to the hon. member for the questions. I wanted to clarify. The member had emphasized that mental health and addiction was one of my focus points, and it certainly remains one of my focus points, but it is not the only reason why we're seeing death in care. I wanted to make that absolutely clear.

The member asked about a number of different things in the beginning of her remarks, and we're pleased to provide those, to the extent that they're available, in writing. I'm happy to do that to help address some of those questions and allow the member to review the material once it is sent to her.

The question of why adoption is included in that line item is fairly simple. Everything in CYFEA is included in that particular line item. That is why I referenced it earlier in my remarks; the \$4 million for the adoptions initiative is included in line item 2.2. I hope that addresses that particular question.

The member had asked a little bit about additional commentary as it relates to intakes, and I wanted to elaborate a little bit more on that as well. When we speak of intakes and the efficiencies that the department has implemented, I wanted to note that it is not a case of intake workers not opening files, but it is actually a more efficient and streamlined process. Intake has been consolidated under one manager in each of the five regions and under the consolidated intake team's report through the same manager, and the work is consolidated into intake units. We find that this has helped ensure consistency across the province. Two teams in Calgary and Edmonton remain responsible for after hours for the entire province. We also have implemented technology through the Bernie telephone system and scheduling improvements to help maximize the use of staff and support and consistency when it comes to our intakes. It is really a question of improved efficiency and not that Children's Services is not opening files. We certainly are opening files where they are needed, and we will continue and always do that.

The member focused on caseloads, Madam Chair, and I do want to address that. Like the overall child population, we are seeing an increase in the number of children with mental health, addictions, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. These children require

intensive supports and exceed the needs of care provided by foster and kinship caregivers.

There are many definitions of complexity in child intervention cases. The ministry is working to improve the definition of complexity. At this time we are using permanent care caseload as a proxy for complexity.

The proportion of children and youth that are in permanent care is 58 per cent of the total child intervention caseload. Over the last three years permanent care caseload as a proportion of the total caseload has increased year over year, and the projected permanent care caseload for 2023-24 is expected to remain relatively stable, with a monthly average caseload of 4,366 children and youth.

9:50

Complex cases, however, in facility-placement types represent about 4 per cent of the overall child intervention cases and show growth of 3 per cent, 1 per cent, and 5 per cent over the past three years, and it is expected that that will continue to grow in future years.

The ministry is also currently seeing double-digit caseload increases in campus-based treatment and personalized community care. I think it's important to highlight the fact that caseloads, while not necessarily increasing – we're certainly seeing a trend in the complexity of cases once again, and that is why it necessitates an increase in funding and also to ensure that there are adequate supports and adequate resources allocated towards making sure that those complex cases are well addressed and thoroughly funded.

The member raised the issue of TAP, and I'd like to comment a little bit about that as well. The question of how many youth were eligible for TAP in 2023-2024 is approximately 1,400. This has been relatively stable as compared with the 2022-2023 year. This is based on the TAP financial supports average caseload of 1,296 and the TAP soft supports, which are nonfinancial, average caseload of 120.

There was a question that the hon. member mentioned about performance measures, and I do want to comment quickly on that. You know, suggestions for additional performance measures were considered and were researched during the development of the 2023-2026 business plan. For example, the TAP program was looked at for a new metric. However, as it was only launched on April 1, 2022, and performance measures require 12 months of previous data, we felt, as such, that we needed more time to assess whether it was appropriate to consider additional performance measures. It is important to note that once we have a complete set of data for the entire year, we'll be able to assess what performance measures we will consider.

On the issue of First Nations communities and the supports that are being provided, I can comment on a number of issues in relation to that. The commitment that this ministry has made in respect of transitioning and providing Indigenous children and youth with the best possible care is evident in the work that we've done with First Nations in Alberta and the government of Canada to reach tripartite co-ordination agreements that enable all members to receive child and family services delivered by an Indigenous governing body, or an IGB, as the member mentioned.

We are working with a number of First Nations to develop co-ordination agreements, and I'm pleased to say that those negotiations are moving along well. We support IGBs to develop agreements and when transitioning to their legislative authority over child and family services, and our government will continue to support First Nations as they work towards or assume authority under the federal act.

With respect to the questions related to the types of supports that we provide to First Nations communities, we do as Children's

Services provide a number of different supports, including what are referred to as transition supports and bridge funding and access to our information systems to avoid gaps in knowledge. We continue to fund the cost of placement for some children as needed and providing staff members for six months. We provide after-hour services, office space, and equipment at no cost to First Nations communities as they assume the role of control and care for member children.

The number of supports that are provided to First Nations communities from the Ministry of Children's Services continues to be strong. We continue to do everything that we can to ensure a smooth transition as it relates to those First Nations communities that wish to exercise their jurisdiction under federal law.

Okay. I just wanted to add a little bit more in relation to the discussion on TAP. Yeah. It is a correction. The last answer that I provided to you in relation to the 1,400 was for TAP financial, but we should also include advancing futures in that as well. That means that there are an additional 1,400 young adults and youth in transition that are receiving the benefit of . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Back over to the hon. member.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Madam Chair. I will just, as we were just trailing off there on the TAP program – I would appreciate if you could table the ranges, clarification that 1,400 are eligible for financial supports under TAP, then another 1,400 under advancing futures, just if you can clarify those numbers.

My question is, though, that I want some specificity around how many young people overall are eligible for supports, meaning they're within the age range and they were a child in care when they turned 18, in the province and then how many access it. The minister indicated that 120 young people, age 22 to 24, are receiving soft supports, and that, to me, stands out as, I think, quite a bit of a failure because, honestly, there were close to 500 young people in that age group who were accessing financial supports under the SFAA agreement before it was cut. To show that only 120 of those – that number, assuming that number stays stable over years, shows to me that the ministry is not engaging in providing the supports to a lot of young people who probably need them.

I want to move on to child care and talk about the child care budget. The overall child care budget went up \$193 million from 2022. The entirety of that increase is from federal funding under the Canada-Alberta ELCC agreement – I'll ask for the minister to confirm that – and of the \$1.27 billion budgeted for child care in 2023, \$937 million of that is federal funding. Can the minister confirm that the provincial portion of the child care budget is approximately \$333 million for the 2023 year?

How much of line 3.1, which is child care affordability and access, is provincial funding? How much of the \$229 million in line 3.2, child care quality and worker supports, is provincial funding? And a breakdown of those amounts would be appreciated.

Section 4.8.3 of the Canada-Alberta ELCC agreement states that "Canada and Alberta agree that funds provided under this Agreement will not displace existing provincial spending in place on or before March 31, 2021," so the province must spend all of its budgeted provincial dollars for child care on child care. Although the 2022 fiscal year will not be over for another two weeks, can the minister assure this committee that the entire provincial budget for child care in 2022, which was approximately \$350 million, was actually spent on child care in 2022? Of the \$1.07 billion forecast to be spent in 2022 on child care, how much of that was provincial spending, as I mentioned?

The provincial budget for child care has essentially been frozen for all four years of the UCP government at approximately \$350 million per year. In 2020 the UCP government underspent that budget by \$110 million; in 2021 it underspent it by \$60 million. With operators struggling to make ends meet, parents facing an unprecedented affordability struggle, and educators chronically underpaid, why should Albertans believe that this is finally going to be the year that the UCP will invest all of their provincial funding dollars in child care actually into child care and not just leave it to the federal government to fund again?

Section 5.1.1 of the Canada-Alberta ELCC agreement states that "Alberta will provide an action plan for fiscal years 2023 to 2024 to fiscal year 2025 to 2026 by the beginning of fiscal year 2023 to 2024," which is where we are now, and "Alberta will publicly release their action plan." The action plan must include an implementation plan, targets for specific indicators around space creation, inclusive child care, educator numbers, wages, training and PD, flexible child care, et cetera. Has that action plan been publicly released already, as required by the agreement, and if not, when will it be made publicly available?

10:00

Section 5.2.2(d) of the agreement states that "within 365 days of the end of each fiscal year . . . Alberta may report to the people of Alberta . . . the results and expenditures of ELCC programs and services." This was not done for the 2021 fiscal year. Why did the minister or his predecessors choose not to report to the people of Alberta about the results from spending close to \$800 million in child care in 2021? Is the minister planning to report to the people of Alberta for the 2022 fiscal year? Will we receive that report before the election?

I want to talk a little bit about the cost-control framework, which, of course, sets out how the \$1.039 billion in child care funding will be administered this upcoming fiscal year. Budget line 3.1 includes parent subsidies and affordability grant payments to operators. The minister, of course, signed a cost-control framework with the federal government at the end of January of this year, which will change the funding model for both for-profit and nonprofit child care providers in the 2023 fiscal year. When does the minister expect the new funding model to take effect? Under the new funding model will there be parent subsidies for parents earning below a certain income? Is that on top of the new funding model, or will that be rolled into it? Will the income and subsidy payment levels remain the same as they are now? If not, what will the new income thresholds and subsidy amounts be? The cost-control framework states that parent fees will be defined by the government at an average of \$15 per day in 2023.

Also under the cost-control framework, enhanced services are described as fees outside the federal agreement. That may include additional parent fees. They include fees for "transportation, field trips, special programming or other additional costs that support innovation and creativity within the child care program." That is a quote from the cost-control framework. Will parents be involved in determining what the ministry considers enhanced services? Since the government did away with accreditation for quality of child care four years ago, how can the minister tell Albertans that this won't create a race to the bottom in terms of the quality of child care, where things like nutrition, field trips, specialized supports, language and cultural resources will be considered extras that only children whose parents can afford it have access to? This used to be considered part of standard access to quality child care. What assurances can the minister provide that the quality of child care will not go down? How will the ministry be reviewing the programs that are charging enhanced fees? Will they be reviewing the details

of each enhanced fee that's being charged by every program? Will they have to be approved annually by the ministry, and will the ministry be reviewing those amounts to ensure they are reasonable?

How much does the minister anticipate that the average Alberta family will pay in extra enhanced fees? Has that assessment been done? Has the minister consulted with parents about what they are able and willing to pay for so-called enhanced services? The framework states that children cannot be denied access to a program because a parent cannot afford the fees, but they can be denied the special programming, activity, or meal because they can't pay the fee. How does the minister believe that isolating and withholding certain programs, activities, meals from children whose parents can't afford to pay extra fees is consistent with key objective 1.1 of the business plan, which is, of course, outlined in the business plan. Operators and educators are shocked at the suggestion that children should receive quality of care based on what their parents can afford and have made it clear that it's not even possible to provide some services to some children and not others in the same group or program due to cost realities and staffing ratios. Is the minister expecting programs to simply eat the cost of these enhanced services, or are they just simply going to stop offering them altogether, thereby reducing the quality of care?

Budget 2023 allocates \$1.04 billion in line 3.1 for child care affordability and access, the majority of which is federal funding, but the ministry still hasn't consulted with for-profit or nonprofit child care operators about how much funding will be required from the government for core child costs. It's leaving that work for after the election. Is the minister willing to increase provincial investment in child care if those consultations indicate that line 3.1 in the budget is insufficient to adequately cover the true cost of delivering a quality child care program?

On the question of the fixed child care budget and that there was no increase in provincial spending on child care, I want to talk about out of school care. As the minister is well aware or should be well aware, parents across this province right now are paying in some situations more for one to two hours of out of school care than they are for a full day of child care, and the federal agreement does not allow for funding to go towards children over school-aged. That would require the provincial government to increase their investment in child care to cover affordability for out of school care. Because the provincial spending for child care is flat this year once again, does that indicate that the provincial government will not be providing any additional affordability supports for parents and families using out of school care? Can the minister report, on that note, how many children it currently believes are enrolled in out of school care programs across Alberta?

Looking at the time, I'm going to go back to talk a little bit about space creation. As of the end of fiscal year 2022, how many nonprofit child care spaces are there currently in the province? How many of these nonprofit spaces are in child care centres? How many of these spaces are currently enrolled? How many of the nonprofit child care spaces are in family day homes, and how many of these family day home spaces are currently enrolled? As of the end of fiscal year 2022, how many for-profit child care spaces are there in the province? How many of those for-profit spaces are in child care facilities, and how many are enrolled? How many are in family day homes, and how many of those spaces are currently enrolled? Overall, what is the provincial enrolment rate for 2022 in licensed child care?

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

We'll go over to the minister for a response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for those questions. Going back to the original questions, I'll try and address them in the order that they came through. The hon. member asked for confirmation in the enrolment numbers for the TAP program. I will confirm once again that there are 1,400 who are receiving financial supports in this province and an additional 1,400 that are in the advancing futures program. The question about how many are eligible is a question that I will have to get back to the member in writing because I do not have that with me here.

Now, the member raised an issue about the 120 that I had mentioned earlier that are receiving soft supports, and the reason that that number has declined from a previous number that the member mentioned was that other youth had been transitioned into other programs successfully. That's why we see a decline in the actual soft supports, but I think that's truly a positive number in terms of the transition into other support programs that these youth and young adults are currently receiving.

The question of the provincial portion of the budget as it relates to child care is that this province is currently spending \$351 million this year for child care in Alberta and that the entire provincial budget, absent any minor surpluses that we may see at the end of the year, is currently being allocated towards child care. That means that the entirety of that \$351 million budget will be spent on child care and directly on the needs of child care in this province.

As it relates to the question about the action plan that the member mentioned, I do have an answer to that as well. The child care action plan was in fact publicly released with the agreement following its signing. The new action plan for 2023-2026 is under development and will be posted once it is finalized with Canada as well, so you'll be able to see that. You know, you'll be able to see the original, and you'll be able to see the new action plan shortly as well.

The questions about the cost-control framework are questions that I would like to address going forward. The cost-control framework was something that I think we're incredibly proud of. It allowed for Alberta to ensure that access to affordable, inclusive, and quality child care in this province remains the staple for the long term. I know that it is our goal as this government fundamentally to improve child care affordability, especially for parents who need it most, without compromising quality and without compromising our mixed-market system. I think Alberta is unique in that regard. I think that the important emphasis here is that working with our federal counterparts ensures the success of all daycare operators in this province by making sure that the mixed-market system allows for private operators and not-for-profit operators to flourish and be successful.

10:10

The Canada-Alberta early learning and child care agreement provided for \$3.8 billion over the next five years in what we refer to as a made-in-Alberta approach. I say that because it truly is a unique agreement that is different than any other agreement, I would say, in the entire country and unique because it ensured that all daycare operators in this province would be included in that federal funding as well. I think that is fundamentally the most important thing that I'd like to convey to the hon. member.

We wanted to make sure – and I don't particularly like distinguishing between not-for-profits and private operators in this province, because they all deliver quality, affordable, and accessible daycare in this province. We are as a government committed to protecting, preserving all of our operators in this province through this funding framework.

The question of how the framework is going to be implemented is one that I think I have mentioned on a number of occasions to the member. The framework is the guide on how the government will

develop the implementation details of the plan, and it is guided by a number of principles: number one, ensuring accountability and direct use of funds while still supporting parental choice for child care services; the other is maintaining rigour around licensing requirements and financial practices; and finally, reducing potential exposure to fee and cost escalation for parents and for government.

What we're going to do is engage, and we've said this a number of times. We've already done so, in fact. We are going to engage comprehensively with operators and parents throughout this province to seek their input on the implementation details of the framework to ensure that it addresses the cost pressures for operators while also remaining affordable and accessible to parents as well. It is important for me to highlight the importance of this agreement, of this framework, because it certainly opened the doors for an additional number of private operators to receive and become eligible for federal funding under this agreement.

In fact, signing the cost-control framework agreement with the government of Canada allowed for an additional 22,500 additional private spaces to operate in this province. What that means is that over the course of the entire agreement we'll see approximately 68,000 new daycare spaces opening up here in this province, 22,500 of which are private, in addition to the 3,700 spaces that were ready to open up in 2021-2022.

In terms of timelines and plans, it is our intention to consult thoroughly with our operators, and we are doing so in a number of ways. We're doing so in online engagement sessions. We're doing so in more focused engagement sessions that allow operators throughout the province to provide their input, and we're doing it a number of times to make sure that every single operator in this province has the opportunity to weigh in on some of the unique challenges that they may have in their particular geographic region or other market variations that may impact their business viability. So we want to make sure that the framework has all of the parameters available to it to allow our operators to operate successfully by giving them the opportunity to weigh in on some of their unique challenges and allow for that to ultimately become the standard of how operators in this province operate.

We're looking to implement the framework in the 2023-2024 year, but we will certainly not implement it until we have engaged with all of the operators in this province and parents as well to give them the opportunity to weigh in on some of the things. But what I would say to the hon. member is that the assumption that this is going to create a two-tiered system is simply incorrect. The hon. member has, I think, a responsibility to convey the information that I'm providing here today to operators in this province and particularly on those engagement sessions.

The member has made a number of assumptions that are simply incorrect. We will not be creating a two-tiered system, we will not be creating a system that is inequitable, and we will not be creating a system that is difficult to access.

The whole purpose of the cost-control framework was to open up a number of daycare spaces in this province in that mixed-market system that we tremendously value. That meant that the 22,500 additional private spaces that became eligible for funding supports under the ELCC agreement can only mean more affordability and more availability and more accessibility for daycare spaces in this province. You know, unlike what the member mentioned earlier, additional options for parents will actually work to create more spaces and allow for more choice. I think that is fundamentally important to all Albertans.

The Chair: That concludes the first portion of questions for the Official Opposition.

We will now move to the government caucus for the first 20 minutes of questions from the members. Would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Turton: I actually prefer block time, if possible.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Amery: I'd be happy to continue with the same.

The Chair: Great.
Please proceed.

Mr. Turton: Awesome. Thank you very much, Minister. I actually prefer block time. It provides an opportunity for a more nuanced response from yourself, which I know many Albertans are going to be extremely interested in.

Before I begin these questions, I just want to echo some of the comments from the colleague from Edmonton-Whitemud and express my sorrow to the families affected by the two EPS officers that lost their lives in the line of duty. It's a horrible day for many families involved in protective services, and thoughts and prayers are with them here for the next little while.

Minister, you have a very tough portfolio. With every line item on the budget, I know, from conversations with yourself as well as many families right around the province, that there's a family on the other end of that line item. There's a child that needs help. There's a parent that needs support. I realize that there's a story behind every aspect of your ministry. For the work that you do, I want you to know that I appreciate it.

You know, pertaining to my questions here this morning, I really want to zero in on a specific topic that is of grave importance to myself and many constituents I've been able to chat with, and that really has to deal with adoption. As I mentioned many times in the Legislature, my family and I have gone through the adoptive process, spent many years going through, just trying to simply increase the size of our family and give a child a forever home. I know from those conversations and that experience that I had and being exposed to so many stories right around the entire province that, as much as I would love to say that it was an isolated incident in terms of some of the challenges that we experienced, my wife and I, it was very common. There are families everywhere, from Claresholm to Fort McMurray to GP to Edmonton and Calgary, that all reached out to me with their issues and concerns with this process.

Minister, I just want you to know right off the bat, first of all, that I appreciate the work that you've done on this file and making sure that children can find forever homes, because that is my number one prerogative.

I guess a couple of questions that I have, obviously, pertain to the budget. To kind of kick-start it, I know on page 85 the fiscal plan states that an additional \$12 million over three years has been included to increase the number of adoptions of children in government care to family homes.

I know, Minister, as I kind of mentioned in my preamble, there's a family and there's a child looking for a home at the end of each one of these line items. I guess I ask for a little bit of elaboration when you have the chance to respond: on average, if you can explain to the many people – I agree with the member from Edmonton-Whitemud that there are quite a few people interested in today's estimates – how many children are actually adopted from government care in a typical year?

Then, with the funding, I guess my question would be: what types of metrics are involved that we can measure to see if this is money well spent? You know, what will this funding increase that number

to? It is obviously an immense number. We want to make sure that we're not just enabling families that have already gone through the adoption process but that we're actually making a substantial difference to children here.

Then, obviously, you know, Minister, I would love to kind of get a basic overview about the process for adopting children from government care. Like I said before, there are families all over this province that every day are, in essence, praying for an ability to simply increase their family.

10:20

Now, I know another key aspect of this budget, Minister, is about the health benefits you alluded to in your initial preamble. It says, I know, in the budget, on page 85 of the fiscal plan, that the government will be extending those supplemental health benefits to children adopted domestically from government care or through an adoption agency. I guess just a little bit of clarification, if you can, Minister, about the nuances and the differences about adopting domestically versus internationally.

I know, for myself, Minister, we had to go through the international route. One of the key reasons was that there wasn't an available child for us to be able to adopt here in the province, so we were forced to go international, to the United States, to be a little bit more specific. I guess I was just wondering a little bit on the nuance between or description about the differences between domestic adoptions versus international.

With these health benefits that will come about from a family that goes through the adoption process, I was wondering if you could just elaborate and provide an estimated cost of this program. How will this program work? Will adoptive parents have to apply for these benefits, or will it come about as a natural result of the adoption process?

Then, obviously, I guess a clarifying question is: how long do these benefits last? Do they last till the age of 18? I know that for many adoptive parents there's always that fear in the back of their mind about: what are the health ramifications or the health history of the child that will be entering their family? You know, for a natural-born child, obviously, we know the health history of that particular baby, but for adopted kids it's always in the back of the minds. I know it was in the back of mind for my wife and me about: what is the health history? Is there an issue of heart disease or cancer that we should be aware of? With the threat or the potential of some of these health ramifications for an adopted child, I was actually very appreciative of the fact that some of these additional health benefits might be there just to help look after and take care of some of the anxiety that many parents may have when it comes to trying to address potential health challenges that they may not even be aware of.

I know as well that as part of the budget, again on page 85 of the fiscal plan, it talks about that there will be \$6,000 in grant funding made available to prospective adoptive parents making less than \$180,000 a year. I know with some other ministries the \$180,000 mark has been used as a bit of a threshold in terms of additional government support, so I'm wondering, Minister, if perhaps you could describe why this \$180,000 is important and why this particular number was actually used. Regarding the grant funding, will families have to apply for this funding, or will it, again, come about as a natural result of the process of adopting a child?

I know one of the most heartbreaking stories I heard from one couple was that they were going through the adoption process and were in it for years, like, in terms of meeting with social workers and just the thousands and thousands of dollars and the financial duress that their family had to go through to be able to go through the adoption process, and they ended up giving up. They couldn't

actually follow through. It wasn't because they didn't want to; trust me, listening to their heartfelt story about how they simply wanted to have a child. It was because they couldn't financially afford it anymore.

I know it's just my own personal opinion, but I think it's an absolute travesty when anyone is required to spend, in essence, tens of thousands of dollars of money out of their own pocket to go down this path, and then they have to give up. To see that look in their eyes when they realize that, you know, the well has run dry – the fact that for the first time there's this type of substantial financial support for families that are willing to go down this long and onerous path, I think, is incredible. Kudos to yourself, Minister, for putting forth that base of support.

You know, as a fiscal conservative I'm always glad, obviously, to see that Albertans can keep money in their pockets. Again, on page 85 of the plan it talks about the provincial adoption expense tax credit, providing that additional financial support for families that are going down this path. It says that the provincial tax credit will increase from \$14,365 to \$18,210, which matches the federal threshold. For that, Minister, I'm very thankful that we'd actually bring ourselves into parity with the federal level of government. I guess as a question pertaining to this point, can the minister give an estimate of about how many families will receive this tax credit?

Then, as well, with so many government programs that are fantastic, we know the positive effects they can have on a community, on a family unit, but is there going to be any additional advertising or work done to inform Albertans that the support is available to them if they're choosing adoption? I guess it's a side issue about the benefits of adoption, just letting people know that this is a viable choice for mothers to be able to look at. I would hope that maybe in a future conversation, you know, the adoption option would be a little bit more prevalent. In the meantime I do know that with these extra tax credits that we're able to put forth as well as the additional financial support, again, just getting your confirmation that there's an active marketing plan so we can ensure that Albertans are able to do everything in their power to increase the size of their families and give kids a forever home.

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

Now the time goes to the minister, a 10-minute block to the minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, once again, and thank you to the hon. member as well for raising a very important issue. I would like to take the opportunity to recognize MLA Turton for truly leading the way in terms of raising awareness and providing your valued input and your support to me, to my ministry, and to the department over the past few years and for the courage that you've demonstrated in sharing your personal story, because I think that hearing from you directly and hearing about some of the challenges that you yourself experienced and your own personal stories has been an incredible help in developing some of the recent announcements and policies that we've been tremendously delighted to introduce in the Ministry of Children's Services.

I want to refer back to Motion 501, which was ultimately your motion, MLA Turton. That was really a unanimous motion in the House that urged the government of Alberta to make adoption more timely and more efficient for Albertans. Certainly, we've taken the advice and direction of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta through Motion 501 to implement a number of initiatives as they relate to adoption.

The hon. member mentioned the \$12 million investment that we've allocated over three years to help make adoption more efficient in this province. I'm tremendously proud to have been able to be part of that because I think it's incredibly important work, and

it will impact favourably a number of families in this province. The \$12 million that has been allocated over three years, or ultimately \$4 million per year, has been allocated to cover the entire cost of supplemental health benefits for children adopted in Alberta regardless of whether they are adopted from the government system or through private licensed agencies in the province. This will become effective as of this fall.

The member, Madam Chair, inquired about what those health benefits include and also how long they will go to. I'm pleased to report that those health benefits will continue on until a child turns 18, and they'll cover a number of different areas. Supplementary health benefits include things like vision, dental, mental health supports, and others that will help provide parents and families with that much-needed support as it relates to adopting in this province.

The member asked about the subsidies. I think that I want to spend a little bit of time talking about that and why we devised that subsidy program. Effectively, the government of Alberta will in fact be subsidizing or providing families with up to \$6,000 for those who have a household income of \$180,000 and will subsidize the cost of private adoptions in Alberta through licensed adoption agencies. As the hon. member mentioned, I think quite eloquently, the cost of adoptions in this province and probably indeed everywhere is sometimes prohibitive. We wanted to make sure that we implemented every type of option available to ensure that the costs did not impact a family's decision to proceed with the adoption process.

10:30

As the hon. member mentioned, Madam Chair, the costs of adoption can be somewhat prohibitive and take many years to complete. I think he alluded to a number of different areas. The delay, the time, the preparation, indeed the costs of doing so are expensive. Just simply put, they can be very high. This is one policy that we were able to devise to help off-set some of those costs.

I've had the opportunity to speak with some of our licensed adoption agencies in this province, and I've had the opportunity to review some of these initiatives with those agencies. I found that they are extremely well received, and they'll have a tremendously positive impact on families in this province by off-setting some of those costs and allowing for families to remove, you know, the financial component from their assessment of whether or not they wish to adopt.

The member mentioned the tax credit program that forms part of these initiatives. Boosting the adoption expense credit from \$14,365 to \$18,120 to match Canada's adoption expense tax credit will help with that as well, help with ensuring that families are able to adopt and see some benefits from doing so. This tax credit will be retroactive to January 1, 2023. It will impact, as the member inquired, approximately 200 families currently. The impact is relatively widespread in terms of the benefits to families here in Alberta who are looking to adopt. We wanted to make sure that every single option that we reviewed in the area of adoptions in this province was explored thoroughly, to remove some of the barriers that we were hearing in our engagements.

There was a question from the member about how many children are adopted in a particular year, and I do have those stats that I can convey: 194 were through government adoptions and 57 through private adoptions. The number of approved prospective adoptive parents in this government adoption program has, however, declined sometimes. There have been times where there have been over a hundred approved applicants, but now we have approximately 40. The number of approved prospective adoptive parents through licensed adoption agencies has been steadily increasing over the past 10 years, with over 200 applicants now

awaiting an adoptive match. This number has been increasing as the number of adoptions completed annually is decreasing.

I do want to turn the microphone over to Assistant Deputy Minister Leann Wagner to comment a little bit more about the questions you had in relation to domestic and international adoption programs.

Ms Wagner: Thank you, Minister. Alberta regulates the private adoption system in compliance with the Hague convention. There are three licensed adoption agencies who exclusively handle adoptions of children who are adopted privately from families who live here in Alberta or Canada or internationally, with our largest source country being the United States. Public adoptions are completely administered by the department, and that includes children who have come into the care of the director and where after consultation, if they're Indigenous, with the community, we are able to place those children either with family – most of the children who are adopted through public adoption are placed with family, extended family. For those who are placed with a new family, if they are Indigenous, we have to continue to consult with the Indigenous community to ensure that they are comfortable and that we hear out any concerns they have about continuing with the child's cultural connections. Those adoptions are then managed completely by us, and there is no cost to the family for adopting a child from government care. There are, of course, costs, particularly related to legal costs, for adopting a child from a private system.

Mr. Amery: Okay. I trust that that addresses most of the member's concerns. I'm hoping that if there are any other follow-up questions or comments, I would appreciate that in the next block. It looks like we're wrapping up here right now.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll take our five-minute break.

[The committee adjourned from 10:36 a.m. to 10:42 a.m.]

The Chair: All right, everyone. We'll resume and head back over to the Official Opposition. Will you be combining your time or block time?

Ms Pancholi: I'm willing to share whatever the minister would like.

The Chair: Minister, what's your preference?

Mr. Amery: Well, in light of my friend's comments, we'll continue with block time.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister. I'm very pleased to hear that the minister intends to spend the full provincial budget on child care; \$351 million. He will likely be the first of his colleagues to do so. I certainly hope that we do actually invest all those dollars in child care in the upcoming fiscal year should the government remain the same.

I'd like to mention, with respect to the cost-control framework, that I do believe it's important to mention that I as the critic for Children's Services have actually never used the term "two-tier child care," but I do note that the minister has used it a number of times. I think that the concerns around the cost-control framework are coming directly from stakeholders and operators, who I'm sure the minister has heard from as well. That is a concern they've raised although I've never used that term. That is a concern when we talk about charging

parents for some qualities or elements of programming. That will make a difference between who can and cannot afford it.

You know, the minister indicated that he believed that it's my responsibility, perhaps the Official Opposition's responsibility, to encourage operators to engage in consultations. I certainly would be happy to do so if the minister would be willing to share some information. I've never received an invitation or information about the cost-control framework, what I should be telling operators who reach out to me. I'm happy to do that if the minister has some concrete information that he would like to share with me. Certainly, I always encourage stakeholders and operators to use their voices to influence the decisions that are being made, but I also take their concerns and bring them forward to the minister.

I would like to go back to child care and ask the minister: how many family day home agencies are currently operating in Alberta, and how many new family day home agencies were approved in 2022? We know, of course, with the agreement that many unlicensed day homes decided to become licensed, which is great news, and of course they had to join a family day home agency.

In 2022, in accordance with the Canada ELCC agreement, the ministry had a target of creating 10,000 new nonprofit child care spaces. How many of those nonprofit child care spaces did the ministry create in 2022? Can the minister provide a breakdown of how many of those nonprofit spaces were in facility-based child care, how many in family day homes, and how many in preschools?

The 2023 business plan does not include a target for space creation for this upcoming year. However, we know that under the agreement Alberta must create another 10,000 new nonprofit spaces in 2023. What strategies will the ministry be using to create those additional 10,000 new spaces this upcoming year, and how many for-profit child care spaces does the minister expect to be created in 2023?

I want to move on to the workforce because, as the minister knows, we can create as many spaces as we want with dollars and license as many spaces as we want in this province, but if we don't have the educators to actually provide supports and services to children, it doesn't matter how many spaces we have. So how many certified early childhood educators are there currently working in the province based on hours submitted for wage top-ups? How many at level 1, level 2, and level 3? In the past year how many individuals have taken the level 1 Alberta child care orientation training course, and of those who have taken that course, how many are currently actively employed in child care?

As I mentioned, spaces without educators is a significant challenge, and programs across Alberta are experiencing significant challenges in hiring and keeping educators, particularly highly qualified educators. I've heard from many programs who generally prided themselves on hiring level 3s and level 2s who are now hiring level 1s and having troubles finding that. A provider in Fort McMurray wrote to me that they have a wait-list of 120 children waiting for care and 28 licensed spaces that are sitting vacant due to being unable to hire and retain educators. Can the minister advise how many currently licensed spaces in Alberta are not enrolled due to staff shortages? How many new educators are required to ensure sufficient staffing for all currently licensed spaces in Alberta?

In line 3.2 of the budget there's a \$32 million increase in federal funding for child care quality and worker supports. How much of this increase reflects the increase in the wage top-up announced in December 2022? And using what number of level 1, 2, and 3 educators is that increase calculated on for the 2023 fiscal year?

Many provinces have chosen to take the federal funding under this agreement to actually implement a wage grid for educators because that is critically important to provide a path for professional development and for educators to see that path going forward. It

would mean that they would get paid not just based on their qualifications but also on their seniority and experience. Many other provinces have done this. Is the minister considering implementing a wage grid with the funding in line 3.2 of the budget in 2023? I'm going to leave that question there because I'm about to run out of time.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll head over to the minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for the questions. I'll go once again in the order that we received them. I appreciate the praise that the hon. member provided with respect to child care budget spending. We are absolutely committed and dedicated to thoroughly funding child care in this province, and we will continue to do so. We will continue to spend adequate funds to maintain funding in child care as this government remains the same following the 2023 election year.

When I refer to the questions in relation to the cost-control framework, I want to repeat the commitment to making sure that any system in this province maintains supports for all of our daycare providers exactly the same. That is what I refer to when I say that we will not look to create any two-tier type system. The reason for that and sort of the source of that comes from what I heard the hon. members on the opposition side advocate for a number of years, and that was supporting their \$25-a-day daycare pilot program.

In that program, approximately 7,500 of a total of 109,000 children enrolled in licensed or approved facilities benefited from the \$25-a-day daycare program. That's about 7 per cent of the total enrolled kids in licensed or approved child care in this province. Of the 7,500 that were enrolled in pilot programs, only 1,660 were from low-income families and eligible for subsidy. The fact remains that this current government's program and the vision that we are proceeding with have ensured that the vast majority of children in this province are benefiting from accessible and affordable daycare.

Indeed, we are moving towards the goal that we have set for this year; that is, to bring fees down to \$15 a day for children in this province and the vast majority of those children and the parents who are paying for this child care. When I talk about two-tiered systems, I want to make it absolutely clear that we reject that notion and that we are moving away from the failed programs of the past, which effectively created a real two-tiered system in this province. We will provide affordable and accessible daycare for all children in this province.

10:50

I do have a breakdown for the member in relation to daycare spaces and, in addition to that, by type. Current spaces: daycare, 74,222; out of school care, 55,364; in preschool, 15,741; and in home-based care, 14,140. The enrolment figures are as follows: 159,000 active spaces, which include out of school care, and as of December of this past year 140,000 were enrolled, which constitutes approximately a 90 per cent enrolment rate. In relation to capacities: daycare enrolment is at 95 per cent, out of school care at 69 per cent, preschool at 122 per cent, and home-based care at 91 per cent.

The member spoke about implementing a wage grid, and I wanted to address that. As part of the ELCC agreement, Alberta committed to exploring a wage grid and other benefit considerations to help recruit and retain high-quality, trained educators. We fundamentally believe that our educators need to grow consistent with the growth of

daycare operators in this province to support an overall strengthened daycare system. While we currently are exploring options for a wage grid and other benefit considerations, we continue to support the ECE workforce through a long-standing wage top-up model.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll head over to the government caucus for your questions. Mr. Turton, will you be using block time or shared?

Mr. Turton: Actually, I'm going to cede the rest of my time to my good friend MLA Martin Long.

The Chair: All right. Member, will you be using block time or shared?

Mr. Long: Block would be great. Thank you.

The Chair: Minister, what's your preference?

Mr. Amery: Happy to continue with the way that we are.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Minister, and thank you to your department officials and your staff for taking part in the conversation today. I really appreciate the opportunity to ask some questions that are important to my constituents.

You know, I've had a lot of exposure to people involved with child intervention. My own parents were foster children years and years ago, and the dedication, the sacrifice that families make in order to try to make lives a little bit better for children who otherwise wouldn't have a better future is remarkable, and it needs to be commended. Your ministry's support for those families, for those parents, and for those children I think needs to be acknowledged. Thank you for that commitment and the dedication.

You know, a large responsibility of the Ministry of Children's Services is the child intervention program. We know that children that come in contact with child intervention are extremely vulnerable, and the safety of that child needs to be the top priority. However, it's also important that when a child does come into government care, whenever possible they keep connections to their culture and community. This is something that I became even more familiar with in my time serving with the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls working group and in particular how important it is for Indigenous communities to maintain their connections and to maintain the culture of Indigenous children moving forward.

With that, I'll sort of piece together a whole bunch of questions. Outcome 2 of the Children's Services business plan is that "the safety, resiliency, and cultural connections of children, youth, and families are supported and children and youth are protected." I'm hoping that you can explain how cultural and community connections are preserved when possible for children coming into care, if there's been more focus on placements in kinship care, and how the number of children in kinship care has changed over the years.

Also, performance metric 2(b) in the business plan is to measure the percentage of children in care placed in family-based care. I think that we can all agree that in the vast majority of cases family-based care is in the best interest of the children, again hearing the importance of this in particular for our Indigenous communities. I was really glad to see that the vast majority of children are placed in this environment, 87 per cent for Indigenous children and 86 per cent for non-Indigenous children.

I'm hoping that you and your officials can give us a little more information on why family-based care is a priority for your ministry.

Given that there are still some placements and facilities like group homes, are there certain situations where non family-based care is actually better for a specific child?

Also, again with the same tone in mind, key objective 2.2 in the business plan is to "work with First Nations and Government of Canada to implement An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families." I believe Children's Services can play a large role in reconciliation. I'm glad to see this is an objective for the ministry, especially given the proportionally large number of Indigenous children in government care across the country. You know, inevitably, it's such a crucial time to have positive experiences in these children's lives. I'm just wondering if you can explain what this process actually looks like and in what situations intervention services will be transferred to Indigenous governments. Have any agreements actually been signed in Alberta to transfer intervention services to a First Nation?

With that, I'll maybe just let you have an extra three seconds.

The Chair: It turns out there are no seconds.

Minister, for your response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for highlighting some of the important issues that impact both his personal experiences and some of the issues that impact the Ministry of Children's Services.

I recall my first event following my appointment as Minister of Children's Services, and that was at the Alberta Foster and Kinship Association. Indeed, hon. Member Long was there as well and shared a very personal story, that I think he shared this morning as well, about sort of his earlier years and some of the interest that he has taken as a result of that in foster and kinship placements and whatnot. I certainly commend the work that you've done in that area to raise awareness.

You also mentioned your work on the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls panel. Again, there is overlap, I guess, if you will, in terms of some of the work that we see in this ministry along with other ministries as well. That work is tremendously important, and the hon. member must be commended for all of his hard work in that area.

The question about cultural connections is one that is incredibly important to me because I believe that that should be a guiding principle in all placements, especially when it comes to what you alluded to earlier, and that is the kinship placements as well. That is, first and foremost, the fastest growing type of placement that we have within Children's Services, but it is also always the first choice as well.

Family-based care is incredibly important, and the reason that I take that approach is because if you look at the fundamental interest of the child and you look at what type of placements in an already very difficult situation are the least intrusive and the least impactful on a child's well-being and safety, it is typically favourable to look to family to conduct that placement because there is familiarity. There is a cultural connection. There may be a language connection. There are any number of close connections within kinship placements that sort of favour the least intrusive type of impact as it relates to children who are involved in these types of placements.

11:00

I do want to emphasize to the entire committee and to all those watching that when I take the approach of how this should be governed, I think the guiding principles of the best interests of the child and the cultural familiarity placements need to be fundamentally the most important things that we consider in terms of placing in these very difficult situations. I will say this. The hon. member mentioned that,

you know, that doesn't always happen, and the reason for that is because it's not always available. While we prefer, certainly, to place children with close family and relatives, that doesn't always present itself to be an available option. Certainly, when you consider what's paramount to Children's Services – and that is the safety and well-being of children – when there isn't an appropriate kinship placement, then we'll look at other avenues to consider as well.

The member had some questions about Bill C-92 and the question of what we're doing to work with First Nations communities to develop co-ordination agreements. Effectively, these are trilateral agreements between the First Nations, the province of Alberta, and the federal government to transfer authority over child and family services to the First Nations community, who has expressed their desire to do so. What that really means – the question was: what type of child care is being transferred? That is the full authority over children and youth to First Nations to allow them to exercise that care over their children. It effectively removes the province from that as well. That's not to say that we are completely removed. We will continue to support in any way possible the timely and smooth transition.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the Official Opposition.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister. I'm going to ask if the minister can go back to some of the previous questions I've asked. Some of them were detailed questions, that I'm sure you've got the statistics for, to maybe table some of those answers in writing, specifically around space creation and how many spaces were nonprofit, the breakdown of where they were created. I'm just going to ask, to save time, that perhaps the minister could commit to going back and looking at those questions and tabling those answers when he gets an opportunity.

I want to speak about safety in child care. Key objective 1.1 in the 2023 business plan is to increase access to child care through initiatives that support affordable, quality, safe, and inclusive programs. According to data produced through a FOIP request, between January 1, 2021, and December 31, 2022, the ministry issued 101 stop orders to unlicensed day home providers. Most were because operators had more than six children in their care, but 19 of them were because of an imminent threat to the health and safety of a child. In how many of those 101 circumstances did the ministry exercise their authority under section 23(4.1) of the Early Learning and Child Care Act to obtain the names and contact information of parents and notify the parents that a stop order had been issued to their unlicensed day home? How many times in the same period of 2021 to 2022 did the ministry receive a request from a parent or other individual under section 23(4.2) of the act for information about stop orders being issued by the ministry against an unlicensed day home in the preceding 24-month period?

As the minister may recall, those changes were made to the Early Learning and Child Care Act in early 2020, I believe it was. I've lost track of my time. Essentially, it provides an opportunity for the ministry to get parents' information and notify them of a stop order but also that if an individual is doing their research about what unlicensed day home to use, they can find out whether or not that unlicensed day home has been issued a stop order. I'm wondering: how many times have both of those powers under those authorities been exercised in the past year?

Because section 23(4.2) is limited to the preceding 24-month period, if a parent today contacted the ministry about whether a stop order had been issued against the unlicensed provider who received a stop order on February 19, 2021, for an imminent threat to a child, that individual would be told, "No, there is no stop order," because it was more than 24 months ago. I'm wondering if the minister

believes that is appropriate and is looking to potentially change that so that parents have the full information about safety for child care.

I also would like the minister to advise as to how many noncompliances were issued to all licensed and unlicensed child care providers in 2022, and how does that compare to the number of noncompliances issued in 2019, going back before COVID? Because there were, of course, so many changes made to accommodate COVID restrictions, I'm asking to compare numbers pre-COVID. How many currently licensed programs, both facility based and family day home, have been granted exemptions to licensing requirements by the ministry in 2022, and how does that compare to the number of exemptions granted in 2019? Can the minister provide a breakdown of the types of exemptions to licences that were provided in 2022?

On the topic of licensing, last year 99 FTEs were added to the ministry to implement the federal child care deal. Can the minister advise whether or not all of those 99 FTEs in child care were filled? Budget 2023 indicates that the ministry will be adding 11 more FTEs. Can the minister advise as to whether those additional FTEs are being added to child intervention or to early intervention or to child care? Which area?

Along the lines of licensing requests, persistently, I'm sure, the minister is getting the same communications from child care operators that I've been receiving. Many times I know the minister has been CCed on these notifications of the delays in receiving funding under subsidies, under the affordability grant, to the point that I've had e-mails from operators saying that their cash flow is significantly impacted, to the point that they're not sure that they're going to be able to keep their doors open. In fact, I have been told anecdotally that one operator for sure closed down because they could not get the cash flow because of the delays in receiving funding from the ministry.

This could be seen as a red tape reduction issue. I notice that is no longer part of the ministry's business plan. While I think that's a good thing, I still remain asking the minister if he can provide a list of all the – I believe it's in the multiple thousands – red tape regulatory requirements that were removed between 2019 and now. As the ministries have boasted about their numbers – so they've been counted – I would like to ask for a tabled document of all regulatory requirements that were removed in the last few years as well as all regulatory requirements that have been added, because red tape has been significantly a problem through the administration of the new federal child care deal. Those new licensing operators or those staff: why has there been no impact in terms of the timelines to make sure that child care operators get the funding they desperately need to survive?

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

We'll head over to the minister for a response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you once again to the hon. member. There was an initial question about the space creation, and I just wanted to elaborate. We continue to support space creation in '23-24 in a number of different ways. We've heard from many communities and programs that want to create new spaces, and we've seen promising growth in licensed, facility-based, and family day home child care settings. In fact, between December 2021 to 2022 we have supported the creation of more than 11,000 new spaces, including 4,741 in nonprofit spaces, 3,096 in family day homes, and more than 3,200 in private spaces.

We've also developed a space-creation strategy to ensure that spaces being created between 2023 and 2026 are targeted to the areas of highest need and prioritized in that manner. We continue to reach out to municipalities that have demonstrated a need for

child care and have expressed interest, and we have begun conversations with community-based organizations, schools, and child care operators on innovative ideas for child care, in particular with those that aim to support underserved populations, whether that be Indigenous, francophone, or children with disabilities or other unique needs. The plans for space creation emphasize areas of high need, areas of high demand, and other unique areas that I had just mentioned earlier with the demand or desire for unique needs.

When it comes to the question about the FTEs, those 99 spaces were in fact filled, and the additional 11 FTEs that were posted will be allocated to child care. That, in particular, is for the administration and delivery of the Canada-Alberta early learning and child care agreement.

11:10

On the topic of safety, I want to make it fundamentally clear to everybody in this room and everybody watching that safety is the absolute paramount position that we take when it comes to offering child care in this province and supporting it in any number of ways. We also tremendously value the choice that parents have – and parents do in fact make a variety of choices when it comes to child care – and we remain committed to supporting working parents regardless of what option they may choose for their family. We remain committed to supporting the safety and well-being of children as well, whether they continue to attend in licensed or unlicensed child care, and that's why we continue to invest into resources to help provide parents and providers with access to resources and supports to increase quality and safety within the unlicensed child care sector.

As many of you already know, Children's Services has been given a mandate to help Alberta parents by ensuring more transparency and accountability for licensed day homes, and I take this mandate item very seriously as I continue to support the work of my ministry in supporting the health, safety, and welfare of children in this province. We are continuing to encourage our private day homes to consider the benefits of becoming licensed providers, and as the hon. member mentioned, a number of those day home operators have in fact utilized the option to do so, which ultimately would allow them to offer reduced fees to parents, participate in training, and receive wage top-ups to help support their workforce. I think that's an incredibly important thing to highlight and know.

The member asked about whether or not families are notified when it comes to issuing a stop order. Families whose children are receiving child care in unlicensed facilities when a stop order is issued are in fact informed, and it is posted online for those who are interested in finding out the details. We certainly do make sure – my apologies. I want to correct that by saying that we do inform parents about any stop orders that are issued. I do want to highlight the effectiveness of that program in addressing the concerns and needs that parents may raise by intervening immediately. Children's Services takes any complaint very seriously and investigates it as quickly as possible.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll head back over to the government side.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. My next question is actually around the advancing futures program. You know, again, I've seen and learned in my own life and by witnessing the impact that my parents had on children that inevitably it's not just a short period of time that you're impacting children in care; it's actually the impact, potentially, of future generations as well by

giving these children in care the right foundation and the right tools that they need to move forward and to be able to provide for themselves moving forward. That's why I'm keenly interested in the advancing futures program and the fact that it supports children who have been in government care so that they can pursue postsecondary education.

Key objective 2.1 of the business plan is to provide targeted supports for youth to successfully transition from government care into adulthood and build on available support services, mentorship, educational attainment, and employment readiness. So three parts to this question: how much funding is allocated to the advancing futures program in this budget, how many students will that serve, and how do eligible students apply for this program?

With that, I'd like to cede my time to MLA Smith.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Member Long. Well, Minister, I want to thank you for the work that you do on behalf of our province's children. I have a couple of questions that I'd like you to consider for this morning. I'd like to focus in on key objective 2.2 of the business plan. I'd like to ask a few questions regarding the other supports that are available to children transitioning out of government care. Now, I know that you made an announcement recently, I believe just yesterday, on the transition to adulthood program, and I know that you've told us that there are about \$28 million over the next three years – I think you said something like that – and maybe you could give us a few more details on that.

There's something like 1,400 youth in the program, a total of \$68 million, I think you mentioned, and \$2.5 million from the Skilled Trades and Professions ministry to support people that are pursuing careers. I love the line that you said it's okay to – there was a line in an article that I was reading that says that it's okay to dream. As a professional educator, as a teacher I really believe that it is okay to dream. That's one of the things we've got to get our kids to do. As these kids are transitioning into the adulthood program and into real life and being an adult, it's okay for them to dream.

Here's a couple of questions that I have for you. The transition to adulthood program launched last January. Can the minister give us an update on some key features of that program so that we can better understand? How has the rollout of that program been, and has there been any feedback from the caseworkers or from people receiving those supports? Lastly, how does the mentoring aspect work, and why is that such an important piece?

The next set of questions that I'd like you to consider deal with page 26 of the business plan. Preventing children from coming into the child intervention system is another focus of the Ministry of Children's Services through prevention and early intervention services. On page 26 of the business plan I see the funding under the line for early intervention services for children and youth has increased. Can the minister highlight what programs and services are under this funding envelope? I think it's clear that if we can support families, if we can prevent children from having to come into and under the Ministry of Children's Services, that's probably a good thing. Can the minister highlight what programs and services are under this funding envelope? What areas will the increase in funding go towards? There's obviously a wide range of areas that you could be looking at, so we'd like to know: what areas will the increase in funding go towards?

With that, I'll just cede the rest of my time to the minister.

The Chair: You can't do that.

Mr. Smith: I can't do that? Okay. Then I'm looking forward to hearing the minister, and if you could actually go back and tell us a little bit more about that transition to adulthood program and the

announcement that you made, I think that would really help us as we move through your budget estimates here.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Thank you so much, Member.
To the minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for highlighting some of the key announcements that we recently made in the area of the youth in transition programs. This is an incredibly important area and one that I'm particularly proud to talk about because I think it really combines the ministry's resources devoted to helping youth and young adults transition out of care and into adulthood. Really, the youth in transition programs are comprised of a number of sort of subprograms: the transition to adulthood program, the advancing futures, mentoring youth employment connections program, and other youth and young adult supports sort of comprised in this youth in transition program.

What the member saw yesterday, Madam Chair, was an announcement highlighting the increased spending in this particular area as it relates to our transition programs and the additional supports that Budget 2023 allocated towards increasing the funding available to help support our youth in government care as they transition into adulthood. One of the things that many people are blessed with is the support of a strong family network as they transition from their, you know, youth into adulthood. We wanted to make it available to youth in government care as well. We wanted to make sure that the supports were available so that youth who are transitioning from government care into adulthood have the resources that they need to continue to flourish and thrive and become strong members and productive members of the community, of Alberta. We wanted to make sure that they have every resource available to them to do so.

11:20

The member earlier asked about the particular budget as it relates to advancing futures. Within the youth in transition program the 2023-2024 advancing futures budget is set at \$20.3 million. I am pleased to report that this is an approximately \$3 million increase from 2022-2023, and it is intended specifically to address caseload growth related to high demand for educational pathways and an increase in postsecondary educational costs, those historically being tuition, books, and other supplies. The historical caseload growth of over 10 per cent annually in advancing futures is truly promising because it is a one-of-a-kind program in this country, and it allows for, you know, young adults transitioning to utilize much-needed funds to help fund their postsecondary education.

I was also very pleased to join with the Minister of Skilled Trades and Professions yesterday to make a further announcement, and that was that we are receiving an additional 2 and a half million dollars from that ministry in addition to the 5 and a half million dollars that Children's Services is allocated under these programs to help support increased enrolment in skilled trades in this province for youth in government care. That is, I think, a truly landmark announcement because it will support approximately 500 additional young adults as they continue with and develop their postsecondary and skilled trades type training and education. I think, you know, it's really promising to continue to fund this.

The other component of that particular announcement that the hon. Member Smith mentioned was the allocation of approximately a total of \$25.6 million from Children's Services over the course of three years to help fund this youth in transition program. That is sort of comprised of 5 and a half million dollars allocated for this year,

8 and a half million dollars for next year, and \$11.6 million the following year thereafter to continue to support and meet the demands of the TAP program as we move to the '24-25, '25-26 years.

The one thing that I want to end with, as I note that I'm running out of time, is that these programs have demonstrated incredible results. There is increased labour market participation, increased employability, and higher earnings, improved time management, financial literacy, and other life skills.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.
Back over to the Official Opposition.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. To the minister: I just want to go back to the questions that we were talking about before in the last block. Can the minister confirm – I might have misheard the minister. I believe he said that 4,741 nonprofit spaces were created last year and 3,096 day home spaces were created. Were any of those day home spaces nonprofit spaces, or are they for-profit? What I'm asking for the minister to confirm is that last year under the Canada-Alberta ELCC agreement Alberta has a commitment of creating – was supposed to have created 10,000 new nonprofit spaces in the 2022 fiscal year. Did Alberta indeed create 10,000 new nonprofit spaces in the 2022 fiscal year?

I'm going to move – I'm going to ask the minister to go back. I had a number of questions around stop orders and how many individuals actually asked for background information on stop orders for unlicensed providers last year, noncompliances, and exemptions to licensing. If the minister can go back and respond to those questions in writing if need be.

I want to move back to child intervention. The minister will be aware that child intervention agencies who – let's be clear. They serve children who are the responsibility of government. They are in the care of government. These agencies provide supports to kinship homes, foster homes, youth transitioning out of care. They provide a variety of supports, and they are delivering services to the children that are the responsibility of the government. You have heard the request, I know, Minister, from these organizations who have been asking for an increase in their contracts as well as . . .

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt.

Ms Pancholi: Through the chair . . .

The Chair: Direct through the chair. Yeah.

Ms Pancholi: . . . the minister would be aware that they have asked for contract increases to reflect the ongoing services they provide but also to address cost-of-living increases. I understand that the minister has provided a one-time 3 per cent increase that must be expended before the end of the fiscal year. That does not address the ongoing challenges. Is there any money planned within Budget 2023 to increase the contract amounts to child intervention agencies?

Along that line, for the devastating numbers of children and youth in care who have passed away in 2022, can the minister indicate how many of those young people were being served in foster homes or kinship homes that were governed by agencies and how many of those deaths occurred for children and youth that were under direct service, provision, and care by the ministry? Just a breakdown if possible, please.

I also would like the minister to go back to a question that I asked earlier around family enhancement agreements. How many family enhancement agreements have been entered into in the 2022 fiscal year? How many does the ministry plan to enter into in the 2023

fiscal year? This is critical, of course, because family enhancement agreements are about early intervention. It's about ensuring that families stay together and receive supports in the home and children don't have to be apprehended but can actually stay with their families, which really should be everybody's top priority. I'm wondering if the minister can advise on that.

I also want to ask the minister to go back to answer the questions around the qualifications of child intervention staff, where essentially we've been hearing that the qualifications have been lowered and that front-line caseworkers are being hired at an HSW 3 level. These are now perhaps how these positions are being filled. Further to the information that we received about the vacancy rate within Children's Services and child intervention, the minister indicated that the ministry was hiring something like 94 – perhaps it was 97 – staff per month. I'm sorry if I got that number not quite right. That suggests to me an incredibly high turnover rate. I appreciate that we have vacancies, but what is happening or what has not been addressed, I suppose, within the ministry that that turnover rate is so high? Is that why the minister is looking to lower the qualifications for front-line caseworker staff?

I would once again – I realize, conscious of time, that we're going to be running out of time. I also wanted to know if there's any – the minister mentioned that there's a review going on of kinship support payments in 2023. That has been something that has been mentioned for multiple years by former ministers of Children's Services, yet nothing has been implemented. Is there a direct plan to implement changes to the kinship funding support model coming forward in the 2023 fiscal year? I'm running out of time, so I will leave it at that.

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

We'll move over now to the minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the hon. member once again for those questions. The initial question was about not-for-profit spaces. What I'd like to do is provide that to you subsequently in writing, because there is the inclusion of the – we'll provide that to you in writing so that it provides a complete picture of how many spaces were created in that area.

The question of the agencies. We have heard, and we have consulted and engaged with agencies throughout this province. Indeed, we've been working closely with Align. Align is effectively an organization that represents a network of agencies providing services to vulnerable children and families across Alberta. They have raised concerns about some of the financial challenges that some of their members have been experiencing, and a lot of that has been attributable to some of the cost-of-living increases that we have seen almost across the board and almost universally throughout the country and indeed the globe. We know that we're in an affordability crisis, and we've done a number of things in this ministry and elsewhere as well to help address those issues.

The work that we have done in respect to some of the concerns that we've heard, specifically from Align but indeed from other organizations as well, is that the expenditures that they're incurring as of this year are exceeding a lot of what they normally would have been able to afford from within their agencies.

11:30

What we've done through that consultation and engagement is that we have committed to providing child intervention contracted agencies with a one-time immediate payment of 3 per cent, and such funding will start to flow very quickly. I've also committed to continually working with these agencies to help address some of the

inflexibilities, that their contracts limit in terms of how they allocate their budgets, so that they can have the ability to utilize their funding in ways that help address their immediate needs as quickly as possible.

In terms of the question relating to kinship support payments, last year we introduced a \$900 benefit for each kinship home, and we are reviewing rates that are paid to kinship and foster care. I can tell the member that we are developing policies, including a number of supports to kinship and foster families, that will help address some of these needs, and I'm hopeful that we'll be able to announce that very quickly.

The member asked about the qualifications of child intervention workers. In the last minute and a half I would like to pass that on to Assistant Deputy Minister Leann Wagner for additional comment on that.

Ms Wagner: Thank you, Minister. Children's Services has changed its workforce model in that all new staff are hired as HSW 3s, as an entry-level child intervention practitioner. In their first year of work we work with them to develop their competencies, ensure that they get all of the training required, and at the end of the year, if they've met the established competencies, they are promoted to an HSW 5. From there, they can of course take advantage of opportunities to be promoted to an HSW 6 or 7 or if they wish to go into management. We did this because we were struggling, like all employers, to attract people to the work, and we were not able to secure HSW 5s, which was our previous entry-level position. So we've changed to hire HSW 3s, which was always part of our classification scheme, and we provide the required training and support for them to advance in their career with Children's Services.

Mr. Amery: I do want to note that workplace challenges, as ADM Leann Wagner mentioned, are common right now across every sector in the country, but we are working diligently to . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We will head over to the government caucus. Member Yaseen, please proceed.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister, for the work that you do in this very important ministry for the people who can't speak for themselves. It's so important, and the people who support you in your ministry, the people beside and behind you: their work is valued and appreciated.

Just a couple of comments before I get to my questions here. We talked earlier about adoption, and I know that in some cultures or faiths there may be an alternative to adoption like guardianship. Is there a provision here to accept that as equivalent to adoption?

Also, I see the budget line for child intervention keeps increasing, which is a good thing, but I'm also interested to see whether we are training people, the social workers who go and intervene, that they are appropriately trained culturally to make sure that children get the best out of this intervention.

If you have time at the end, you can also talk about this \$10 daycare. When we talk about \$10 daycare, what does it mean for an average person viewing us here today? What does that really mean for them in terms of that? I know we use a lot of things here very easily, but people don't quite get that.

Talking about child care spaces, access to safe, affordable, and quality child care is so important for not only families but for the economy as well. Key objective 1.1 in the business plan is to "increase access to child care through initiatives that support affordable, quality, safe, and inclusive programs enabling parents to participate in and support Alberta's economic recovery." Can you please update us on how many new child care spaces have been

created under the agreement with the federal government? When will these spaces be opened for children?

I also see that performance metric 1(a) in the business plan measures the changes in the number of active licensed child care spaces. I see that your target for the 2023-24 budget is 11 per cent, and I know that way back in the 2021-2022 budget it was about 6 per cent. Are you on track to meet that target that you are projecting, Minister, and are the unlicensed day homes included in that number as well?

Another important, I guess, area is that we must have qualified people who look after our children, and that comes to labour shortage and having appropriate, trained labour to do that. Child care spaces need the appropriate number of trained staff in order to operate and care for children. There are labour shortages across the economy, including the child care sector. Key objective 1.2 of the business plan is: "Enhance quality licensed child care through workforce investments that strengthen the recruitment and retention of skilled early childhood educators and support their capacity to deliver quality child care." In view of that, I have a couple of questions. What is the total investment into supporting the workforce in this budget? Are there any efforts to recruit more workers into the child care sector? What investment is made into the retention of workers already in this field?

I also see that on page 26 of the business plan the line item for child care is increasing by about \$200 million, and this envelope is actually getting bigger and bigger in the future years as well. Is the increase we are seeing this year from provincial funding, or is the increase in funding from the federal government under the early learning and child care agreement? What areas and programs will increase in this funding going forward?

Lastly, on page 21 of the business plan I see the reference to Canada-wide early learning . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll head over to the minister now for a response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for raising those important questions and also highlighting some of the challenges with some of the cultural components of adoptions and some of the impacts that may arise from that. I certainly have a deep appreciation for the work that the hon. member has done in his role both in the past in his associate ministry as well as onwards as you continue to advocate for your constituents and for the community at large.

You know, adoption is one of those areas that certainly fits for some families, but there are alternatives as well to that. I think it's important to highlight some of those while we're here today. One of those alternatives to actual adoption is guardianship, and we do have self-directed guardianship programs in this province as well as through private guardianship orders. In addition to that, the government of Alberta, through the Ministry of Children's Services, has embarked upon a province-wide recruitment strategy to help attract foster parents and to sort of inform Albertans about the rewarding benefits of becoming a foster parent with the hopes that we can attract an additional number to help alleviate some of the pressures that we're having in that area as well. I think that that has been a tremendously successful campaign. We've seen a large uptake in the number of new foster parents that are expressing interest in becoming one.

11:40

For some communities where adoption is not necessarily an option, I think we can sort of supplement some of that through our

guardianship programs and through foster families and, in particular, cultural foster families and the emphasis that we may be able to work with in terms of families and placements of children in familiar homes and in familiar communities so that we can ensure that there are, you know, the least intrusive type of placements for our children.

In relation to the questions on the space creation and child care, I'm pleased to report that there has been a significant investment in our workforce as it relates to our early childhood educators. What we're doing is sort of a multipronged approach to make sure that we address both the recruitment and retention of ECEs in this province.

We continue to support this workforce through wage top-ups, which, as you may recall, increased just a few short months ago, and we were able to provide all ECEs in this province with a one-time payment during the holiday season to help address some of the cost pressures that they themselves may have been facing during that expensive end of year.

We also have paid professional development programs, which provide every ECE in this province with up to \$2,000 a year for tuition, conferences, or workshops to further their education and funding to support release time so ECEs can actually attend those programs.

We have grant programs to target diverse populations, including launching pilot programs to promote entry into the child care field. We are launching a recruitment campaign asking Albertans to consider a future career in the child care sector as an ECE.

We have been working very closely with the Ministry of Advanced Education to improve access and successful completion and increase spaces for available ECE programs in postsecondary education. Finally, we are modernizing level 1 ECE orientation course content to include new modules for out of school care and family day homes.

The member asked about the number of spaces that we have seen created recently in relation to child care spaces, and I'm pleased to report that today we have under the agreement created over 11,000 new child care spaces, and we'll continue to do so as we move forward and achieve our target goals of getting to the \$15-a-day child care fees for this year.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the Official Opposition.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. This is my last block, so I just want to really quickly pick up. I'm a little baffled by why the minister is not able to provide how many of the 10,000 new nonprofit spaces that were actually created – the minister just repeated: 11,000 new child care spaces. The minister just indicated 11,000 new child care spaces were created and seems to know that number but doesn't seem to know how many of them are nonprofit. I'm a little confused as to why that isn't clear. I think we could just minus the 32 private spaces and, I guess, perhaps that's how many nonprofit spaces were created.

I would really ask the minister to go back to those questions that I asked about: stop orders, how many times they were accessed, noncompliances and exemptions questions. Please table that information, Minister. I think it's pretty critically important to the safety of child care.

On the question of the hiring of child intervention staff, we have heard the government announce a number of new spaces in postsecondary for nurses and various other roles and early child educators, but we've just heard that the ministry has had to lower the qualifications for front-line caseworker staff. Yet I'm not hearing where the commitment is to creating more postsecondary

spaces for registered social workers. I think that's a little bit troubling, and I'm not sure how an HSW 3 is qualified to provide the trauma-informed care that we know is necessary to provide appropriate front-line caseworker services to children and youth who are in crisis and require assistance.

Really, the last big question that I wanted to ask was that, you know, the Child and Youth Advocate has come before, and we've been through a process over the last year of looking at the recommendations that the Child and Youth Advocate has made, and it's been through a lot of pulling teeth and dragging the government to the point of saying that we need to have ministries come forward and answer questions about their responses to the recommendations of the Child and Youth Advocate. Eventually we finally got the UCP to agree to do that after three years of asking.

What we discovered through that process was that very much the ministries are guiding their responses to the Child and Youth Advocate's recommendations by simply saying at some point that they're not going to answer questions anymore or provide any more updates because they believe that the recommendations made by the office of the Child and Youth Advocate have been met, even if the Child and Youth Advocate doesn't agree, and they will simply just say: we're not going to provide any more updates. So the advocate has no choice but to just say: okay; then I guess I'm going to close this.

We heard a fulsome discussion about that at another committee, that some of the members here were part of, and that discussion was around: perhaps the Ministry of Children's Services needs to review and amend the Child and Youth Advocate Act to allow for the determination of whether recommendation has been made by the Child and Youth Advocate, not that the ministries receive the recommendation. I'd like to know if the minister is supportive of that.

As well, we've heard that, you know, essentially, ministries are not having the conversations that they're required to with the Child and Youth Advocate, that there seems to be a miscommunication about what the advocate meant, so would the minister support revising the process to ensure a more fulsome discussion between the Child and Youth Advocate and ministries that receive recommendations as to how to implement or respond to those recommendations?

Lastly, I think Albertans have very significant questions about the government's performance to date on supporting the safety and well-being of children and youth in care, and we should not have to go through three years of the opposition guilt tripping, essentially, the government into allowing ministries to come forward and actually answer for the work that they're doing. Would the minister support changing it in legislation to require that ministries receiving recommendations from the Child and Youth Advocate not only provide a written response but actually come before a committee of the Legislature and answer questions every single time a recommendation is made?

I would like to end by saying that this is my last opportunity this Legislature to sit as a critic for Children's Services in budget estimates. I appreciate the forthcoming nature of the current minister. Unfortunately, very light on details on a lot of the questions – a lot of talking points – and there are some very significant questions about the work that I believe this ministry is doing to support children and youth in care and also with a full commitment to implementing affordable and quality child care. The track record of this government on both of those pieces is not very strong, and I do certainly hope that Albertans get more transparency and more commitment to supporting vulnerable children and youth and all children and families going forward. I believe that that will happen with a change of government.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: All right. Back to the minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'm not sure why the hon. member is baffled. We've been forthcoming in saying that we will provide those details as it relates to the number of spaces in the not-for-profit realm created. Certainly, we will be happy to provide that to her, and I've said that – and I'll say it once more – that our department will be in touch with the details shortly.

We know that when it comes to the question of stop orders, that the hon. member spoke about earlier, and the number that had been provided, I do want to continue with my support for the program and for the hard work of Children's Services and the department, who has demonstrated to me and I think to all Albertans that their quick actions have been instrumental in making sure that the safety and welfare of children in this province are well met. I'm tremendously proud of the work that the Children's Services department staff have been doing, in particular when it comes to addressing urgent needs of our children in this province, and I will continue to advocate and defend on their behalf because I think that the work that they do is tremendously valued and important.

I'd also like to, you know, shift the discussion a little bit with respect to the member's comments about lowering the qualifications, again, another dismal approach as it relates to the hard-working staff in child intervention. The staff that work day in and day out do an incredibly difficult job, and I think that the hon. member and all hon. members in this committee need to know that the work that is being performed by caseworkers in child intervention is extremely challenging yet extremely rewarding and important for this province.

11:50

I as a minister will continue to take the position that our valued workforce in child intervention is absolutely and fundamentally important to this government. I would prefer to focus on what we're doing to help recruit and retain those valuable staff members and allow them to grow within the department as well. Simply criticizing them for not having qualifications or lower qualifications does not comprise the attitude or the views of this government. We believe that Children's Services workforce models are working well to attract, recruit, retain, and support child intervention employees. The emphasis has been placed on a greater focus to support the career growth and advancement as well as competency development for these valued employees.

What we've done, essentially, is that the work on behalf of caseworkers has been streamlined into two job categories, and that is broken down as child intervention and caregiver supports. Employees are, again, given the opportunity to gain knowledge and experience in all areas of work within their assigned categories, and by shifting away from the system of numerized specific and specialized roles, it allows us to enhance the agility in the workforce and the deployment of resources.

I think that this approach is important because it supports the equitable distribution of workloads among staff and operational efficiency, but it also allows the system to adapt to surges in workload in different parts of the system. It enhances the stability in the system and gives employees valuable learning opportunities, as well, to grow within the department and within the ministry and to help retain and develop those employees as best as possible. I think, you know, there's a marked difference in the view between what this government believes are valued members of the Children's Services child intervention department and what the hon. member keeps focusing on.

In relation to the Child and Youth Advocate recommendations I'm also very pleased to report to this committee that there have been a number of recommendations made, and since 2013 the office of the

Child and Youth Advocate has issued 107 recommendations to Children's Services, and 101 of those have been fully implemented. Another five of those recommendations are currently under way, and that constitutes more than a 99 per cent completion rate when it comes to the recommendations and what this department has done to address the recommendations of the office of the Child and Youth Advocate.

Those five recommendations that are remaining and outstanding are being actively implemented, and we are proud of the tremendous work that we have done to date in response to the advocate's advice.

I'd also note that there is ongoing work and collaboration between the office of the Child and Youth Advocate and the Department of Children's Services. That is something that I want to highlight to committee members as well. We continue to work diligently day in and day out with the office of the Child and Youth Advocate to ensure that we are addressing the recommendations as thoroughly and as fully as possible.

The Chair: The timer can go, but the time now goes over to . . .

Mr. Amery: Sure. Certainly. I just want to once again take this last 15 seconds to thank the critic of Children's Services for her advocacy in this area, and I'm looking very much forward to your continued work as critic in the years to come.

The Chair: All right.

Yeah. Let's head over to the government caucus, please. Member Yao.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much, Chair. Minister, thank you so much for all your hard work in the time that you've been there. I've experienced nothing but a ministry that's been able to provide me a lot of information on a lot of difficult cases from my region, and I really want to thank you and your entire team for everything that they do. It is an extremely difficult file. It's very complex, and certainly I've been able to understand a lot more of the nuances of some things that your ministry has to manage.

In my two terms, if there is any ministry that has demonstrated that they are as nonpartisan as it comes and that their hard work reflects the fact that they are dealing with children who are the most vulnerable and all the hard work they do on that and all the things that they have to deal with, it is the Ministry of Children's Services. Again thank you to your entire team, your entire administration, and all the front-line workers, that the members opposite might be disparaging, that do a lot of hard work in trying to address these children.

If we could again touch on First Nations and Métis peoples, on page 24 of the business plan under key objective 2.2, under outcome 2, I see you've committed to "work with First Nations and Government of Canada to implement An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families." I know you've touched on this previously a little bit, but I just want you to expand on what the ministry is doing to ensure how the government supports this transition.

As an example, many First Nations have approached the Alberta government with the intent to take responsibility over youth and family services on reserves. I'm wondering if we can understand a little bit more about that, please.

The Chair: Minister, you have two minutes and 47 seconds.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much to the hon. member once again, and I appreciate the kind words that the member conveyed to me in relation to the work of this ministry. You know, this is, in my view, one of the most important ministries because it deals with such challenging and important issues and, in particular, dealing with the work that is involved within this ministry as it relates to the safety and well-being and integrity of our children in this province. It's fundamentally some of the most rewarding work and some of the most important work that I have ever done.

You know, I have never taken the approach that this ministry should approach with any sort of partisan views. This is a ministry that must maintain the well-being of children regardless of what side of the political spectrum you lay on. That's why I've always had an open-door policy for all members, including members of the opposition, to come to my office at any point in time and discuss important and relevant issues.

I'd also like to commend the incredibly hard work that my office staff and the department staff do day in and day out as well, because without them, you know, we would be in a very, very dire situation. The work that they've done is thankless and selfless, and I want to take this opportunity to formally thank each and every one of them for showing up every single day and doing the incredible work that they do.

In relation to your question we have had a number of First Nations approach the province and the federal government with their intent to take over responsibility of child and family services. The way they do that is that they provide a notice of intent, which signals a future request for agreements from within. They may submit a request for a co-ordination agreement, which signals their readiness to begin developing a trilateral co-ordination agreement.

Since the act came into force on January 1, 2020, Alberta has received five requests for trilateral co-ordination agreements representing seven First Nations in Alberta. We have also received four additional notices from First Nations in Alberta of their intention to exercise their legislative authority in relation to child and family services and will continue to remain committed and ready to assist in any way with those transitions.

Thank you, all.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. This concludes the consideration of the 2023-24 main estimates by the Standing Committee on Families and Communities.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

