



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature  
First Session

Standing Committee  
on  
Families and Communities

Ministry of Justice  
Consideration of Main Estimates

Thursday, March 20, 2025  
9 a.m.

Transcript No. 31-1-25

**Legislative Assembly of Alberta  
The 31st Legislature  
First Session**

**Standing Committee on Families and Communities**

Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC), Chair  
Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP), Deputy Chair  
Hoffman, Sarah, Edmonton-Glenora (NDP),\* Acting Deputy Chair

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**Standing Committee on Families and Communities**

**Participant**

Ministry of Justice  
Hon. Mickey Amery, Minister



9 a.m.

Thursday, March 20, 2025

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

**Ministry of Justice**  
**Consideration of Main Estimates**

**The Chair:** All right. Good morning, everyone. 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 Justice for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2026.

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 when your turn comes. My name is Jackie Lovely. I'm the MLA for the Camrose constituency and the chair of this committee.

We'll start to my right. Myles McDougall.

**Mr. McDougall:** Sorry. Myles McDougall, MLA, Calgary-Fish Creek.

**Mrs. Petrovic:** Chelsae Petrovic, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod.

**Mr. Lundy:** Good morning, everyone. Brandon Lundy, MLA for Leduc-Beaumont.

**Mrs. Johnson:** Good morning, everyone. Jennifer Johnson, MLA for Lacombe-Ponoka.

**Mr. Singh:** Good morning, everyone. Peter Singh, MLA, Calgary-East.

**The Chair:** Minister, if you'd introduce yourself and your team.

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning to all of you. Mickey Amery, MLA, Calgary-Cross and Minister of Justice. To my left is ADM Tracy Wyrstiuik, ADM Brad Wells. To my right, deputy minister Malcolm Lavoie and ADM Ms Macve. I also have in attendance ADM Goddard, ADM Strauss, a number of Justice officials and ministry staff as well.

**Ms Hoffman:** Sarah Hoffman, Edmonton-Glenora.

**Mr. Shepherd:** David Shepherd, Edmonton-City Centre.

**Mr. Sabir:** Good morning. Irfan Sabir, MLA, Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

**The Chair:** All right. I'd like to note the following substitutions for the record: hon. Mr. Sabir for Member Batten, Mr. Shepherd for Mr. Haji, and Ms Hoffman for Ms Goehring as acting deputy chair.

Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Justice shall be considered for three hours. Standing order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01 (6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table. For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and the member speaking agree. If debate is exhausted

prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee, I'll call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting. However, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break today? All right. I see none, so we'll have a break midway through.

Ministry officials who are present at the table may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone in the gallery 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.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused. However, the block of speaking time and the 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.

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

I'd now invite the Minister of Justice to begin with your opening remarks. Sir, you have 10 minutes.

**Mr. Amery:** Good morning, everyone, and thank you. I'm very pleased to be here to discuss the Alberta Ministry of Justice's business plan and estimates with you. This plan was created in collaboration with several ministry officials, many of whom are here with me today. The Ministry of Justice works to ensure a fair and accessible justice system for all Albertans while ensuring that Albertans are receiving value for their tax dollars. The ministry continues to examine cost-effective ways to deliver services while ensuring an accessible and efficient justice system.

Quite simply, we must expand, modernize, and improve overall systems in Alberta's court system. As a result, Budget 2025 provides a funding increase for several justice items, for a total budget of \$706.9 million. This is an increase of \$16.2 million over the previous year. Increased funding will allow us to add additional staff and judiciary supports so it's easier and faster for Albertans and the legal community to access their justice system. I'm proud that through Budget 2025 our government will expand the family justice strategy, addressing increased volumes in the province's three courts and defend Alberta's jurisdiction over federal overreach. Through the Alberta Crown prosecution service we will establish a human trafficking unit, and we're investing in getting impaired drivers off the roads to keep Albertans safe.

I'll now speak to the budgets for individual divisions. Through Budget 2025 court and justice services is allocated \$280.6 million to provide resolution and justice services to Albertans with legal issues and to support the operation of Alberta's three courts at 72 locations province-wide. This funding supports staffing increases due to Alberta's population growth and increasing case volumes, enhanced interpretation services, and upgrades to courthouse security. Ensuring our courthouses are adequately staffed will help reduce backlogs, enable the efficient operation of busy courtrooms,

and avoid increasing lead times, ensuring criminal matters proceed to trial in a timely manner.

We're also investing an additional \$3.2 million for the continued expansion of the family justice strategy to Grande Prairie as well as to five Court of Justice-based locations surrounding Edmonton: Stony Plain, St. Albert, Sherwood Park, Leduc, and Fort Saskatchewan. This initiative, initially implemented in Edmonton and Calgary, has significantly improved the court experience and outcomes for Albertans undergoing separation and divorce. As of December 31, 2024, since its launch in Calgary and Edmonton in December 2023, over 52,000 Albertans have accessed these precourt services through the family justice strategy.

Budget 2025 also includes an investment of \$4 million of capital funding to help expand videoconferencing capacity in courtrooms, which increases access to justice. This videoconferencing expansion reduces the need for people to physically appear in court, thereby reducing the time and costs associated with escorting inmates and witness travel, increasing the number of court proceedings that can be heard, and increasing court efficiencies.

We're providing a total of \$6.1 million in capital investment over two years for courthouse security upgrades. Work will begin in key locations, including in Edmonton, Sherwood Park, Lethbridge, and Drumheller, with additional locations to follow in the next fiscal year.

Moving on to the legal services division. The legal services division is the civil legal adviser to the government of Alberta. Its civil Crown counsel provides strategic legal advice to all government departments, represents the government of Alberta in court, and supports the administration of public affairs according to the law. This includes advice on high-profile, politically sensitive, and complex files in support of the government's mandate to protect our provincial jurisdiction from federal overreach. The volume and complexity of government legal work has been growing as government works to keep our laws up to date while protecting Alberta's constitutional jurisdiction. Although government can contract outside counsel, it is more cost-effective to use civil Crown counsel.

The legal services division is receiving a \$5.7 million, or 8 per cent, increase, which will focus on hiring additional lawyers. This will allow government to continue defending Alberta's interests in court and to introduce new or updated laws while using taxpayer dollars efficiently.

The Alberta Crown prosecution service in Budget 2025 provides for \$146.7 million in total, which is an increase of \$7.3 million over the previous year. Our continued investment in the Alberta Crown prosecution service gives our Crown prosecutors the resources to prosecute viable files, including those involving violence. Providing funding to support recruitment and retention of Crown prosecutors, including the new human trafficking unit, will continue to give the ACPS the capacity to effectively manage caseloads and ensure that viable criminal cases can be prosecuted. We'll continue to make sure those who commit criminal offences, including violent offenders, are held accountable for their actions so that Albertans can feel safe in their communities.

In our fourth division, strategy, support and integrated initiatives, Budget 2025 addresses the workload pressures in the office of the Chief Medical Examiner and the Alberta chief firearms office. The province is investing an additional \$1.9 million, or a 9 per cent increase over Budget 2024, to hire medical and nonmedical staff for the office of the Chief Medical Examiner, cover operating costs for new equipment purchases, and to support technology modernization reviews. Additional capital funding of \$3.5 million to purchase two computerized tomography CT scanners and four rapid toxicology machines will make sure

operations are modernized and create efficiencies to help bring quicker closure for Albertans who have lost loved ones.

#### 9:10

We are continuing efforts to provide Alberta families with timely access to information regarding the death of a loved one by building a sustainable and effectively resourced death investigation system that aligns with international practices and best practices. Strategy, support and integrated services is also the division that provides support for community justice initiatives, specialized courts, restorative justice, Indigenous policy and services, and the Alberta law libraries. We are collaborating with partners to develop alternatives to traditional judicial processes and specialized courts that provide a therapeutic and culturally relevant approach to justice.

We're proud of what the Alberta chief firearms office has accomplished in such a short time to promote public safety while standing up for law-abiding firearm owners since it was established in 2021. Alberta's government is increasing funding of \$2 million through the Alberta chief firearms office to make sure that there is enough staff to process files. Albertans continue to receive timely service related to their applications for firearm licences and other services.

We continue to fund drug treatment courts as an alternative route for nonviolent offenders to access treatment and recovery instead of incarceration while maintaining the threat of jail if conditions are breached. These courts help prevent nonviolent addiction-related crime in communities, which in turn allows those working in the justice system to focus on serious violent crimes and repeat offenders. An additional \$1.9 million and 18 FTEs will be provided to enhance services and provide strategic policy and planning within the department, particularly on mandated high-priority policy files.

As of April 1, 2025, safe roads Alberta, a program within the Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors, is being transferred to the Ministry of Justice. This transition of safe roads to Alberta Justice recognizes the value of closer alignment of the program with the justice system. As a result we are creating a new division: the administrative law programs. That includes programs that provide alternatives to traditional court processes, including safe roads, family support order services, and the Alberta Human Rights Commission.

Getting impaired drivers off the roads is critical to keeping Albertans safe and protecting communities from the devastating consequences of driving under the influence. Under our government Alberta has had the toughest impaired driving laws in the country since 2020, with immediate and severe consequences for impaired drivers. Budget 2025 will add an additional \$1.4 million in funding for safe roads to help remove impaired drivers from Alberta roads. This approach to penalizing impaired drivers and handling traffic ticket disputes reduces the burden on our court and police resources while protecting the safety of people on our roads.

Family support order services delivers essential programs to support children and families. For example, the maintenance enforcement program manages court-ordered child and spousal support payments for children and families and collects subrogated support on behalf of the Crown for recipients and families on income support.

The Alberta Human Rights Commission fosters equality and reduces discrimination by adjudicating discrimination complaints in a quasi-judicial process and by communication, education, and engagement with community organizations.

The Ministry of Justice remains committed to regulatory approaches and program delivery with an emphasis on outcomes in

order to improve access to government services, attract investment, support innovation and competitiveness, and grow Alberta business. Alberta's government remains focused on keeping our province the best place in Canada to live, work, and raise a family.

With that, Madam Chair, thank you very much. Those are my remarks.

**The Chair:** All right. Thank you, Minister.

We'll now begin the question-and-answer portion of the meeting. For the first 60 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you'll be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams.

Now, members, do you prefer shared or block time?

**Mr. Sabir:** Shared.

**The Chair:** Minister?

**Mr. Amery:** Madam Chair, in order to have a complete and thorough conversation, I would opt for block time.

**The Chair:** Block time for you. Okay.

Members, you have up to 10 minutes to ask questions and make comments to the minister. Once you've done so, the minister will have up to 10 minutes to respond.

Please proceed.

**Mr. Sabir:** Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister and his staff for being available here. My first set of questions relate to the ministry's business plan, and I will refer to page 113. The opening paragraph of the ministry's business plan states, "The Ministry of Justice works to ensure a fair and accessible justice system for all Albertans where the rule of law is upheld and government undertakings are administered according to law." Related to that, through you, Madam Chair, is key objective 1.1 on page 115, that talks about government action to protect Albertans' rights. We can all agree that the rule of law is the foundation and the cornerstone of a free and democratic society. My question relates squarely back to the rule of law and the key objective of protecting Albertans' interest.

There's a bit of background, Madam Chair, to this question. On March 4, 2025, a journalist reported based on documents he obtained through a FOIP request relating to the communication between the members of the UCP cabinet, including this minister, the Premier's chief of staff Marshall Smith, and Calgary chief of police Mark Neufeld regarding the student protests at the University of Calgary. On May 13 a half hour after the public safety minister informed Chief Mark Neufeld that the province was ordering an investigation from the provincial police watchdog, the chief spoke with Marshall Smith, the Premier's chief of staff, who apparently assured that the watchdog won't investigate but will focus on whether there were serious injuries resulting from police action. The notes also include notes made by the chief about a call from the Minister of Justice as well.

I think I will get to the question, and the question is about the rule of law. While the police file I totally understand is with Public Safety and Emergency Services, Calgary police was carrying out a significant and unprecedented operation against the protesters, and there were attempts from the Premier's office and multiple cabinet ministers. Again, the question is about the rule of law, that Albertans do have a constitutional right to protest peacefully. Key objective 1 says that it's a priority for the government to protect Albertans' rights, and I think the minister will agree with me that the protest at U of C was peaceful, yet three ministers and the

Premier's chief of staff called the police chief about an operational matter. So the question, through you, Madam Chair, is: will the minister agree that the minister's conduct and other ministers' conduct was a violation of the rule of law, and how does this budget help government's idea of upholding the rule of law and protecting Albertans' rights? That's my first question.

Second question also relates to the business plan, page 113: the Ministry of Justice administers federal firearms legislation and advocates for Alberta's firearms community while working towards public safety. Madam Chair, gun violence is fairly prevalent in our communities, and it remains a huge issue. The question I have for the minister is: share specific initiatives that the ministry is undertaking to curb gun violence.

Again page 113, through you, Madam Chair. It talks about legal aid, and it says that

the ministry oversees the delivery of legal aid to Albertans through an agreement with the Law Society of Alberta and Legal Aid Alberta. It also facilitates the enforcement of child and spousal support orders and provides forensic death investigations into sudden, unexpected or unexplained deaths in Alberta.

My question relates to legal aid first. This year's budget cuts legal aid by \$22 million. It's a huge cut, and it impacts Albertans' rights, constitutionally protected rights to fair representation. How does the Minister think this impacts Albertans' rights to representation and access to justice?

9:20

With respect to death investigations through you, Madam Chair, my question to the minister is: can the minister share how many investigations are completed or ongoing into sudden and unexpected deaths, and are there any findings that the minister would like to share with this committee?

Another question with respect to the maintenance enforcement program, just a baseline question about the caseload for child and spousal support orders. Has it increased or decreased? How many staff work in both these departments?

Page 113 of the business plan:

the Ministry of Justice is striving to provide Albertans with more timely and accessible services. The continued rollout of the pre-charge assessment system will ensure charges are reviewed by a prosecutor before being laid by police. This system will reduce the number of cases entering the court system.

The question I have is pretty similar to what I asked last year as well: how many prosecutors are working on it, what impact this program has on improving the criminal justice system, and whether there is any data or evaluation that the minister can share that demonstrates the effectiveness of this program.

Relating to that also is a question about the delays in our court system. Through you, Madam Chair, I would ask the minister to share the status of Jordan delays in our court system and how this Budget 2025-26 helps to address those delays. I'm looking for actual stats, the number of charges that has been stayed by the prosecutor due to the Jordan delays. Are these delays because of staffing caseloads?

A related question. The minister also talked about viable criminal cases. It would be helpful to understand what that really means. If somebody is offside the criminal court provision, that's a crime, and victims do expect that government will take steps to prosecute that crime. In cases where those crimes are not prosecuted in a timely fashion, the question through you, Madam Chair, for the minister is: what impact does it have on the victims and their families, and what does the minister have to say about that?

Page 116, outcome 2, the justice system is fair and accessible. I note that the Jordan delay is one of the key issues in terms of

timelines faced in our justice system, and this outcome 2 doesn't mention Abrametz talking about Jordan delays.

Page 116, performance measure 2(a), Alberta Court of Justice lead time to trial for serious and violent matters. That's a direct measure of Court of Justice's availability to process these types of criminal cases. In '23-24 the lead time to trial for serious and violent matters was 22.9 weeks, and the target for '25-26 is set at 24 weeks. Through you, Madam Chair, the target for lead time to trial for serious matters is actually increasing to 24 weeks. How does this align with the ministry's stated commitment to providing more timely access to justice?

I think for this block these are all my questions. I do have three seconds, but I won't be able to ask any more.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Member.

Over to the minister for his response.

**Mr. Amery:** Well, thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for the questions and the insightful commentary. When it comes to how I perceive my role, it's important for me to maintain the fundamental components of what I believe is important when it comes to justice; that is, that our justice system is just, it is fair, it puts above all else equality and equity as some of the most important fundamental components of what an effective system of law is and what the appropriate rule of law means to me. To the member's question, that is important to me. I know that many of us come from different places, many of us come from environments where we don't have the benefit of the rule of law, and to be here in a society that puts law and order above all else is incredibly important to me.

The member talked a little bit about protests. Protests are enshrined in our Constitution, and they are very important to me to make sure that the fundamental right, the constitutional right to protest is always upheld. That is part of what I believe that an appropriate system of justice permits. Certainly, I would agree with the member that people who are passionate about important events, whether domestically or globally, should be entitled to freely protest in a peaceful manner.

The member spoke a little bit about police and ASIRT investigations, but the hon. member will know that if we uphold the fundamental rules of justice and independence, we have to allow these processes to take place without political interference. ASIRT operates fully independently of the government and of elected officials. The police detachments all across this province and the chiefs operate fully independently of political influence. What the member didn't describe was the content of the conversations, and that is why I cannot comment on what those conversations were with respect to other members. But, certainly, upholding the rule of law and respecting the independence of the various agencies, whether they be within Justice or whether they be in law enforcement or otherwise, are incredibly important to me.

Having said that, once again, Madam Chair, I will repeat one more time that the constitutional right to protest, even if the issue is unpopular, remains one of the most important things that I will do everything in my power to uphold.

The member asked a question about increases in gun violence. Certainly, that is a key problem that is plaguing the entire country. We established the Alberta chief firearms office in 2021 not only to process applications for gun licensing but also to provide a collective approach to public safety through initiatives, through educational programs, and by having an office here in Alberta that can address the needs of Albertans. In particular, we believe as a government that law-abiding gun owners should have all of the necessary resources that they need in order to acquire, purchase,

sell, and use firearms in this province. Firearms are a fundamental component of the culture of Alberta. Whether it be for hunting, whether it is for sport, whether it is for the use in Indigenous communities, it certainly is something that we think is incredibly important. Having a local chief firearms office to provide educational programs, to provide for licensing, to provide for the processing of applications is a very important and key component of improving gun safety in our province.

The ACFO is trained in investigations, also to inspect and license firearms businesses. They provide background checks on those applying for firearms. They travel to various businesses, including nightclubs and gun shops, to provide seminars and educational programming. They certainly see the delivery, I think, of the Canadian firearms safety course within our province. Now, it's important to note that 30,000 Albertans complete the course annually. In 2024 that number jumped to 36,000 people, signalling a 20 per cent increase in Albertans taking the first step needed towards safely acquiring a gun licence.

**9:30**

We are certainly challenged in some ways with firearms issues all across the board. I think that this is a problem that plagues many provinces, but that is solely and exclusively due to the soft-on-crime policies that the federal Liberals have brought forward. We have Bill C-75, which directs courts to take the least restrictive approaches, for example, in determining bail and release conditions. We have a number of decisions that have come from the Supreme Court interpreting these laws to mean that all people who are going through the criminal justice system should be assessed on the least intrusive methods before moving on to more restrictive methods when it comes to bail.

What that means is that all across Canada we've seen people struggle with bail reform. We have seen people call it soft-on-crime policies. That is the revolving-door policy that we read about in the news. It simply means that the courts have been directed by law to take the least intrusive, the least obstructive methods in considering release conditions. That is a real problem that plagues our entire country. That's a problem that we've been advocating against since the very beginning. We've been asking for stronger bail reform, stronger criminal sentencing, a stronger approach to crime all across, and I think that we are in good company all across the country with provinces asking for the same thing.

The hon. member spoke of legal aid, and I think that it is a mischaracterization, I would say, to suggest that legal aid funding has been reduced. What has actually happened is that through a legislative change the Alberta Law Foundation's statutory contribution to legal aid will increase by a proportionate number to the number that has been decreased from our financial statements with respect to legal aid. What that means is that the Alberta Law Foundation, which is an organization that receives revenue from the income derived from the trust accounts of lawyers all across our province, will now contribute 50 per cent of that income, that revenue, to Legal Aid Alberta. What that has translated to is an increase that corresponds with the decrease represented in our budget. Legal Aid Alberta will absolutely receive the same funding it has always received, and it will be well supported by this government to make sure that access to justice is upheld.

There are no cuts to legal aid, to the hon. member through you, Madam Chair, but what I will say is that our financial eligibility guidelines increased last year, which means that more Albertans will receive or can be eligible for legal aid, and I think that's important to note because that is underscoring our commitment to access to justice. It means that more Albertans will qualify for legal aid. We also increased the tariff amount, which is the amount that



is paid to legal aid lawyers, roster lawyers who take on legal aid files. What that has translated to is a greater interest from lawyers all across our province willing to provide their legal expertise in the areas that legal aid covers. That's important.

When it comes to the hon. member who spoke of statistics relating to the office of the Chief Medical Examiner, as of 2024 2,595 cases are under investigation; 504 of those are more than nine months old while the rest are less than nine months old. What that means is that the office of the Chief Medical Examiner continues to investigate and assess these cases in order to determine the cause of death and provide additional information.

The member asked about maintenance enforcement. In that regard, we have 44,600 cases or caseload referring to the maintenance enforcement program. We also have a commitment of \$18.8 million in Budget 2025 and 200 FTEs committed to the delivery of this important program for Albertans.

The member asked a little bit about precharge assessment, and I'm incredibly proud of that program. It is a program that allows for our Crown prosecutors to provide support services and assess the viability of cases that are contemplated for charges. It has resulted in a significant number of cases that are either moved forward with much stronger evidence and better evidence or cases that are referred back to police officers, seeking additional information, for example, or asking them to shore up their claims.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

Over to the Official Opposition to continue with their questions.

**Mr. Sabir:** Thank you, Madam Chair. Just a few follow-up questions. The minister alleged that I mischaracterized the cut to legal aid funding. I was referring to page 156, line 5.4, support for legal aid: '24-25, it was \$110 million; 2024-25 forecast is \$110 million; and this year's estimate is \$88,100,000. I don't think I was mischaracterizing it. It's a cut in the government's share to legal aid. The minister may have an explanation, but it was completely not true that I was mischaracterizing the legal aid numbers.

Well, we can talk more about legal aid and how this cut will be backfilled. I think that historically the Alberta Law Foundation's contribution from 1991, when they first started, to 2022 averaged less than \$4.2 million per year. Even at a 50 per cent contribution rate this would amount to less than \$10 million and significantly less than the \$78 million it would have been at the end of 2023-2024. The question I have is: what's the government plan to maintain the stability for legal aid funding when at a 50 per cent contribution rate the variance in funding from Alberta Law Foundation could exceed considerably? The Alberta Law Foundation gets its funds on whatever interest is generated on lawyers' trust accounts, so it fluctuates with interest. It is understood that an increased contribution from the Law Foundation will also decrease the amount of funding available to the rest of the access-to-justice sector by up to one-third.

While legal aid is a critical resource for our most vulnerable population, the vast majority of Albertans do not qualify for legal aid under the current financial eligibility guidelines even after the government changed those guidelines. Instead, many who require these critical legal services and support: they rely on over 65 community-based organizations and initiatives that the Alberta Law Foundation funds. So the question, through you, Madam Chair, is: how does the government justify taking money from nonprofit organizations and the critical services they provide to vulnerable and underserved populations to cover for its cut to legal aid as estimated in line 5.4 of this year's budget?

A related question, through you, Madam Chair: is the government committed to funding the nonprofit organizations and

programs whose stability and sustainability will be compromised as a result of this reckless cut to legal aid? How does the government plan to mitigate the negative impact on over 65 community-based organizations and initiatives that rely on funding from the Alberta Law Foundation, especially considering the critical services they provide to vulnerable populations? Another question, through you, Madam Chair: can the government provide specific examples of how it will support these nonprofit organizations to ensure they can continue to operate effectively despite the reduced funding because government is taking more from the Alberta Law Foundation forcibly through legislation?

Another question. When the Law Foundation was established, *Hansard* makes it clear that the interest earned on clients' money held in lawyer trust accounts should not go to the general revenue of the province nor be used for legal aid. The government's proposed changes would see these monies being used for both, as is made clear in budget line 5.4, that cuts legal aid to the tune of \$22 million and that is replaced with increased contribution from the Law Foundation. How does this government justify completely ignoring the legislative intent and purpose of Alberta Law Foundation and its funds? Another question, through you, Madam Chair: what legal or ethical consideration has the government taken into account when proposing to divert these funds from their intended purpose?

9:40

To propose a requirement for ministerial approval of all Alberta Law Foundation grants and funding commitments over \$250,000 is also something that is in one of the bills before the Legislature and the minister talked about. It threatens the independence of Alberta Law Foundation and risks politicizing legal services and support to our most vulnerable population. What is the government rationale behind this change? Does this government not value upholding the independence of the Law Foundation from the government? Through you, Madam Chair: why does the government think that they are in a better position to approve those grants than Alberta Law Foundation? Government also lauds its commitment to red tape reduction. It's difficult to perceive any other change than this proposed change that you can count as red tape. How do these proposed changes not result in duplicate process and unnecessary rules that cost Albertans valuable time, money, and resources?

Through you, Madam Chair, the Alberta Law Foundation has existed for over 50 years as the primary funder of access-to-justice initiatives in this province, supporting critical legal services and support that do not draw from and, in fact, save taxpayer dollars. What is this government trying to accomplish by preventing Alberta Law Foundation from doing their job? Through you, Madam Chair, no other law foundation in Canada or across North America is subject to this level of government control. Why does this government believe that Alberta should be any different? What is the reason for implementing more government control on funding decisions of a third party, of an arm's-length, independent organization, namely Alberta Law Foundation?

How does the government justify the need for ministerial approval of all Law Foundation grants and funding commitments over \$250,000 given the potential for politicizing critical legal services? Through you, Madam Chair, a question I have is: what measures will the government implement to ensure that the independence of Alberta Law Foundation is not compromised by these changes?

In recent media reports the minister's press staff has been quoted as saying, and I quote: with Alberta Law Foundation's significant cash reserves and proper management of these resources, there is minimal risk of losing funding for initiatives they support. This

seems to run counter to the foundation's remarks as the \$250,000 cap prevents the foundation from funding major projects like the \$26.8 million University of Calgary family justice project. Does government have any plan to provide capital funding to organizations in the absence of the foundation, or do these changes effectively act as a cut to the justice initiative beyond legal aid?

One last question. Page 82 of fiscal plan says that government is collaborating with the Law Foundation to increase its contribution to legal aid. Through you, Madam Chair – news flash – Alberta Law Foundation is running a full-fledged campaign against this government decision to take their money, to increase their contribution to 50 per cent. What has the minister to say about that?

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Member.

To the minister for his response.

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'm just going to address a few of the comments made in the previous section very quickly in order to address the Jordan application issue. Twenty-seven Jordan applications were filed in Alberta in '23-24. Of those, two were granted by the court. This is a remarkable decrease, I would say, in respect of the Jordan applications that were granted by the court from, for example, when the NDP led the province, in which case we had double-digit Jordan applications that were granted by the court. I think that we're moving towards the right direction, and I think that is appropriate.

When it comes to the question that the hon. member asked about viable cases and how we assess those, again, prosecutorial independence is tantamount, but the most important thing to keep in mind is that prosecutors assess cases on a standard of reasonable likelihood of conviction. An individual prosecutor will independently assess the merits of a case and the evidence to determine if there is a reasonable likelihood of conviction and that it serves the public interest. I think those are the two components that a prosecutor contemplates with respect to deciding whether or not a case is viable. I think that's important. It's important to maintain public confidence in our criminal justice system. It's also important to respect the individuals who are going through the criminal justice system as well.

The member asked about lead times to trial. We do have a 24-week lead time to trial. We know that Jordan issues are always front of mind and top of mind for prosecutors, and that's why they have methodology in place to track those and ensure that Jordan issues do not arise.

We'll talk a little bit now about Legal Aid. Once again, I do want to correct the record. Legal Aid will receive no decrease in funding this year. They will receive \$110 million, \$88 million of that from our budget, \$22 million from the Alberta Law Foundation's increased statutory contributions. I do want to point out that it's important for members of this committee and all those watching that Legal Aid currently holds, or at least did as of last fiscal year, \$70 million in deferred revenue. We think that the financial status of Legal Aid, the financial situation of Legal Aid is quite strong. They have improved their delivery of services in many different ways. They are providing for additional scope of services. They are certainly able to support the roster lawyers in ways that have never been seen before. The increase in the tariff that is paid to roster lawyers increased substantially in recent years, and I think that has done a tremendous job of attracting people, lawyers who are willing to become roster lawyers and work and provide the important legal services that Albertans need.

In addition to the increase in tariffs, we've also increased the financial eligibility guidelines so that more Albertans can qualify for legal aid. What that means is that the minimum eligibility

thresholds have increased in order that more Albertans now qualify, which means greater access to justice, which means a better program for all Albertans. I'm tremendously proud of that, Madam Chair, and I think that Legal Aid is delivering very important work in this province and they are well supported for many years to come in the ways that we have structured our relationship.

The member spoke about the Alberta Law Foundation, and I'll take some time to speak a little bit about that. As the member identified, the Alberta Law Foundation receives revenue that is derived from the interest that is made from the trust accounts of lawyers all across Alberta. Lawyers do not keep the interest derived from their trust accounts but, rather, give it to the Alberta Law Foundation, which then in turn supports a multitude of important programs, not-for-profits, organizations all across this province.

When we started looking at the Alberta Law Foundation's commitments over the past decade or so, we learned that there are important not-for-profits and agencies that have operated in our province for many, many years, including agencies like Calgary Legal Guidance or Student Legal Assistance or other sort of pioneering organizations in Alberta. These organizations in total received from the Alberta Law Foundation about \$20 million in grants last year. That's an important figure to keep in mind both for the hon. member, Madam Chair, and for all members of the committee and those watching. In previous years that number has been relatively consistent, meaning that the Alberta Law Foundation has provided about \$20 million in grants each year for about the past 10 years. Sometimes it goes up by a little bit, and sometimes it goes down by a little bit, but that's the consistent figure.

**9:50**

In 2024 the Alberta Law Foundation collected \$164 million in revenues and currently, or at least as of March of 2024, sits on \$226 million in reserves. So when I said publicly that the reserves of the Alberta Law Foundation, in my view, will allow for these programs, the programs that the Alberta Law Foundation supports, to be maintained for a long time, I'm still confident of that statement. When the Alberta Law Foundation has \$226 million in reserves and a commitment of about \$20 million a year, we know that sort of the financial health of that organization is very, very strong. That's a great thing.

We look at legal aid. When I think about legal aid, I think about my mandate, and my mandate says that the objective of Alberta Justice is to make sure that we improve and increase access to justice for Albertans in every way possible. When I think about the work that Legal Aid does and the important role that it plays, I think that there is nothing better for us to focus on and support than providing real access, tangible access to justice directly in relation to legal matters before the courts by making sure that our legal aid program is well funded and well supported.

Similarly, when we talk about the Alberta Law Foundation, we know that the agencies and organizations and not-for-profits all across this province are going to be well funded. We know that the commitment year after year pales in comparison to both their annual revenues and to the reserve funds that they're currently sitting on. In my view, it would be appropriate to say that there is no negative impact on Legal Aid – they will continue to receive the money that has been allocated year after year – and there is no negative impact on the important organizations that are receiving the money from the Alberta Law Foundation.

The other thing that we took a look at when we were deciding on whether or not we needed to adjust the statutory contribution was: what are other jurisdictions doing? We know from our jurisdictional scan that a 50 per cent Alberta Law Foundation contribution, or the

equivalent in other provinces, is consistent with what some of the other provinces are doing. We know that the statutory contributions that are being paid in other provinces for the law foundations there are consistent with the legislation that is before the Assembly today, and we think, through the modelling that we've done, that it is a sustainable approach.

The member asked about my position with respect to approval by government of the programs that Alberta Law Foundation funds. I will say this. Accountability, respecting public funds, transparency, and making sure that we continue to be prudent stewards of public funds are important components of this Conservative government, and making sure that we uphold our commitment to Albertans, to make sure that fiscal prudence is something that we uphold, is something that is very important. The independence of the Alberta Law Foundation remains in that they operate as an independent board that makes decisions about the individual granting program that they provide. The one thing I will note for the member very quickly is that Manitoba, Ontario, Newfoundland, and, if passed, Alberta have a 50 per cent or more contribution for their law foundations' commitment to legal aid.

**The Chair:** Minister, before we go to the Official Opposition for the rest of their questions, I wanted to check in with you to see how your voice is, if you'd prefer to have a break sooner than later.

**Mr. Amery:** I'm quite okay. Thank you.

**The Chair:** You're good? Okay. Perfect.

All right. Perhaps what we'll do, then, if everybody agrees, is just have our break at 10:30. That's kind of halfway through. Okay.

Please proceed, Member.

**Mr. Sabir:** Thank you, Madam Chair. Fiscal prudence, accountability, transparency: some interesting choices of words. I think whatever reserves the Alberta Law Foundation has do not belong to government. An independent organization, how they spend their money, revenues: again, the government has no business in that. The question I would ask through you, Madam Chair, is: Minister, have you met with Alberta Law Foundation? What feedback have they provided you in this regard? As is obvious from the Alberta Law Foundation's public campaign, they are against this decision. They are opposed to government robbing their reserves.

Moving on to Jordan applications. The minister provided some data that two applications were granted but also mentioned that the Alberta Crown prosecution service tracked these numbers. Back in the day we used to have numbers where government will share, courts will share how many cases are actually past that 18-month or 30-month threshold. If the minister could share those numbers so we can see the extent of the problem, not just the applications that are before the court but actual cases that are past the 18-month or 30-month threshold. As you stated, we do know that the Alberta Crown prosecution service tracks that number, and it used to be publicly available before the UCP decided to become more transparent and take it away.

Another question with respect to performance measure 2(a). It relates to the vacancies that are there when it comes to judges at all three different levels of the court. The question through you, Madam Chair, is: what is the government doing to fill those vacancies?

The third question in this regard is: when was the last time the Alberta government made a request to the federal government for more judges in superior courts? Another related question is: how many candidates have met the screening or eligibility to be appointed and are waiting for the appointment if that number is

available? With respect to the justice system, how many full-time employees are there in the justice system? What's the vacancy rate for that?

Page 113 says exactly the same as what it said last year. "Support for Indigenous people who are in contact with the justice system will continue with efforts by the ministry to provide culturally relevant programming and initiatives." Indigenous people continue to remain overrepresented in our justice system. Through you, Madam Chair, Minister, do you have the exact percentage of that representation or overrepresentation, and what specific steps does this budget allow you to take to address this overrepresentation of Indigenous Albertans?

Another thing mentioned in the documents was Gladue reports, Madam Chair. The question with respect to that is: beyond Gladue reports are there any specific targets for reducing these numbers over the coming years?

**10:00**

The business plan mentions supporting Indigenous people in contact with the justice system, yet there are no specific performance metrics tracking outcomes for Indigenous Albertans. What specific target has this ministry set to reduce the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in our justice system? I think, through you, Madam Chair, this remains historically an issue, so the question I have is: why not open more courtrooms like Indigenous courtroom in Calgary in all major cities and hire more Indigenous judges? Does this budget support any of those initiatives?

Page 115, outcome 1: "Albertans' rights and interests are protected." It talks about challenges to federal legislation and policies. How many challenges has this government made so far? And another question is: how much of taxpayer money is set aside for these challenges in this budget, and how much of the funds have been used so far? The minister mentioned with respect to civil law section that they prefer not to contract out. There is an increase of \$5.7 million this year. But is there any contracting out of these challenges?

[Ms Hoffman in the chair]

On page 118 transfer from government is estimated to be \$28.38 million. Can the minister provide the exact breakdown of the transfer, what's included in it? In particular, what is included for legal aid funding?

Same page. Other premiums, fees, and licences: that's going up from \$27 million last year to \$32 million. What new fees and premiums are added in this budget? Expense side legal services is going up \$5.7 million. Again, can you provide a breakdown on how this will be used? Human rights education and multiculturalism fund going up from \$380,000. What specific program will this fund support?

A couple of follow-up questions from my very first question. Minister, you said that I didn't provide the detail of conversation that I referred to with respect to the minister's calls to the police chief. The question, again, was about the rule of law and the ministry's key objective 1.1. The details are that three ministers, including yourself and the Premier's chief of staff, called Calgary police. I guess, let me ask this question: is it true that your other minister called? What it says about the rule of law – wouldn't you agree that such conduct by ministers and Premier's chief of staff is a violation of the rule of law? As you stated, you want independent processes to take place independent of government interference. If this is not government interference, what constitutes government interference?

The next set of questions is about the government of Alberta's strategic plan objective 4, assisting Indigenous people within the justice system. Again, it stated that the government is facilitating preparation of Gladue reports. So my question is about the time a Gladue report takes. Correct me if I am wrong. I did ask some organizations and practising lawyers. I am informed that for inmates in custody it can take up to six to eight weeks, and for out-of-custody inmates it could take a few months. Tell us how this budget ensures that these reports are made available in a more timely fashion to help Indigenous people go through the justice system more fairly and in a timely fashion. These are my questions.

**The Acting Deputy Chair:** Back to the minister for the final response in this first 60-minute block.

**Mr. Amery:** Well, thank you very much, Madam Chair. We'll start again with the questions about the Alberta Law Foundation. The hon. member referred to the Alberta Law Foundation reserves as their reserves. I disagree with that. The Alberta Law Foundation reserves and revenues do not belong to government, do not belong to the Alberta Law Foundation; they belong to the people of Alberta. Through organizations like Calgary Legal Guidance, Student Legal Assistance, the Alberta law libraries, Calgary youth and justice strategy, and many other programs, the funding that flows from the Alberta Law Foundation supports and will continue to support many important organizations all across this province. I think that, through our conversation in the previous section, there was an assessment of the financial health of Alberta Law Foundation, and I think that they are doing well.

The member asked if I had met with the Alberta Law Foundation. I have indeed met with the Alberta Law Foundation. My office has been in regular contact with the Alberta Law Foundation, and we think that there is a path to good collaboration in making sure that the program, the mandate of the Alberta Law Foundation, continues to deliver on the important things that Albertans need.

The member asked about Jordan thresholds. I think that I will talk a little bit about that once again. The question was how many cases had exceeded the Jordan timelines. I can report that, out of 34,232 cases in the provincial court or the Alberta Court of Justice, 701 exceed the 18-month threshold, and out of 1,456 in the Court of King's Bench, 271 exceed that 30-month period.

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

However, it is important to also note that those numbers do not tell the full story, because there are many reasons why a case might exceed the 18- and 30-month thresholds. Delays that are not attributed to the Crown are often the case, and so we do not have particular concerns as to whether these numbers are exceeding the timelines that are described in Jordan. There are a number of different reasons why a case might exceed 18 months or 30 months. The hon. member will know that there are reasons that are often attributed to an accused, for example, as to why that might be the case. While I can appreciate that the member wants to know about how many cases exceed 18 and 30 months, without the context of knowing the particulars, those numbers do not tell us very much. It's important to note that each individual case has different factors, different reasons, a multitude of facts and details that might influence that.

The member asked about judicial vacancies. I'm happy to report that we have very good news to report to this committee. Out of the 82 positions in the Court of King's Bench, we currently have 82 justices. I think that's remarkable, given that when I was appointed to this role, we were sitting at vacancies in the double digits. We have been working very hard with our federal counterparts and the

Ministry of Justice in the federal government to encourage and urge them to continue to appoint justices to our Court of King's Bench. We currently have a full complement of judges, which I think is probably the first time in recent memory that we've been able to do that.

**10:10**

The member asked about when was the last time I had advocated for additional judges. Ever since I was honoured enough to assume this role. I have been in regular contact with our Minister of Justice in Ottawa to advocate for this. In October of last year we went to an FPT meeting, which the member will know is a federal-provincial-territorial meeting, of Justice ministers and public safety ministers across this country, and we advocated there in person. We've advocated by telephone. We've advocated by letter. I think the results are very obvious, that we are in really good shape right now. I'm proud of that.

There was a conversation that the member asked about the work that we are doing to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in our criminal justice system. I do want to say that, certainly, the ministry recognizes the importance of addressing Indigenous overrepresentation in our justice system. We have done so through a number of co-ordinated and collaborative efforts, both with Indigenous partners, government partners, and the court itself. The court has and continues to develop an Indigenous justice strategy. The government of Alberta and Alberta Justice certainly have an Indigenous justice strategy, and all across the various ministries we also have a strategy of collaboration to make sure that the work that we do, one, doesn't necessarily overlap or duplicate services but that we have sort of a continuum of services that flows through all of the government ministries that we currently have, the court, Indigenous communities and leaders, and so on.

We have a number of programs that support Indigenous people in their justice system interactions, and we do that by supporting culturally appropriate programs, including the Indigenous court workers program, the Gladue report program, and, of course, again, the Indigenous justice program. We have Indigenous courts in Calgary and Edmonton and a healing to wellness court in St. Paul. I was proud to attend the reopening of the on-reserve court located on the Siksika nation recently as well, and I know that that is an Indigenous-led courtroom that is doing remarkable things in various ways, a number of different ways. I think that we have a remarkable approach to working with Indigenous communities. We support and continue to support our restorative justice models, we're promoting community involvement in the court processes, and, of course, once again, we have specialized Indigenous courts in the Alexis Nakota, Siksika, and Tsuut'ina nations.

With respect to our constitutional challenges and the legal services division, I certainly can report on some of that for the hon. member as well. The legal services division supports a number of mandate items both within the Ministry of Justice but also in other ministries in helping them achieve their objectives as well. LSD is currently engaged in the work that Alberta Justice has been tasked with respect to medical assistance in dying; the Election Act; the Public Health Emergencies Governance Review Panel; constitutional challenges, including the plastics ban, or toxic substances, that we all know, the Impact Assessment Act, challenges to the consumer carbon tax; and working collaboratively with the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction and other ministries to develop and support the compassionate intervention legislation. All constitutional challenges but for two are internal.

**The Chair:** All right. Thank you so much, Minister. That now concludes the 60-minute segment.

We'll now move to 20 minutes for the government caucus members and the minister. Do you prefer blocked or shared time with the minister?

**Mr. Amery:** I'm happy to keep it consistent.

**The Chair:** All right.

**Mrs. Petrovic:** Thank you, Madam Chair and through you to the minister. I appreciate you guys being here today and the hard work that you've put into Budget 2025. I appreciate you and your staff being here today.

I know that we are a little bit short on time, so I just want to jump right into it. My first question is about federal overreach, which I think is quite good today considering that the new Prime Minister is currently in the city. Perhaps he would like to join us to talk about some of that federal overreach and learn a thing or two, but I doubt that that's going to happen, so we'll just talk specifically about this budget.

On page 115 of the Justice ministry's business plan outcome 1 talks about standing up for Albertans and making our province's voices heard in Ottawa. Perhaps when some of the members opposite jump ship to join the federal Liberals – looking forward to that announcement – they'll help Carney understand that the policies and regulations from the federal government significantly impact Alberta's resource development and utilization, but I doubt it. It remains crucial that Alberta's government continues to advocate for policies that represent the interests of Albertans and stand up against the overreach from the federal government.

From the federal plastics ban to the destructive Bill C-69 legislation we've seen Alberta's government taking steps to address the issues while also standing up to the federal overreach. The federal court has sided with the stance taken by Alberta's government, and while Ottawa has dictated a net-zero power grid by 2030, Alberta has taken a more responsible and realistic plan to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. I'm not going to assume but I would hope that the minister would agree that what we need from the federal government is to come to the table in good faith and work with Alberta to align our mutual efforts, whether on emission reductions, developing our electricity grid and world-class energy sector, or in reducing plastic waste and keeping it out of landfills. With that being said, my first question would be: would the minister please elaborate on how Budget 2025 is protecting Alberta from federal overreach?

Moving on. Coming from Livingstone-Macleod, we are a farming, ranching, and hunting area, and I know that a majority of my constituents are law-abiding firearms holders. I know that my husband and my daughter absolutely love to go out and responsibly use firearms. It's part of our way of life down south and amongst many parts of our province. I just want to talk about key objective 1.2 on page 115 of the business plan. It instructs the minister to stand up for Albertans by taking steps to protect their interests and ensure that Alberta's constitutional jurisdiction is not infringed upon, including advocating for federal legislation that supports law-abiding firearm owners and advancing legal challenges to federal legislation and decisions that infringe upon Alberta's constitutional jurisdiction.

Alberta publicly opposed federal Bill C-21 and its sweeping changes since it was first introduced. I know that the Alberta chief of firearms continues to stand up for Alberta's law-abiding hunters, sport shooters, and firearm business owners and that it's a priority for this government to continue advocating for Alberta's law-abiding firearms communities and business. Law-abiding firearms owners and businesses should not be punished for the actions of criminals. It's my hope and expectation that Alberta will continue

to seek to protect these stakeholders from all federal overreach and decision-making that is not based on evidence.

I know that lawful gun owners, who are my constituents, often say that they feel like they're being unnecessarily targeted, and I would agree with them. Thankfully, the Alberta Bill of Rights adds new rights for Albertans, including a reinforced commitment to standing up for lawful firearms owners here in Alberta and affirming government's intent that provincial laws should not interfere with the right to own legally acquired firearms. Through you, Madam Chair, can the minister explain to this committee how Alberta's government is standing up for Alberta's lawful firearms community while ensuring there's no risk to public safety in 2025-2026? Two, through you, Chair: per initiative highlighted on page 115 of the business plan I see an investment of \$8.6 million to support the Alberta chief firearms office. How will this support aid Alberta's chief firearms office in delivering on its mandated items, including for engagement and advocacy and research in 2025-2026?

With that, Madam Chair, I'd like to cede my time over to Member McDougall.

**10:20**

**Mr. McDougall:** Thank you. Also, just to comment, you know, thank you very much for the minister to come here and provide information.

Through the chair to the minister, I want to talk a little bit about digital services investments. Albertans, as we can all agree, deserve a fair and accessible justice system, and investing in digital services is crucial to making sure that all Albertans can have access to the legal services that they need. Key objective 2.2 on page 116 of the business plan deals with the advancement of digital transformation and streamlining processes to improve access to justice, with a renewed focus on delivering the most effective and efficient way for Albertans to access court services. We know that digital options play a crucial role in making the justice system more accessible for individuals who live in rural communities and for vulnerable people who are testifying in court.

Digital options also significantly enhance the efficiency of court services by reducing paperwork and streamlining processes like through electronic forms and minimizing the need for physical documents, reducing administrative burdens and likely lowering the cost for both courts and litigants. Of course, this has a very direct implication, potentially, for red tape reduction. You know, there's lots of opportunity there. I think a lot has been done, but there's certainly a lot more that can be done. Automated scheduling and case-tracking systems also help manage workloads more effectively, ensuring that cases progress smoothly through the system. These digital advancements ultimately can help courts operate more efficiently and provide faster resolution to legal matters.

Even extending this a little bit, the issue of AI, you know: there's a lot of talk. It's actually one of the main areas in terms of the implications in the future for the law profession, generally. I would say for the legal system: what can AI be doing to the processes, procedures that exist within the whole legal structure and this system? It could be, certainly many people believe, major fundamental changes. In terms of the question – and I don't know if the minister would want to talk about what the implications are in AI – but to start off: can the minister please elaborate on what will be achieved with the justice digital project through Budget 2025?

On page 116 of the business plan under outcome 2 it highlights the work the ministry is doing to increase the availability of online services, and key objective 2.2 speaks to the advancement of digital

transformation to improve Albertans' access to justice. Can the minister inform this committee more specifically which initiatives fall under this objective?

Then moving on to page 150 of the fiscal plan, I see under schedule 13 an \$18 million investment for Justice. Can the minister tell this committee specifically: what falls under these initiatives and if these relate to justice digital and justice transformation initiatives?

I have a minute left here on this block, so I'll just commend the minister for the important work that's being done to advance justice technology policies across Alberta's courtrooms. I'd like to highlight another key aspect of the justice digital—outlined on page 116 of the business plan under the initiatives supporting key objective section, it includes a \$12 million investment to enhance online services, digital platforms, and videoconferencing. A strong digital platform is crucial for ensuring access to justice, particularly for individuals in remote areas, those with disabilities, or those facing financial barriers. This investment is great news for my constituents, who will benefit from the flexibility that remote hearings can provide, but obviously even more so for people in rural Alberta, I would think. Again, it's not just about rural Alberta; it's about convenience for everyone. Beyond convenience . . .

**The Chair:** Thank you, Member. That's your time.

May I just pause and compliment the clerk on the new time settings. He's added in the Speaker time. I just think that it's so much easier to follow. So thank you. Well done.

Minister, to you.

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to both of the hon. members for their questions. I'll begin by talking a little bit about our position as it relates to federal overreach, what the government of Alberta is doing, and speak a little bit about where we're at there because I think that's important. Budget 2025 includes an increase to the legal services division of \$5.7 million. The intention is to provide a budget increase so that we can provide additional supports to the work that legal services is doing on behalf of Albertans. We know that there have been a number of constitutional challenges, a number of important legal challenges that we have been dealing with over the past few years. But we've had tremendous successes as well.

I think it is important to take this opportunity to highlight the incredible work that legal services has been doing not only for the Ministry of Justice but for all ministries and all Albertans. The legal services division supports the government's commitment to of course stand up for Albertans by protecting their constitutional jurisdiction.

We know that there are a number of legal and constitutional challenges that are happening, where we are challenging federal intrusion into provincial jurisdiction. Some of those we've talked about, like the, you know, plastics ban or the toxic substances ban. We've had recent challenges to the Emergencies Act, which we were successful in as well. Certainly, we have ongoing challenges in relation to the firearms ban, which will sort of take us into your next question.

We've got the Impact Assessment Act, that we have been dealing with. I think that it's important to talk just a moment about that. I just want to highlight for all members of the committee how important some of this work is. The Supreme Court of Canada held recently that the components, as they relate to our challenge in relation to the Impact Assessment Act, were deemed to be largely unconstitutional. I read a statistic just yesterday that the impact of the cancelled contracts that we're able to quantify has reached \$176 billion. That is \$176 billion in lost contracts, in lost jobs, in lost

opportunities, and in lost investment, and that is, in our view, not only harmful to Alberta but also to the entire country.

So when we come forward with these challenges, we think it's important to take a position, defend that position, and do it for the benefit of not only Alberta but the rest of Canada as well. These are countless companies, countless opportunities that have been lost because of the federal government's decision to create obstacles and barriers, which make it impossible for investment in this country to flourish. What actually happens is that they simply go south of the border or otherwise. We want to attract them here, preferably to Alberta, but anywhere in Canada would be just fine. Things like the Impact Assessment Act do all Canadians an injustice, in my view. That is why I'll continue to support the work that legal services does for us as a ministry and does for the government of Alberta and all Albertans fully.

I want to talk a little bit about your comments with respect to our chief firearms office. As I mentioned earlier, the Alberta chief firearms office was opened in September 2021, not only to process the PAL and RPAL applications that we are receiving or help do that but also to provide public awareness, public education, and public safety. We're incredibly lucky and fortunate to have our Chief Firearms Officer, Dr. Teri Bryant, who is a well-respected expert all across Canada, leading this office. I know that the ACFO continues to process applications. It has been working on comprehensive reviews of the proposed firearms confiscation program, and we know that we're in good hands when it comes to making sure that Albertans are well represented because we have both Dr. Teri Bryant and the Alberta chief firearms office doing wonderful work in that regard.

**10:30**

I want to talk a little bit about Bill C-21, which you had referenced in your comments, and that is in relation to the bill that creates significant impediments to lawful, law-abiding gun owners. The important thing to note here is that Alberta has and will continue to take the position that we wholly oppose Bill C-21 and its sweeping changes, which I think are misguided, and we've done so since 2021, when it was first introduced. We are always weighing our best options and looking at the positions that we need to take to help make sure that we stand up for all of Alberta's law-abiding hunters, sport shooters, and firearms business owners. I want all members of the committee to know that Alberta Justice will be doing everything it can to challenge that.

I also want to talk a little bit about why I think it's misguided. I think that's important. We know that law-abiding gun owners are not the ones committing the serious and violent crimes. Law-abiding gun owners who take the steps to obtain a licence are not the ones committing the crimes. Similarly, the ones committing the crimes are not the ones that are taking the time to go and get their licences. We think that it is misguided and it targets the wrong people, and we'll continue to advocate for that as much as possible and as far as we can.

I want to address, Madam Chair, the comments of MLA McDougall as well. I know that the questions focused a lot around our justice digital program, which is one of the most comprehensive and technologically advanced moves forward of our court system in history. The intention here on a high level is really to make sure that Albertans can access their courts in many different ways, including electronically or virtually.

We've made some remarkable steps forward when it comes to doing that and implementing that. We've got the ability now for Albertans to submit their filings online. We have the ability for Albertans to manage their traffic tickets virtually. We have the ability for them to make adjournment requests or appear in dockets,

again, online. What this really has done and what it's achieved is that we've been able to cut the time that Albertans need to take out of their busy lives to come to court and deal with things like traffic tickets or other important matters.

We have a digital surrogate system that I think is the envy of the country. It is working remarkably well to allow people to deal with their loved ones' estates virtually as well or electronically. We know that this is just getting started. We've got so much more to do and so much more to go. We've also been able to create an environment where most of our courtrooms have the ability for Albertans to log in online or virtually and conduct their business from their cellphone or computer from home. I think that is an important component and one more piece of the puzzle when it comes to highlighting my mandate letter, which is really to improve access to justice.

I want to talk very briefly in the time I have left about the member's comments with respect to artificial intelligence. We know that there are implications that we will deal with today and that we're going to deal with in the future. Some of those are good, and some of those are not so good. I want to talk about where Alberta Justice is turning its mind to right now. We know that the development and the continued improvement of things like deepfakes is something that we're going to have to tackle in the very near future. These are computer-generated images, artificial AI-generated images or videos that appear to be real. We know that in many instances they can be used for positive purposes, but in other instances there could be nefarious or negative uses of these. Alberta Justice is turning its mind to AI both in how we can implement it within our courts to improve and streamline processes but also in ways to try and protect Albertans from some of the potentially negative consequences of the development of AI. We'll continue to develop that with our Minister of Technology and Innovation, and we look forward to bringing . . .

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

We'll take our five-minute break now.

[The committee adjourned from 10:35 a.m. to 10:41 a.m.]

**The Chair:** Hello, everybody. We're back.

That concludes the government members' first block for questions. Now we move to the second round of questions and responses. The speaking rotation going forward will be the same as in the first round, starting with the Official Opposition, followed by an independent member, then members of the government caucus; however, the speaking times are now reduced to five minutes for the duration of the meeting. We'll begin the rotation with a member of the Official Opposition, who'll have up to five minutes for questions and comments, followed by response from the minister, who may speak for up to five minutes.

After both individuals have had the opportunity to speak once, we'll then move on to the next caucus in rotation. If the member and the minister agree to share time, we'll proceed with a 10-minute segment during which neither the member nor the minister may speak for more than five minutes at a time. Members are reminded that they may not cede their time. I'll just review that quickly here. Members are reminded that they may not cede any of their unused portion of their five minutes to another member.

Member and Minister, do you wish to share or combine your time?

**Mr. Sabir:** Shared.

**The Chair:** Sorry. Blocked or shared?

**Mr. Amery:** It is my preference to remain consistent with what we're doing.

**The Chair:** Block? Okay. Very good.  
Please proceed.

**Mr. Sabir:** Thank you. The 2025-28 government of Alberta strategic plan, page 23, talks about investing \$3.2 million in the family justice strategy, family justice hub, and also talks about the parenting intervention programs. The question I have is: how many individuals have accessed the family resolution hub since its launch, and how many individuals will be supported through this budget? How are mediators being hired, and how many mediations have been conducted? Will this budget help hire more mediators and support more mediation?

Next question is about: what are the parenting intervention programs? Where have they been implemented? How many parents have accessed or will be able to access this program through Budget 2025-26? What percentage of family law matters are currently being diverted from the court through this program, and what target has been set for the upcoming fiscal year?

I will move to Justice estimates now. It talks about capital investments of \$17.5 million. Through you, Madam Chair, earlier this month at a government press conference the Minister of Justice was present and the Premier said that she was directing her government agencies, school boards, Crown corporations, everyone to purchase their goods and services from Alberta companies, Canadian companies, and countries where free trade is being respected and honoured.

I have reviewed the sole-source contracts with the Department of Justice on the government disclosure website. There are three American companies who have sole-source contracts for the services in this budget and beyond: Precisely software incorporated, Massachusetts, United States, contract ends in 2029, over \$170,000; Infax, Georgia, ends in 2029, three different contracts of over \$320,000; Freshworks Inc., California, ends fall 2027. That's over \$110,000.

So the question I have is: the minister was standing with the Premier when she made that announcement, so what has been done to ensure that the Premier's direction, government direction is followed to procure from Canadian companies? Will the minister commit to cancel all these sole-source contracts with companies outside of Canada, in particular in the United States, or was this announcement just performative? That's the question with respect to the procurement.

Then on page 156 of Justice estimates, line 1.1, the minister's office budget is going up again this year slightly, but it's still an increase. What will it be used for? How many full-time employees are there? The same thing with the deputy minister's office; it's going up again. It's more than minister's budget. What will this increase will be used for? There was an increase in last year's budget, too. How many employees are there in the deputy minister's office?

Legal services budget is going up significantly, almost a \$3 million increase. There was an increase last year, too. Can you please provide the detailed breakdown of this line item?

Court and justice services. That also includes dispute resolution, information, and education services. The budget is going up from \$54 million to \$59 million. What exactly will this budget be used for? What portion of this budget will go to dispute resolution, information, and education services?

In line 2.2 there is also a change, an increase from \$147 million to \$153 million. What's the reason for this increase, and what's included in it now?

I do have a question about maintenance, enforcement, and child support caseloads, which you've already touched on, but I can ask them in the next block.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Member.

Over to the minister now.

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you again to the hon. member for the questions. The family justice strategy is something that we launched in December of 2023 in order to provide support services to families going through separation and divorce matters. The idea was that when families are dealing with these stressful events in their lives, there would be services available to allow for families to seek alternatives to court, more informal processes. Having the ability to go into sort of the wraparound or support services that we've been able to make available to Albertans all across this province was very important to me. I think that if we can settle some of these issues without having Albertans go to court, families are better served in that regard.

The question about the \$3.2 million increase: we made that increase in order to support delivery of that service to a number of different locations. For the member's benefit the \$3.2 million increase will mean \$11.2 million for the family justice strategy to Grande Prairie as well as some of the areas we talked about earlier – Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer – and five court-based locations in and around Edmonton: Stony Plain, St. Albert, Sherwood Park, Leduc, and Fort Saskatchewan.

We know that investing in the family justice strategy will make it easier for families who are navigating through this challenging program. We also know that it will make things a lot less difficult and stressful for children. I think that on those merits alone, the family justice strategy has far exceeded our expectations.

Let me give the hon. member some statistics as well, Madam Chair, through you. We have invested, again, a total of \$11.2 million to expand this program to a number of different regions in our province, but we also know that these services are available to Albertans all across the province through virtual methods. As of December 31, 2024, 52,000 Albertans have accessed these services; 30,000 people have visited the Alberta family resolution hub. New family court applications in both the Court of King's Bench and the Court of Justice have decreased by 40 per cent in 2024 as compared to 2023. And self-represented litigants, if they identify their matter as urgent or time sensitive, are generally seen in the same day by a family court counsellor.

**10:50**

We think that these are remarkable statistics, Madam Chair. This program has far exceeded what we thought that we'd be able to achieve. Again, we're getting started, and we plan to make this even more accessible to people all across Alberta.

I'll speak briefly about the capital investment question in relation to contracts and sole-source contracts, as the hon. member mentioned. We do have some existing and ongoing contracts with U.S. suppliers, but we certainly have made the commitment to take the Canada-first approach, just like every other ministry, just like every other government across Canada. We will continue to explore options to make sure that the transition to a Canadian-based company ensures that we move to a local provider while maintaining an interruption-free transition.

Justice officials, like everyone else in the government of Alberta and governments all across the country, are taking this Canada-first approach, and we're no different. We are going to explore all the available options and make sure that we do look for Canadian

alternatives. But we will not allow the integrity of our court system or the disruption of services with respect to the overall justice system to be interrupted as we transition to a Canada-first solution.

When it comes to court and justice services, the hon. member did identify a large increase in that, and that is largely due to our growing province and growing demands. Budget 2025 invests an additional \$8.3 million for ongoing support at our three courts: the Court of Justice, the Court of King's Bench, and the Court of Appeal.

**The Chair:** All right. I believe now we're heading over to the government side. Please proceed, Member Johnson.

**Mrs. Johnson:** Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, also, through you to the minister and to your team for all the hard work you've done preparing for Budget 2025 and for taking all the questions today. My question is on a rather sombre subject, the safe roads program. The safe roads program in Alberta has been a significant success in enhancing road safety and reducing the presence of alcohol-impaired drivers. Since its implementation the program has focused on providing immediate penalties for impaired driving offences, streamlining enforcement processes, and reducing the burden on the court system.

I know, Madam Chair, that my constituents can rest easier knowing Alberta's government is ensuring that those who drive under the influence face swift consequences. I also will rest easier knowing this as this has affected my family personally. It was over three decades ago that my husband's sister along with a young couple, who had left their two-year-old behind, and another senior lady were driving on a Sunday afternoon to a local town. It was a clear day on a straight road, and an 18-year-old who had been drinking too much and wasn't watching hit them head-on, killing all of them instantly. The young couple – the wife was pregnant with their second child. They orphaned their only daughter. So this affects my family personally, this affects millions of people personally, and I take it really seriously. I thank, first of all, the minister for taking this on and for taking this so seriously, protecting Albertans and protecting families.

Key objective 2.3 of outcome 2 on page 116 of the business plan mentions that Budget 2025 will “ensure Albertans have access to a fair and efficient adjudication process to challenge administrative penalties related to alcohol or drug-related driving contraventions under the Traffic Safety Act.” By introducing roadside sanctions, law enforcement officers can impose swift consequences, including licence suspensions and vehicle seizures, which act as strong deterrents against impaired driving. My personal hope is that these measures have contributed to a decline in impairment-related collisions, making Alberta's roads safer for all road users.

May I also say that we love all of our nonprofits and all of our volunteers who are helping in these areas, but I am sure that Mothers Against Drunk Driving, MADD, would love to be put out of business.

My first question is: can the minister elaborate on the \$7.5 million investment for the safe roads program and how this initiative will help protect Albertans from alcohol-related driving matters? Second, why is the safe roads program shifting from the Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors to the Ministry of Justice? My final question on this subject is: can the minister explain why the new division of administrative law programs was created?

My second question in this final minute has to do with drug treatment courts if we have time to get there. I was at a rural crime watch meeting about a year ago, and a young man who had gone



through this program gave his personal story, and it really, profoundly affected my life and that this is really working.

Alberta's drug treatment courts are recognized as successful alternatives to traditional court processes for individuals struggling with substance abuse issues. Outcome 3 on page 117 of the business plan talks about how the ministry continues to support and grow targeted programs like drug treatment courts that provide these wraparound supports while holding offenders accountable. These courts provide a structured rehabilitative approach that integrates judicial oversight with treatment services, offering participants access to counselling, addiction treatment, and support programs. As I understand, by focusing on the rehabilitation instead of incarceration, drug treatment courts help break the cycle of addiction and crime. They reduce recidivism rates and promote long-term recovery.

I'll jump straight to my questions. Would the minister explain how much funding is being directed towards drug treatment courts and other specialized courts in Budget 2025? My final question: what type of supports are available through the drug treatment courts for the families of offenders during these challenging times?

**The Chair:** Minister.

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you very much, Chair. Just let me begin, through you Madam Chair, by expressing my sincerest condolences about your personal story. Thank you for sharing that. I know that many of us have similar stories, and I, too, agree with the member's notion that if we could put MADD Canada out of business, we would all be winners. Certainly, I think that's the ultimate goal.

The safe roads program is an important program in this province. I know that Mothers Against Drunk Driving and other advocates for the prevention of impaired driving have certainly supported the safe roads program, and we continue to support it in many ways, including the funding and bringing it over to Justice.

I'll begin by talking a little bit about some of the questions relating to: why Justice? I think that, first off, it highlights the relationship between enforcing the law and making sure that impaired drivers are not on our roads. I think that there is a direct relationship between Alberta Justice and making sure that this ministry is leading the effort to prevent impaired driving in our province.

The other thing that's important to note is that there are many benefits of the safe roads program. They include the strongest penalties in the country. People who are stopped and who are driving impaired will suffer immediate consequences as a result of that at the roadside, which I think is important. That includes vehicle seizures. That includes licence suspensions and, of course, a number of different things that individuals will have to do to deal with the consequences of having their licences suspended.

The safe roads program does also include, in order to maintain and ensure procedural fairness, an adjudication process that is quick and allows individuals who don't believe or who want to challenge the decision to be able to obtain a decision in a very short period of time. What was happening in the criminal justice system was that these impaired driving charges were taking a significant amount of resources both of the individuals charged and of our Crown prosecutors, our courts.

Having the timely adjudication of those who have been alleged to have been impaired through an adjudication branch is an important thing for all people involved. The ability to free up court time, the ability to dedicate Crown prosecutors to other areas, and the quick consequences are all reasons why the safe roads program is working here in Alberta, and it is here to stay.

**11:00**

I can tell you that in the period of April 1, 2022, to March 31, 2023, 84 per cent of criminal impaired driving charges were diverted to safe roads. A total of 1,453 criminal impaired driving charges were commenced in court in comparison with 9,016 penalties under the safe roads program, so you can see a significant shift which also frees up our police officers because administering the consequences at the roadside in the safe roads program is remarkably quicker than the process with respect to a criminal impaired driving charge.

The member spoke about a number of important issues in relation to safe roads. We are investing the money because we think it works. The \$7.5 million investment to safe roads is doing great things to ensuring that members of our community remain safe and that impaired drivers are off our roads and not causing the problems that you so very emotionally spoke about, and I'm certainly proud to speak about that.

The drug treatment courts are an important component here in Alberta and we have seen some great successes there as well. We know that \$4 million in Budget 2025 will continue to flow to provide the good work in our drug treatment courts. We have seen the statistics. The statistics suggest that those who successfully complete the program in the drug treatment courts, many of who have multiple prior offences, prior convictions, are not returning back to court, and I think that's great news.

**The Chair:** All right. Thank you, Minister.

To the Official Opposition. Go ahead.

**Mr. Sabir:** Thank you, Madam Chair. My question relates to line 3.1, civil law. There is an increase from \$61 million to \$67 million. The question I have is: is the government involved in more cases? What's the cost and process for the outsourcing of civil law services?

The next question relates to line 4.1, operation and bail prosecutions. The budget is flat in this line. I note that there are many issues with respect to individuals in custody and bail process, some of which the minister outlined. All political rhetoric aside, the law as it stands now is that Albertans have the right to be brought before a justice of the peace or a judge for bail within 24 hours, but there are huge delays, and the accused are getting a runaround. Failure to meet this requirement can be considered a breach of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and could negatively impact any future prosecution against the accused.

I have looked at it for a while now. Practically, when a person is arrested, the matter gets adjourned from the JP to Alberta Court of Justice into the docket court. The Crown's policy generally is to schedule a bail hearing because they won't do bail hearings in docket court due to the number of perils in the court and the lengthy list in the docket. The inmate then has to schedule a bail hearing. The available hearing date is often weeks down the road, and the inmate's consent is required and show cause to adjourn past three days. Practically, the inmate doesn't have a choice and has to adjourn as per the dates available and as such the bail is not timely.

This is due to the lack of availability of Crown, courtrooms, and availability of judges, so basically lack of resources. The actual bail courts are often double-booked. Permission is required from the chief or assistant judge to overbook. This happens in Calgary on a regular basis due to lack of availability of courts and judges. Again, a simple solution other than accusing the federal government nonstop is to fund the justice system adequately. So the question I have is: what steps has the minister taken to ensure the rule of law is upheld? Albertans deserve to be treated according to the law as it stands, which requires that accused be brought before a judge in 24

hours. That shouldn't be just lip service, but that should be a meaningful opportunity for the accused to make their case before a justice of the peace.

Second related question is that, also, I understand that the Alberta Crown prosecution services perform monthly bail result analysis. The question, through you, Madam Chair, is: tell us how many bails have been processed within the timeline set by the legislation. There are many inmates that are not brought before the justice of the peace for a bail hearing within 24 hours. Through you, Madam Chair, what I'm looking for is the exact number of those inmates. What is the ministry doing to address these delays in Budget '25-26 since there is no increase in the Alberta Crown prosecution service budget?

With respect to line item 4.2, appeals and specialized prosecutions, is there an increase in caseload? There's an increase in the budget. Also, the department continues to lose serious criminal cases due to Jordan delays, yet this budget shows no coherent strategy to address this crisis. Can the minister explain why, after years of promising to fix the problem, the government is refusing to properly fund the justice system, prosecution services, and all the players in the justice system?

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Member.

Over to the minister.

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and once again thank you to the member for the questions. I'll begin by speaking a little bit about the increases to our legal services division, which is our civil Crown division. They are responsible for not only representing the Ministry of Justice but also for representing all ministries in legal challenges, legal advice, and other areas. We do have a number of LSD lawyers which are internal to the department, and they work day in and day out representing the province's interests in a variety of different ways. Certainly, as the hon. member alluded to, with the increase in complexity of the cases, with the increase in challenges that we face as a province, and with the growth that we're experiencing, we certainly do have a heightened need for additional supports. That is exactly why the legal services division is receiving an increase in their budget. That increase will support the hiring of additional lawyers and the hiring of additional support staff. The important thing to note is that an internal legal services division lawyer is much more cost-effective for government than outside counsel would be, so the money that is allocated to hiring legal services division lawyers is a fiscally responsible thing to do.

With that said, I think the member might or I might presuppose he might ask about the retention of external counsel. Madam Chair, we certainly do use external counsel when it's appropriate. There are external counsel retainers that are granted to assist Alberta Justice where an area is unique; where legal counsel, for example, outside of Alberta is required; where there is a conflict of interest potentially; or where the urgency and resourcing requirements for a particular matter can only be handled by external counsel. Of course, when that happens, all efforts are made to negotiate the best rate possible, and we certainly have a preference to use our internal lawyers wherever possible. Sometimes that isn't realistic, but when it isn't, we certainly approach it in the best and most fiscally prudent manner.

**11:10**

The member spoke, well, in great detail, I would say, about the Alberta Crown prosecution service. What I would say is that, again, the ACPS has once again received a substantial increase in their budget, and I will break it down for the member: \$2.5 million will

address salary pressures for prosecutors; \$1.1 million will be devoted to 12 additional FTEs, specifically to legal assistance and paralegals; \$800,000 for four FTEs to establish a human trafficking unit; half a million dollars for retention bonuses so that we can help recruit and retain lawyers to work for the Alberta Crown prosecution service in areas where it is difficult to staff, sometimes in remote areas where we need Crown prosecutors, and we have developed this retention bonus to help attract good talent; \$2.4 million for general increases to collective bargaining outcomes as well. That is the budget.

The member spoke in great detail about people who don't appear before JPs within 24 hours. I would say that is largely anecdotal, Madam Chair. The vast majority of people appear before JPs within 24 hours as is required. Whether or not they choose to have their bail hearings heard by a judge or in another way is certainly their prerogative, but we certainly maintain and uphold our obligations to make sure that the accused see somebody within that time period.

There was a question about what steps we're taking to ensure that people appear before a judge in a timely manner. Certainly, I would direct the member to, you know, largely the budget, which saw increases all across the board. Court and justice services alone saw a budget increase of \$12.7 million. We've also seen the highest number of FTEs in Justice.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

Over to Member Singh.

**Mr. Singh:** Thank you, Madam Chair, and, Minister, thank you for coming here today. I appreciate the ministry's work ensuring the availability of a fair and accessible justice system for all Albertans where the rule of law is upheld and government undertakings are administrated according to law.

Through you, Madam Chair, my questions are on justice system funding. A priority of this government is ensuring all Albertans can access a fair, accessible, and transparent justice system. Page 146 of the fiscal plan, schedule five, regarding operating expenses, indicates a \$13 million funding increase for the Ministry of Justice, taking the budget to \$700 million. Funding the justice system adequately is crucial for ensuring efficiency in our courts, and our courts surely require sufficient financial resources to function effectively. Underfunded courts lead to case backlogs, delaying justice for victims of crime and prosecuting violent offenders. Proper financial support for the justice system is also essential for rehabilitating offenders. Efficiency in our justice system also means that resources are used effectively, ensuring that taxpayer money supports fair trials and proper investigation and rehabilitation programs rather than being wasted on administrative bottlenecks. When justice is delayed, people lose faith in the system, but a streamlined, well-funded justice system ensures fairness, protects rights, and fosters a safer, more orderly society.

Through you, Madam Chair, would the minister please tell this committee about what those funds will be used for and how will this support Albertans? Also, I see on page 154 of the fiscal plan, schedule 22 indicates that FTEs are increasing in the ministry with wonderful new additions for the total of 3,575 FTEs. Can the minister please explain why this increase to full-time equivalents is necessary and what they will be doing in 2025-2026?

Through you, Madam Chair, increasing court capacity, ensuring legal matters are resolved quickly, is crucial for improving access to justice for Albertans. When cases take too long, it can cause stress, financial burdens for individuals and families who are already going through a difficult time. I see on page 118 of the business plan an increase of about \$16 million to court and justice services expenses: investing in court and justice services such as

hiring more judges; improving digital systems; and streamlining processes vital to reducing backlogs and speeding up case resolutions. Through you, Madam Chair, could the minister advise what this approximately \$16 million increase to court and justice services expenses is allocated for?

I understand that the Justice ministry has made significant strides in increasing the capacity for courtrooms with 18 appointments of justices and three appointments of justices of the peace to the Alberta Court of Justice since June 2023. Can the minister elaborate on how Budget 2025 will support this drive to improve Albertans' access to justice?

Again, Minister, thank you for coming here. I really appreciate the ministry's efforts to provide programs and services that ensure access to justice and supports the needs of Albertans involved in the justice system.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** To the minister.

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you once again, Madam Chair and through you to the hon. member. Thank you for the ongoing and strong advocacy for your community. I am incredibly proud of this budget as it relates to justice. This is a year-after-year increase ever since I was appointed to this role. It is now \$706.9 million, which is the highest budget for Alberta Justice in the history of our province. This is a \$16.2 million increase over the previous year, and it is designed to expand and modernize and make sure that our justice system is responsive to the needs of Albertans.

You asked for a breakdown. I would be happy to give you one; \$5.7 million will be allocated to the legal services division to address multiple priorities, as we've talked about in this committee, the constitutional and legal challenges, supporting other ministries, and supporting the work and the needs of Albertans; \$7.3 million increase to the Alberta Crown prosecution service will establish a human trafficking unit, will hire more prosecutors, will support more prosecutors, and we certainly will be able to provide both electronic and human resources to our Crown prosecution service. Again, an increase in the budget to safe roads will help keep impaired drivers off our roads. We will be working with our court and justice services to provide them with a significant increase so that they can continue to support the expansion of our courts through the hiring and retention of new people and providing for additional support services within our courts.

Madam Chair, the member mentioned the FTEs that Alberta Justice is receiving this year that comes to 3,575. That represents a total FTE increase of 104, which represents not only the greatest number of FTEs that Alberta Justice has ever had; it also represents the largest FTE growth in the past two years now in a row as compared to all other government departments. That means that Alberta Justice has received the greatest increase of FTEs, at least proportional to the existing FTEs, of any government department in Alberta.

**11:20**

What this means is that this government is absolutely focused on the delivery of a strong justice system in this province, and I think that the number of FTEs and the support in our budget represents our commitment to making sure that Albertans can have faith and confidence in their justice system. Thirty-six of those FTEs will be going to court and justice services. We'll use those FTEs to expand the family justice strategy, and they will improve court interpretation services for our three courts to address the increased volumes of those who need those services.

Nineteen FTEs will go to legal services to address multiple priorities, 16 in the Alberta Crown prosecution service, and 23 in strategy support and integrated initiatives to help deliver on mandate priorities and assist in improving the office of the Chief Medical Examiner's workload. Finally, 10 will be allocated to administrative law programs to help support the safe roads program and the growth that we anticipate in that area.

Lastly, in the short time that I have left, I do want to talk a little bit about what the hon. member mentioned in relation to the judicial appointments that we've seen in this province and the judicial officers. Thus far in my role we have seen 18 judicial appointments. We have also seen the appointment of three JPs, and many more to come. We're excited about that because it represents, again, Alberta Justice's commitment to the delivery of a strong and effective justice system in this province.

There was a question earlier about the applicants and the number of those that are applying. We certainly have a healthy number of people who are going through the process, but the member should know that the process, again, is independent. It requires interviews by Judicial Council.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Minister.

To the member.

**Mr. Sabir:** Thank you, Madam Chair, just to follow up on the bail question, I stated that it's my understanding that the Alberta Crown prosecution service performs monthly bail result analysis. That's why I was asking if the minister could share some data on what percentage of bail hearings or bails are processed within the timeline set by the legislation.

The next question also relates to Crown prosecutors. What's the vacancy rate for the Crown prosecution service, and will the department be hiring more prosecutors in this Budget 2025-26? With respect to line 4.3 there is an increase, so the question through you, Madam Chair: with the increase in the criminal prosecutions budget what specific allocation is being made for specialized prosecution of technology-related crimes, which continue to increase across Alberta? And how many prosecutors will be specifically trained or have been trained or assigned to handle cybercrime?

The next question is with respect to line 5.1. I notice that the current budget is lower than the forecast, so can you please explain why the estimate is lower this year, and how the digital transformation initiative, specifically, will improve access to justice for rural Albertans who may face geological and technological barriers to court services? And what measurable targets have you set for improvement in this area in Budget '25-26?

My next question is with respect to line 5.2, office of the Chief Medical Examiner. This budget is slightly going up. There were some funds set aside in the capital budget as well for this office. Tell us: how many employees are there? What is the caseload like? With respect to the new equipment at OCME, including a CT scanner and toxicology machines, the question I have is: what is the current backlog of death investigations, and what specific reduction in processing times does the minister expect to achieve through this investment in new capital equipment and operating funds?

I think I do have time for another question. I can talk about line 6.1, Alberta human rights. There's a slight increase, so the question I have is: what is that increase for? Will there be any grants for human rights education, which, for context, the UCP government has cut from \$1 million in 2019 to exactly zero. The question I have is: will any increase go to human rights grants?

With respect to line 5.4, support for legal aid, we did talk about legal aid and how ALF reserves are being raided to backfill for the government cuts. Since 2024 the government has cut legal aid funding by \$43 million. Has the ministry conducted any analysis on how this might impact quota efficiency due to a potential increase in self-represented litigants? And what measures are in place to ensure that access to justice is maintained despite these reductions? What I am looking for here is the number of self-represented litigants in our court system, any increase or decrease in their numbers.

**The Chair:** To the minister.

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I appreciate the questions once again. Monthly bail data can be made available to the hon. member. But, again, when I referred to the statements of the hon. member, it's anecdotal. I believe that those are supported by the statistics. The number of individuals that are processed within a 24-hour period of time remains the vast, vast, vast majority of individuals appearing before our criminal justice system, with often a fraction – a fraction – of 1 per cent of individuals who might exceed the 24-hour period. There are, again, a number of reasons for why that might happen. Certainly, happy to provide those, if they're available to me, to the hon. member. But I can assure members of this committee that the vast majority of individuals certainly get processed within the 24-hour timeline. That is again a testament to how hard both the court system and our Crown prosecutors are working to ensure that happens.

The member's question in relation to Crown prosecutor retention rates and/or hiring: we have since 2019 hired an additional 65 trial prosecutors, bringing our number of trial Crown prosecutors to 392. That's what Budget 2025 includes funding for. The vacancy rate for trial Crown prosecutors was 7.4 per cent. The question from the member was: what efforts are we making? We certainly are working hard to fully staff our Crown prosecutors offices all across the province. I alluded to that earlier, Madam Chair, in my comments about the retention bonuses. We're working with our regional offices, our regional Crowns and our chief Crowns, to streamline processes and make sure that the hiring and retention process is supported in the best way possible.

**11:30**

A further breakdown for the member in relation to specialized prosecutors and what this means. Those are the prosecutors that are taking on special or specific areas, including areas like cybercrime and some of the things I had spoken about earlier in relation to human trafficking, extortion, and firearms violence. There are 59 dedicated prosecutors in the specialized prosecutions unit, and those are the folks that are undertaking the specialized areas of the criminal justice system.

There was a question from the hon. member – and I'm trying to get through all of them, so I'll speak quickly about this – about what intentions or hopes I'd like to see with respect to our digital initiatives in relation to how they might help improve access to justice for rural Albertans. I think that one of the primary considerations has always been to ensure that our justice digital programs and our transformations are intended specifically to ensure that Albertans in all four corners of our province can access our court systems. We've seen that through the pandemic. We've seen sometimes by way of necessity and not necessarily by choice the need to adopt new technologies to help allow for virtual meetings all across our province. We do that in our everyday lives, and our court system is moving along as quickly as possible with the technology available to allow Albertans to access their courts.

I think it's also important to note that Albertans no longer have to deal with, you know, their traffic tickets or other court matters by physically travelling to the courthouse each and every time. That was a complaint that we heard almost consistently, so we made it available to access the courts in multiple different ways to address your court matters by way of a virtual means while maintaining, again – I want to make this absolutely clear, Madam Chair – the ability to go in person if you so wish. We do have 72 locations all across our great province for Albertans who prefer to go in person.

There was a question in relation to line 5.1 and the decrease in funding. The decrease is essentially due, Madam Chair, to the return of restorative justice grants to their 2023 levels. We've also introduced a new grant program, the community justice grants.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

Back over to the government side. I believe, Member Lundy, you're up next.

**Mr. Lundy:** Yes. Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and of course thank you to the minister and your staff. Some of the issues that you're working on are top of mind in my riding when I talk to my constituents in Leduc-Beaumont. You know, they often talk about public safety and, of course, the administration of justice, and they understand how important it is. I appreciate the chance to unpack some of that with you today.

I'd like to sort of continue on a topic you've touched on a little bit, but I'm interested in some of your thoughts further, and that is on trial delays. I would like your commentary on federal involvement in some of these trial delays. I will be referring to outcome 2, key objective 2.1, and this is to improve Albertans' access to justice and create a sustainable justice system that utilizes court and prosecution resources efficiently and effectively. Through the chair, Minister, you've done a great job highlighting some of your key investments into the prosecution services, et cetera. I would like to talk about how we can kind of see that visualizing and reducing some potential trial delays and specifically look into how federal policies may be impacting the outcome that I just presented. I know that earlier we did talk about the federal overreach, so we certainly have seen that become a problem. I would like to know more specifically about how Budget 2025 is working to deal with the effects of policy decisions from Ottawa as it relates to trial delays.

Through the chair to the minister: given the federal government's catch-and-release approach to crime how is the minister working to ensure that serious and violent offenders are held accountable and not released back into the communities too quickly? I'm certainly interested in the minister's response to that. I had a constituent tell me that they think the only thing the federal government is efficient at is releasing violent criminals into our communities. I would tend to agree with that analysis. It's certainly disappointing. I'm interested in the minister's thought on that.

Again, through the chair, as always, I'd like to ask: are there specific legislative or policy changes at the federal level that are contributing to trial delays?

I'd like to ask one more question, through the chair, on this particular topic. What is Alberta doing to push back against these policies that may be undermining justice for victims? I'm certainly interested to hear from the minister on that. I think it's a really important topic.

I would also like to switch my attention a little bit now to talk about the precharge assessment program. You know, I'm certainly interested to hear the minister's perspective on this. It is highlighted on page 113 of the business plan. As I understand it, precharge assessment plays a significant role in the administration of justice.

It allows law enforcement and prosecutors to review the evidence of a case before deciding whether it should go to court or not. This, of course, helps reduce the number of cases going to court by filtering out weak cases and resolving minor offences through other alternative measures, thereby increasing court efficiency by focusing court resources on more serious crimes.

I would like to ask about this precharge assessment system now. Through the chair to the minister: can the minister speak to what precharge assessment does and how it reduces the number of cases entering the courts? I'd like to have a second question, through the chair. Can the minister tell this committee how much money is allocated as part of Budget 2025 for this important initiative? How many resources, prosecutors, and support staff will be available to support this program through '25-26?

We have heard from the minister on the importance of efficiency, and I do think that this is an important program that can help contribute to our overall justice system. I certainly appreciate the minister's previous comments on working hard towards that goal, making sure that our financial resources are used effectively and that victims and all Albertans are served by our justice system.

I would once again like to thank the minister, and I look forward to his responses. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Minister.

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to the hon. member for the insightful comments and questions. I appreciate your advocacy in the Leduc-Beaumont area, and certainly happy to answer some of those questions for you.

For far too long I think that Canada collectively, at least at the provincial level, all public safety ministers, all Justice ministers, has echoed the same message to our federal government: the ineffective bail legislation that was introduced in the way of Bill C-75 has completely eroded the public's confidence in our bail system, our catch-and-release system, as it's commonly referred to. It's instructed our courts to find the least intrusive release conditions when contemplating what the court should do with an individual. The system made it easier for violent criminals to be released back into our communities. We've heard it time and time again, that those that are charged with serious offences always end up in the communities where they were charged. I think this is highly inappropriate and problematic. Again, I want to stress to members of the committee that we're not the lone voice here. We heard it from every single province in the country.

The federal government tried to address some of those concerns by introducing Bill C-48, and that was brought into force on January 4, 2024, with the intention of creating what they called a reverse onus where an accused individual in some limited circumstances would need to demonstrate why he or she should receive bail rather than the opposite. We don't see any tangible impact at this point in time. I concede that, you know, it's been about a year, a little over a year now, and maybe it needs more time for us to get those statistics, but we've not seen any tangible stats as of yet.

**11:40**

I do want to talk a little bit about some of the things that we're doing as a province, because I think that's important. Many of you will remember, many of the committee members will remember, that in my role as Attorney General one of the first things I did was that I got rid of the triage program. This was a directive introduced under the Alberta NDP government that had provided guidelines to our prosecutors to triage certain cases. The problem I had with that was that it was difficult to assess what cases were more important than others, what cases a prosecutor should move forward and try

and what cases should be dropped. To a family dealing with an issue in their neighbourhood, prosecuting that case is very important, and to businesses that are impacted by cybercrime or theft or whatever it may be, that too is important. Assessing it on sort of a triage basis I think was the flawed way to go. We've cancelled that program altogether.

The other thing is that we've introduced a bail practice protocol, which is really a guideline to our prosecutors recommending that they identify some of the most serious and repeat offenders and take a hardline approach when it comes to bail, take the approach that our prosecutors will stand their grounds. They will oppose bail where appropriate. They will recommend strong release conditions where appropriate. Again, the idea of making sure that our Crown prosecutors take a hardline approach when it comes to our repeat offenders is doing our part in making sure that these individuals don't come back into the communities and create havoc once again. We're one piece of the puzzle, and certainly there are – you know, bail reform is necessary in order for us to kind of complete that loop, but we're doing our part to make sure that criminals and those who are serious and repeat offenders don't end up back in our communities.

I want to talk a little bit briefly about the precharge assessment office, because I think that the idea is that precharge assessment prosecutors help ensure the charges that are entering the criminal justice system meet the standards for prosecution by reviewing the investigative file well before it gets to an assigned Crown and gets prepared for trial. Precharge assessment has proven to be very effective in reducing the number of files entering the court system by about 20 per cent since its implementation, and the Alberta Crown prosecution service has rolled out the precharge assessment office to all RCMP detachments in Alberta.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

To the opposition.

**Mr. Sabir:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I have some questions remaining, but I will just try to prioritize what I can ask in this last block. Through you, Madam Chair, the question is about line 5.3, Alberta chief firearms office. A simple question: how many employees are there? There has been a turnover in senior leadership positions lately. What positions are empty, and what positions will this budget help to fill? Any particular reason for that turnover in senior leadership?

Second, there is some amount from this budget that is spent, Madam Chair, on decommissioning the weapons. What's the amount that is spent on decommissioning those weapons? That's one question. Second thing is that with those weapons that are decommissioned, there are some plaques created by this department, and some of those plaques have those decommissioned weapons fixed on it and they have quotes from the Premier and the minister himself. The minister can confirm or deny whether such plaques or quotes exist, but if so, how many such plaques with weapons have been created, and what purposes are they used for? And how many of those plaques have been created so far, and how many more plaques will this budget support? It's more about this chief firearms office. If needed, I can expand on these questions, but I am sure the minister understands what I'm talking about.

The other question is back to the human rights education. As I said, that human rights education grant was cut in 2019 to zero from \$1 million. Will there be any grant for human rights education in this budget?

The third question is a follow-up. The question I asked with respect to the rule of law in key objective 1.1, where there were

media reports that three ministers and the Premier's former chief of staff called . . .

**Mr. Singh:** Point of order.

**The Chair:** A point of order has been called, members.  
Please proceed, Member.

**Mr. Singh:** Thank you, Madam Chair. The point of order is under Standing Order 23(b). The member speaks to matters other than the question under discussion. The call with the police chief, call with Marshall Smith, and call with other ministers are not within the scope of these estimates. The committee has convened for the purpose of considering the ministry's '25-26 budget, including estimates, fiscal plan, and business plan. The matter that has been raised by the member was raised before, and the minister did answer those questions at great length. I think we just have 10 minutes left here, and I will request the hon. member to bring some important issues facing Albertans.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** All right. Please proceed, Member.

**Mr. Shepherd:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I would say that this is not a point of order; this is a matter of debate. The member himself seems unsure as to which point of order he's calling. First, he said it's relevance. He said that wasn't a relevant question though he has not called a point of order at any point on this question earlier today. Then he moved to suggesting that it was a question of repetition.

What I would say is that, certainly, if the member has not called a point of order before now, it is clearly something that is relevant. The minister has spoken to it; therefore, it also remains relevant. So I think it should be at the discretion of the member. If he feels he has not received the answer he's seeking from the minister, certainly I think it's common practice to allow the latitude for members to continue to pursue and to ask a question. Certainly, as the member said, we have just a short amount of time left, and really I think it's reasonable to leave that up to the member who's asking the questions to determine how he wishes to use the time that he has and leave it to the minister to determine if he wishes to answer.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Member.

As I've stated in other estimates sessions, I encourage and welcome any points of order from either side of the table, and I'm always happy to pause and discuss that for a moment. At this particular time I agree: we'll proceed, and the minister can choose whether or not he is going to answer.

Please proceed, Member.

**Mr. Sabir:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I think the question relates to the ministry's stated ideals of making sure that the rule of law is upheld in this province, people's rights are upheld in this province. I think that should be priority one for the Department of Justice. The question is not about police conduct or an operation that happened at the U of C. The question was that major concerns are raised when the Premier's chief of staff or a cabinet minister in this case, including the Minister of Justice, are reported to have called police chief . . .

**The Chair:** So I'm just going to have you stop right there.

**Mr. Lundy:** Point of order, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** Another point of order has been called.

**Mr. Lundy:** Thank you, Madam Chair. The members opposite were asking about which number. I'll be very specific on these three. This is a point of order, 23(h), (i), and (j). I'll start with (i), imputing false or unavowed motives to another member. This is probably the third or fourth time that the member opposite has done that. He's clearly just trying to politically grandstand, trying to score some cheap political points. Clearly, this is 23(j): he's doing so in an attempt to cause disruption at the end of our time here at this estimates. And 23(h): he's also made allegations against a member. I don't see any logs of notes or phone calls in their budget documents today. It's a point of order on 23(h), (i), and (j).

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

11:50

**The Chair:** Hon. Member, please proceed.

**Mr. Shepherd:** Thank you, Madam Chair. It appears Mr. Lundy is not familiar with the newspaper article that Mr. Sabir is referring to, which indeed does contain the documents that he is specifically referring to. So this is not a question of a lack of evidence. Mr. Sabir has only referred to what has been directly mentioned in that article, for which there are documents that were FOIPed from handwritten notes from Calgary's chief of police. Mr. Sabir is not impugning the motives of the minister because he is not alleging any particular motives. He is asking the minister about what his decisions and the reasons for these calls and these conversations might have been. Similarly, Mr. Sabir is not making any allegations. He is simply repeating what has been reported in a newspaper based on FOIPed documents and handwritten notes of Calgary's chief of police.

Now, whether it causes disorder: well, that is a decision of the government members, and certainly they have decided that they do wish to cause disorder and, in my view, waste the time of the committee in the limited time that we have left. I suppose they're free to make use of that time because it's only going to limit the amount of time they have left to speak with the minister. But in my view, this is a matter of debate

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

As I mentioned earlier, happy to hear from both sides of the table with regard to points of order.

But you may have recalled that I did start to pipe up, Mr. Sabir, when you were speaking because you were veering into an area that is not related to estimates in any way. We're not here to review newspaper articles; we're here to review the budget estimates for the Department of Justice. So if you all don't mind, I would like to continue on that path. We have very few minutes left. Member, you have one minute and nine seconds left. Please stick to the estimates; otherwise, we will probably have another point of order called.

**Mr. Sabir:** I think, Madam Chair, I was sticking to the estimates, and I guess documents say that estimates – it's a fair question to ask about what's stated in the business plan, key objectives, ask about those things. The ministry's business plan starts with: the rule of law is to be upheld as their priority one; government undertakings need to be according to the rule of law. That's the first, opening line of the business plan, and that's what the question relates to, that when the conduct of the three ministers in question calling a police chief – that's offside the rule of law. The question is: how will the minister make sure that rule of law is upheld and ministers don't call into the operational matters of Calgary police?

I will leave it at that. Those are all my questions.

**The Chair:** Are you surrendering the rest of your time then, Member?

**Mr. Sabir:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Okay.

I guess we'll turn it over to the minister. Please proceed, Minister.

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Once again, thank you to the member for those questions. I'm happy to answer them.

The initial question relates to the Alberta chief firearms office budget increase. Those will support a total FTE complement of 70. That is the target that the Alberta chief firearms office has established, and the goal is, with the increase in funding, that we achieve that target of 70 FTEs. The increased amounts will also address cost pressures in staffing and other operational expenses. The chief firearms office has leasing fees, employee-related expenses, other expenses, certainly, that they are incurring, and because of that the increase in their budget is appropriate, in my view. Budget 2025 and the corresponding increases that the member inquired about will help to process licence applications. It'll work to address issues of transfer, authorizations to transport, and other administrative tasks, and it will also address the supports that we talked about earlier in the education of Albertans in firearm safety and best practices.

The member asked a number of questions about – I think it was decommissioning of weapons. I think the member is referring to the federal decision to buy back certain weapons or at least make them unlawful. Again, my position on that remains clear: there is no methodology, there is no science, there is no evidence for or consistency in the way that the federal government has applied its rules in relation to the categorization of various firearms in this country. I will say this: it's important to keep in mind that the federal government has spent thus far in excess of \$60 million on this, quote, unquote, buyback program and has not purchased a single gun back.

We've advocated for border supports, we've advocated for more funding to law enforcement, we've advocated for greater education, and we've advocated to the federal government to use the resources that they're wasting on this federal buyback program to help support the things that actually matter, making sure that people who are transporting and using guns illegally are targeted and addressed. I think that's important.

With respect to the human rights fund, the member has asked about that, and I do apologize for not getting to it sooner. There is currently a human rights education and multiculturalism fund that operates under the authority of the Alberta Human Rights Act. It currently sits at \$4.5 million, not zero as the member has said repeatedly now. There is a drawdown plan that the Alberta Human Rights Commission has in order to draw those funds down and use them for what the fund was intended to be used for. That includes a number of different things. That includes various projects to help improve navigator programs, conferences, grants, technological systems, and translation services, along with the corresponding staff needed to help deliver these programs under the human rights

education and multiculturalism fund. I think it's helpful to keep in mind that the Alberta Human Rights Commission does have a healthy fund in order to continue its education and multiculturalism projects, and they will do that as they see appropriate. The five-year budget drawdown plan does mean that the \$4.5 million will be drawn over that five years.

The member has focused a great deal on a call to the Calgary police chief, but the member has made some relatively serious allegations that are not supported by the facts. The police chief did not complain. No one has complained. No one has raised any concerns, not even the police chief himself.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Minister.

Back to the government side. Member Petrovic.

**Mrs. Petrovic:** Thank you, Madam Chair. Just really quickly, through you I'd like to turn my attention to a high-level overview of the impact of Budget 2025. Through you, Madam Chair, what priority is the minister and his ministry looking forward to most and addressing in 2025-2026?

With that, I'll cede my time over to the minister.

**The Chair:** Minister.

**Mr. Amery:** Well, thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for that open-ended question. Look, I'm tremendously proud of the work that Alberta Justice is doing. I know that there are many priorities, but the key ones for me are certainly overseeing the development and work of our justice digital program. This is an initiative that will help connect Albertans all across our province. I want to continue to develop our Indigenous justice strategy because I think that, as the hon. member of the opposition mentioned, Indigenous overrepresentation is something that we must tackle. I'm very proud to see the construction and opening of the Red Deer courthouse and the capital funding for the Calgary Court of Appeal, again, institutional structures that will maintain and uphold the rule of law in our province.

Finally, I'm very proud of all the work that this Justice team is doing day in and day out to make sure that Albertans feel safe in their communities and that their interests within our court and justice services are upheld. I think we've got a remarkable team, and I just wanted to put that on the record, that I'm incredibly humbled and proud by all the work they do.

Thank you very much to all the members of this committee and all of those watching.

**The Chair:** 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 2025-26 main estimates by the Standing Committee on Families and Communities.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]











