



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Justice
Consideration of Main Estimates

Thursday, March 12, 2026
9 a.m.

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participant

Ministry of Justice
Hon. Mickey Amery, Minister

9 a.m.

Thursday, March 12, 2026

[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, 2027.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce your officials who are joining you at the table. My name is Jackie Lovely. I'm the MLA for the Camrose constituency and the chair of the committee. We will start to my right.

Mr. Getson: Shane Getson, the MLA from Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland, but it's known as God's country around our parts.

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

Mrs. Sawyer: Good morning. MLA Tara Sawyer, from the outstanding constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

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

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

Mr. Amery: Good morning, everyone. I'm Mickey Amery, MLA for Calgary-Cross and Minister of Justice. To my far right is, of course, Tracy Wyrstiuk, assistant deputy minister of court and justice services. To my immediate right is Malcolm Lavoie, deputy minister and deputy attorney general. To my left is Brad Wells, senior financial officer and ADM of financial services division. Finally, to my far left is Elizabeth Macve, assistant deputy minister of strategy, support, and integrated initiatives division.

Mr. Sabir: Irfan Sabir, MLA Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

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

Member Arcand-Paul: Brooks Arcand-Paul, MLA for Edmonton-West Henday.

The Chair: All right. I do not see that we have anyone joining us remotely.

I'd like to note the following substitutions for the record: Member Arcand-Paul will be substituting as deputy chair for Ms. Goehring. Mr. Stephan will be substituting for Mr. Lundy from 11 until 12.

A few housekeeping items to address before we move on. 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 Legislative Assembly meetings. 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 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's officials at the table.

For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined, but 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 to the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting. However, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone object to having a break today? All right. Seeing none, we will have a short break.

Ministry officials who are present 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 area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times. 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 materials 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. Members, Minister, debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

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

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, and good morning, Madam Chair. I'm pleased to be here today to discuss the Ministry of Justice's 2026-27 estimates and business plan.

I am joined by senior officials from across the ministry who are available today to support our discussion. With me are Malcolm Lavoie, deputy minister and deputy attorney general; Lori Dunford, assistant deputy minister for the Alberta Crown prosecution service; Elizabeth Wheaton, assistant deputy minister of the administrative law programs division; Tracy Wyrstiuk, assistant deputy minister for court and justice services; Marie Strauss, assistant deputy minister for our legal services division; Brad Wells, senior financial officer and assistant deputy minister of financial services division; and finally, Elizabeth Macve, assistant deputy minister of the strategy, support, and integrated initiatives division.

Budget 2026 focuses on what matters, makes disciplined choices, and turns possibility into progress. For the Ministry of Justice that means strengthening our core services, improving access to justice, and ensuring that the system remains sustainable and responsive as Alberta continues to grow. The Ministry of Justice plays a crucial role in upholding the rule of law and ensuring Albertans have access to a fair, timely, and effective justice system. We administer Alberta's courts, deliver criminal prosecutions, provide legal services to government, support administrative adjudication, and oversee programs that help victims, families, and individuals navigate the justice system. Justice is a people-intensive ministry.

Approximately three quarters of our budget supports front-line professionals, justice's support staff, Crown prosecutors, civil Crown counsel, and other legal counsel, court clerks, and adjudicators. This work remains essential in keeping our justice system running. Budget 2026 exercises financial restraint but improves efficiencies and supports the government's commitment to long-term sustainability and a return to balanced budget.

In Budget 2026 the Ministry of Justice has allocated \$773.3 million in operational funding. This is an increase of \$66.4 million, or nearly 9 per cent, compared to last year. The funding supports 3,556 full-time equivalent positions, which in itself reflects the magnitude and complexity of Justice services that need to be delivered across our province. Capital funding totals \$29.9 million and is targeted towards the modernization, technology, and access to justice services. Together these investments focus on maintaining system capacity, reducing pressure on our courts, and improving how Albertans access justice services.

Court and justice services is the largest area of the ministry and receives \$292 million in Budget 2026. This program is responsible for the administration of Alberta's three courts across 74 locations province-wide, and for the delivery of various Justice programs. The three courts are, of course, the Alberta Court of Justice, the Court of King's Bench, and the Court of Appeal. Funding supports core operations, judicial and staff resources, interpretation services, security, and access to information and dispute resolution services for Albertans.

Budget 2026 supports the court and justice services division by addressing growing pressures driven by population growth, rising case volumes, and increasing complexities in family and criminal matters. It also supports a continued expansion of the family justice strategy. This strategy helps families resolve their disputes earlier, reduces conflict, and frees up court time for matters that require judicial intervention.

The Budget 2026 capital plan includes \$10.2 million for technology modernization to advance the justice digital strategy. These targeted investments reduce the risk of system outages, disclosure delays, and courtroom technology failures that can delay proceedings and increase costs. Modern digital tools improve service consistency across the province and support remote participation wherever appropriate, helping remove barriers for rural communities.

As with all of the divisions Budget 2026 includes funding to support salary requirements due to recently negotiated collective agreements. There was also a market modifier in that agreement for judicial clerks, which will help improve attraction and retention of these important roles.

The legal services division receives \$83 million in Budget 2026. This division provides legal advice and representation to the government of Alberta ministries. It drafts legislation and regulations, and it supports law reform. This year's budget includes an increase to address compensation pressures and sustain capacity within civil law, legislative counsel, and related legal functions. Strong in-house legal expertise is cost-effective, and it ensures the government can continue to advance legislation, defend Alberta's jurisdiction, and manage complex legal matters efficiently.

9:10

The Alberta Crown prosecution service receives \$163 million in Budget 2026.

This program area is responsible for prosecuting criminal code, youth, and provincial offences and plays a critical role in public safety. Funding increases address recruitment and retention pressures and help maintain full staffing levels and manageable caseloads. Budget 2026 also supports operational improvements,

reducing administrative burden and supporting timely prosecutions. These investments will ensure viable cases proceed efficiently and that serious and violent offences receive the appropriate attention they deserve.

Strategy support and integrated initiatives, or SSII, receives \$177 million in this budget. This area provides essential supports for government business and public-facing programs, including the office of the Chief Medical Examiner and the Alberta chief firearms office. This division leads strategic policy development engagement, legislative co-ordination, service, innovation and digitization, research, evaluation, and data analytics. SSII also manages the Alberta law libraries, official documents, and appointments and overseas access to justice programming such as restorative justice and specialized courts.

In support of the OCME Budget 2026 includes \$4.4 million in capital funding to modernize toxicology, laboratory equipment, improving the accuracy, capacity, and turnaround times as caseloads increase. These investments support system integrity, public confidence, and timely service delivery.

Budget 2026 also includes a \$14.6 million increase to funding for Legal Aid Alberta. This ensures that Legal Aid can maintain stable operations and continue providing access to legal representation for all eligible Albertans.

Administrative law programs receives \$40 million in Budget 2026. This area oversees quasi-judicial and administrative processes. This means areas like safe roads Alberta, family support order services, the Alberta Human Rights Commission, and tribunal policy and support functions.

Investment from Budget 2026 will result in continued growth in the division, strengthening the consistency, independence, and decision-making across administrative law programs. The division continues to provide fair, transparent alternatives to traditional court processes, helping reduce pressure on the courts while protecting procedural fairness.

Budget 2026 also includes \$2.8 million in workforce optimization savings. We will achieve this by reducing vacant positions and modernizing internal processes. To be very clear, these changes do not reduce front-line services. They do support long-term fiscal sustainability and maintain access to justice.

While Budget 2026 does not include specific capital funding for the Edmonton Law Courts, Treasury Board has asked for further feasibility work. This includes exploring how to structure and fund and then reporting back in the coming months. This reflects a disciplined approach to capital planning while continuing to assess long-term courthouse needs here in our province.

Budget 2026 strengthens Alberta's justice system while respecting the fiscal realities of our province. It focuses on what matters, maintaining system capacities, improving access to justice, modernizing how services are delivered, and supporting public safety. Through these disciplined choices Budget 2026 turns possibility into progress for Alberta's justice system, not just for today but also well into the future.

With that, Madam Chair, I thank you, and we're ready to begin.

The Chair: 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 will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams.

Member, do you wish to have shared or block time with the minister?

Mr. Sabir: Shared.

The Chair: Minister, what's your preference?

Mr. Amery: My preference would be block time.

The Chair: All right. We'll go with blocked.
Please proceed.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister and staff for being here. My hope this morning is to understand the Justice estimates, understand how this money will be spent and what are some of the priorities, outcomes, and how these outcomes will be measured. I will also seek to kind of know a little bit more about the factors, considerations, and some assumptions that were relied on by the ministry in reaching these estimates, and some rationale and explanation how Albertans getting the best value for their money.

Page 112 of the business plan says that "ministry business plans should be considered in conjunction with all . . . documents – including the Fiscal Plan, Government Strategic Plan, and Estimates – which work together to [give] a complete overview of government's" plan. I will have questions about each of these documents.

I will start with questions about the government of Alberta's strategic plan. Madam Chair, through you, page 19, objective 2 states: "Providing access to and supporting the delivery of mental health and addiction services in correctional settings to enable treatment continuity and help facilitate recovery for individuals interacting with the justice system." The questions I have are: what specific role does the Justice department have in this regard, and how much money is included in the Justice department's budget? What kind of services are being provided by the Justice department? Are the services restricted to incarcerated individuals in remand centres or also being provided to sentenced accused at the provincial correctional facilities? What are the exact programs, and when do they commence?

Madam Chair, through you page 21, objective 4, improving services and supports for Albertans with family legal matters by working with the courts and other stakeholders, including ongoing implementation of the family justice strategy and undertaking an operational review of family support order services. The questions I have are: what's the timeline for the implementation of this strategy? What's the timeline for the completion of this family support order review? Is it an internal review, or will an outside consultant be engaged? Who does the department intend to consult with, and who has already been consulted? Can you share the name of the stakeholders?

Moving on to the fiscal plan. Page 72 of the fiscal plan says that Justice's operating expense has increased by \$44 million. However, the minister in his opening statement said that it was increased by \$66.4 million.

Page 72 also talks about a 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence and federal funding. The questions through you, Madam Chair, that I have are: how does the department intend to support the 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence, and what's the total amount of funds allocated by your department towards the strategy to end gender-based violence? How much of this fund is coming from the federal government? Same page and another question is: how does this strategy align with the government's decision to end the Family Violence Death Review Committee?

Through you, Madam Chair, another question is that the Justice budget includes \$26 million for public-sector compensation. Has this already been negotiated and allocated?

Through you, Madam Chair, another question. Once we account for federal transfers and AFL, Alberta Law Foundation, funds, the

ministry's core operating expense for Justice didn't increase to population and inflation. In fact, it's a \$5.5 million real cut. At a time when our justice system is facing delays, they need more resources, not less. Why is the government cutting and withholding funds from the justice system?

Madam Chair, moving on to page 86 of the fiscal plan, it talks about government commitment to strengthen the justice system and affordable and efficient access to the justice system. It talks about legal aid. The question through you, Madam Chair, is: what portion of this \$105 million grant is coming from the government of Alberta, from the government of Canada, and from Alberta Law Foundation funds?

Another question relating to the same page is that access to justice often requires accommodations, and those looking for accommodations shouldn't have to fight for them; they should get them as a right. The question I have is: what accommodation policies and practices are in place to ensure equitable access to justice for Albertans with disabilities? Another question is that the office of the disability advocate of Alberta has been clear that barriers exist in all areas of responsibility, including the Ministry of Justice in all of its divisions. What work has been done or will be done with the office of the advocate to address barriers and increase access for Albertans with disabilities? A more accessible justice system would mean better access for Albertans with disabilities.

9:20

Page 108 of the fiscal plan, Madam Chair, talks about capital allocations. The question I have is: what's the timeline for the completion of a new facility for the office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Edmonton and the Court of Appeal facility in Calgary?

Page 116 of the fiscal plan again talks about technology system upgrades. The minister indicated that \$10.2 million have been set aside for that. However, page 116 of the fiscal plan says \$17 million. What's the correct number? What's the timeline for the completion of these justice information and technology system projects? What are these systems, and are they specifically for court modernization?

Madam Chair, page 156 of the fiscal plan, schedule 13, again, says that Justice has a total of \$30 million for capital projects. What other projects are included in this \$30 million, and what's the timeline for their completion?

Madam Chair, page 159 of the fiscal plan, schedule 21, talks about changes to fees. It also includes changes to speeding fines, racing and stunting, increases anywhere between 30 to 50 per cent. There are other fee increases listed there as well for court and justice services document authentication. A question I have is that traffic fines are going up again. How will the ministry evaluate the deterrent effect of these fines, or is it just another way of taking money from Albertans who are struggling with the affordability crisis? Also, the government has moved everything online. Does it not limit access to justice for those who struggle with digital access? Another question is that once these fines were collected by municipalities, and at that time government referred to those as cash cows. Now the government is increasing these fines quite significantly, 30 to 50 per cent. How does government justify such increases?

Another question I have with respect to the fiscal plan, page 160, schedule 22. It's about full-time equivalents. There is a change of 19 employees. We are seeing a decrease in full-time equivalents. What areas will be impacted by this decrease? Will there be any cuts to services? The minister talked about it in his opening remarks, that it will not impact front-line services. Help us understand how we can have fewer people on the front line and that will not impact services.

Page 161 of the fiscal plan. It lists \$113 million in grants to others. Who are these grants for? How will they be awarded? Can you share some of the details of these grant recipients?

I think these are the questions. I still have 10 seconds left, but I will leave that for the minister so he can answer them in a more fulsome manner.

The Chair: Well, thank you, hon. member.

We'll turn it 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. It gives us a great opportunity to highlight some of the wonderful work happening in Alberta Justice. The opportunity to comment on some of these questions will give us a good snapshot of exactly what we're doing.

Madam Chair, the first question was in relation to mental health and addiction. Certainly, Alberta Justice finds itself at the very forefront of dealing with mental health and addictions matters, which I have always advocated to say are important in the continuum of care. As you know, we have shifted to making sure that all of the mental health and addiction approaches involve a multitude of ministries and a crossministry approach.

What I would say to the hon. member is that some of the work that we're doing in our specialized courts is indicative of our commitment and dedication to the work that we're doing to address mental health and addictions issues here in our province. One of those examples is the work that we're doing in our drug treatment courts. I think I have said it before, but I'll say it again. The work that is being done in these drug treatment courts is remarkable. It is a very specialized and individually centred approach that works directly with the individuals along with prosecutors, defence counsel, support workers, and judges and helps individuals who are addicted to substances go through a very structured program to help them get past their addictions.

One of the interesting statistics that I'd like to mention to the committee is this. When individuals go through the program successfully, about 70 per cent of those never reoffend again. I think that's an impressive statistic to let the committee know. This is important from the lens of Alberta Justice because one of the things that we work very hard to do is to make sure that those who are, unfortunately, within the criminal justice system try to find a pathway to get out of it once and for all. That's important. That's one way that we're working on it. We've dedicated significant resources to drug treatment courts here in our province. We have currently seven locations across the province operating. Those locations are as follows: Calgary, Edmonton, central Alberta, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Grande Prairie, and Fort McMurray.

I'll move on fairly quickly to another question that I think that the member had, and that was in relation to the family justice strategy. I want to talk a little bit about that because I think it's important to, again, let members know. The goal of the family justice strategy is to ensure that we try and resolve as many cases as possible without going through a formal court process. This is important. I think that the impact on families is significantly reduced when we have mechanisms in place that reduce the impact, the stress, and the anxiety on families going through difficult times, and that is especially the case where there are children involved. What we've done thus far is that we've expanded the family justice strategy to a number of locations. So far it's been implemented in Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Grande Prairie, St. Albert, Sherwood Park, Fort Saskatchewan, and Leduc.

The member asked about costs. We've allocated a total of \$11.2 million to support five locations, with an additional \$3.2 million to help augment the expansion strategy that we have. The strategy

includes four mandatory precourt requirements that support and, I think, encourage early resolution and reduce the impact on families and children. That includes the requirement that families complete an online parenting after separation course for matters involving minor children. It requires parties to meet with family court counsellors, especially when they are self-represented and have dependent children. It provides for financial disclosure supports for – providing financial disclosure for support or property matters and participating in an alternative dispute resolution process and also requiring families to attend an alternative dispute resolution process.

Now, what we've seen from this strategy is a significant drop in the number of court applications that are being filed at both the Alberta Court of Justice and the Court of King's Bench and a number of matters that are being resolved in these precourt services that we're providing. I can tell members of the committee that applications in 2024 were 40 per cent lower than they were in previous years. In 2025 applications are 34 per cent lower as compared to preimplementation levels. I think that's a testament to the work that the family justice strategy is accomplishing in making sure that so many families have alternative ways of dealing with their family law matters without having to go through the formalized court process.

9:30

Talked a little bit again about the family support service orders, and the member asked some questions about that. I can tell members of the committee that family support order services has 198 FTEs and a project cost of \$18.8 million. This program delivers essential programs to help families meet their ongoing maintenance obligations.

Maintenance enforcement is the program that collects and distributes court-ordered child and spousal support payments for children and families and collects subrogated claims supports on behalf of the Crown for recipients and families on income support. The program applies enforcement tools when payments are not made. Many of us will be familiar with those enforcement tools, but the family support order services does provide support to families by facilitating the payments of court-ordered supports to recipients.

In addition to that, the child support recalculation program provides families with a cost-effective alternative to the court system for recalculating child support orders annually.

On the question of the gender-based violence strategy, as I mentioned earlier, this is a strategy that involves a number of different ministries. It is led by the ministry of arts and culture, but certainly Alberta Justice does play a pivotal role in the work that is being done. The cost of that, as the member asked, is a total of \$2.1 million in Budget 2026, which will support a number of initiatives. We're actively supporting the implementation of the national action plan to end gender-based violence, with a current focus on pillar 3, which centres on creating a more responsive justice system. Justice has established a working group to support this pilot project with participation from the judiciary, the Alberta Crown prosecution service, and the Ministry of Children and Family Services.

When it comes to the question of Legal Aid Alberta, I'm pleased to say that Budget 2026 is fully supporting the needs and the requirements of Legal Aid. The total budget for Legal Aid allocation is approximately \$104 million dedicated to legal aid. What I've said from the very beginning is that legal aid is the primary way of ensuring that access to justice is fulfilled in our province because it ensures that eligible Albertans receive the legal representation that they need and deserve, Madam Chair. Legal Aid Alberta, as the member mentioned, is funded by the government of

Alberta, a contribution from the Alberta Law Foundation, and a smaller contribution from the government of Canada.

What is important to note here is that Legal Aid Alberta is not being cut whatsoever. Legal Aid Alberta is functioning with a significant grant from the government of Alberta. It is augmented by a statutory contribution by the Alberta Law Foundation in addition to that received funding from the federal government to help provide services that Albertans need. The assertion, I think, that legal aid is being cut is simply incorrect. I would like to correct the member's statement. I can also advise the members of the committee that Legal Aid operates with a significant reserve fund as well, so they do have the flexibility and the ability to allocate funds from their reserves, which are substantial at this time. They are certainly using it to deliver those front-line services that Albertans need.

I want to talk a little bit about the question in relation to justice digital or the capital investment into . . .

The Chair: I'm so sorry, Minister. I was anxiously waiting to hear that answer, but we've run out of time. Back to the Official Opposition.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you I think I asked a number of questions, and many of them the minister did not get a chance to get to. I would appreciate if you could provide some of those answers in writing. Also with respect to legal aid, Madam Chair, my question was the proportion of grant to legal aid that's coming from the government of Alberta, the government of Canada, and from the Alberta Law Foundation.

Moving on to the business plan. Madam Chair, the Minister of Justice mentioned in his opening statement that the Ministry of Justice plays a crucial role in upholding the rule of law. Page 111 of the business plan also starts with the opening statement, "The Ministry of Justice works to ensure a fair and accessible justice system . . . where the rule of law is upheld and government undertakings are administered according to law." As I said, it's the opening statement of the Justice department's business plan. That was in the opening statement of the minister's comment as well. Essentially, an important and core mandate of the Justice ministry is to uphold the rule of law. It's fundamental to a functioning democracy that the rule of law is upheld and the government undertakings are administered according to the law. As of late many Albertans, legal professionals, their representative organizations, and even members of the judiciary have raised concerns about the state of the rule of law in this province and also the Premier of Alberta's statement with respect to judicial funds. Those things have been in the public light.

Chair, if you'll allow me to give a little bit of context for my next questions. The context is that the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court has weighed in on criticism of judges being unelected and activists. Three Chief Justices of Alberta courts have weighed in on the rule of law. Many lawyers from Camrose, your constituency, Madam Chair, including two former Alberta Justice ministers, have raised concerns about the rule of law. The question I have is to the minister. What do you have to say to all these individuals and organizations who are concerned about the state of the rule of law in this province? How is your ministry ensuring that government undertakings are administered according to the rule of law, when everyone believes that government is overreaching into the justice system?

The next question I have, Madam Chair, is with respect to the recent statement from the Premier about withholding Justice funds. Does the department think that any threats to withholding Justice funds align with the ministry's stated objective of upholding the

rule of law? Will the department follow through on that direction or commit to funding the judiciary at an appropriate level and uphold the rule of law?

Another question I have, Madam Chair, is that the Assembly of Treaty Chiefs have also raised concerns with respect to government failure to meet the treaty-based constitutional and governance responsibilities. They are raising serious concerns about the rule of law. Again, my question through you, Madam Chair, is: how will the department ensure treaty-based constitutional and governance responsibilities are administered according to the rule of law?

Page 111 of the business plan talks about "The Ministry of Justice is taking . . . steps to protect the rights and interests of Albertans" and also talks about legislation being developed to ensure greater oversight and appropriate safeguards when Albertans seek medical assistance in dying. Through you, Madam Chair, the question I have is: what are the plans? Who is being consulted? Is there a report, or will there be a public report? What exactly is the department planning to change, and what greater oversight is being sought? My understanding is that there is an exemption in MAID legislation that exists for mental health, which is set to expire on March 17, 2027. Has the department had any conversation with the federal government about this exemption or the changes the government is contemplating to make to MAID that relate to this exemption?

Madam Chair, page 111 of the business plan talks about how the ministry is helping Albertans dealing with family matters. Also page 115 of the business plan, key objective 3.2 talks about supports for family matters, and page 115, 3(b), performance measures, talks about the proportion of family affairs that were handled by Alberta Justice dispute resolution programs. I know that the minister talked about it in his earlier response, but I do have questions about matters being resolved outside the court using these services. The minister indicated there are four mandatory steps. Essentially, now people have to go through more steps before they can come before the judge. That's what is making the caseload look lower, but essentially it is causing delays in certain matters as well.

9:40

The next question through you, Madam Chair, is, for instance, mandatory ADR service. Are these services income tested, or are these services available to all families' judicial system participants? If they are income tested, what's the income threshold to qualify for these services? Again, through you, Madam Chair, the question I have is that because of this fourth step, isn't it true that reduction in family matters is, as a result of the families going through these processes and their inability to have direct access to court, the increased red tape which makes it harder for families to access justice – that is, getting support orders and parenting orders – thereby limiting access to justice and delaying access to justice?

Another question through you, Madam Chair, is that the ADR process requires both parties to consent to it, and if one parent refuses to engage in ADR, this delays support orders for the party seeking support. Often the impact is on the parents, mostly women, and children. Not only does the support get delayed, there are now further roadblocks before the court can intervene and provide support to children and families. Another question relating to the same, through you, Madam Chair: is the court being consulted on these changes and how about the individuals that are directly impacted; that is, families who may not want to have additional roadblocks before they can access the court for timely interventions? One more question through you, Madam Chair is: can you name some of the organizations who were consulted for lawyers?

I think I have room for another question. Page 113 of the business plan, key objective 1.3, review of election-related regulations. The

question through you, Madam Chair, is: which legislation is the ministry planning to review now? Is the government contemplating any changes to referendum laws? And through you, Madam Chair, the minister is responsible for the Citizen Initiative Act and referendum laws, and the government has announced a number of referendums in this fiscal year, so how much budget has been set aside in this budget for referendums, and what's the cost of each of these referendums?

I think I have asked a fair bit of questions, and the next questions do not necessarily relate to these questions, so I can just let the minister answer these questions and I will ask more.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll move over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you once again to the hon. member. I just want to continue on from what we were talking about before the break, Justice capital investment, which is what the member asked about. A breakdown of that is that the total number is \$29.9 million allocated to Justice capital investment, and the breakdown is as follows: \$10.02 million to the Justice digital for digitization and modernization of justice processes, \$7 million for the justice system technology renewal program, \$4.4 million to the office of the Chief Medical Examiner, \$4 million for courthouse videoconferencing expansion, \$2.2 million for advanced projects, \$1.1 million for general capital as well new equipment purchases, and \$1 million for court information technology services.

In respect of the question on the breakdown of the legal aid funding, I do have that breakdown for the hon. member: \$104,500,000 came from the government of Alberta, \$14.6 million of that was by a federal transfer, \$1.8 million of that from MHA, and the remainder from ALF to continue. Now, that is to be determined for the '26-27 year because the statutory contribution from the Alberta Law Foundation depends on the revenues that the foundation receives, and that fluctuates year after year because of changes in interest rates. The nature of the Alberta Law Foundation's revenue depends on interest derived from the pooled trust accounts of lawyers here in this province. That interest is then transferred over to the Alberta Law Foundation. So the revenue levels of the Alberta Law Foundation typically fluctuate year after year, and the number of ALF funding will be determined once we receive those revenues.

On the question of judicial independence I have to say this. The member knows full well that we have a robust and independent process for the selection of judicial candidates here in this province. All judicial candidates must go through a vetting process by two separate and independent committees. The first one, which I'll refer to as judicial council, consists of representatives of all three levels of court and two other individuals. The second one is the Alberta Judicial Nominating Committee, and that consists of members of the public as well as representatives from the court. Both of those processes are wholly independent, and both of those processes ensure that a robust vetting process occurs for every single judicial candidate that comes forward for recommendation by Executive Council.

I will also say this. The assertion by the member in relation to interference is simply incorrect. I have to say that the statements made by the Premier encouraging greater collaboration and greater participation in the work that is being done by committees that select our superior court judges – that is, specifically the judges from the Court of King's Bench and the Court of Appeal – are ones that I think are reasonable in all of the contexts. Having additional representation, having somebody from the province give a line of

sight to these selection committees or additional individuals giving lines of sight is an important thing that I think that we can all benefit from.

I can also say this to the member. I think we're quite well positioned here in Alberta to have a really good line of sight on some of the remarkable lawyers that are practising here in our province, and the inclusion of additional representatives from the province on the selection committees that choose our superior court judges would create a better process overall. Having somebody from Alberta who has a closer and, I think, better line of sight on some of our candidates is only helpful. I would certainly disagree with the member when he asserts that this is sort of an attempt at interference. I think we would all be better for it, not only as a province but also in the federal selection committee as well.

When it comes to the question of MAID and some of the issues that the member raised, I can tell the members of the committee that we engaged in a very robust engagement process with various organizations all across our province. I think that we were able to meet with a significant number of various groups. The organizations that we met with included postsecondary institutions, public bodies, not-for-profits, regulatory bodies, and private organizations as well to get a wide scope of information from the folks that are interested in this particular area.

9:50

Now, I can also advise the committee that it is anticipated that Justice will introduce a new legislation and regulations to establish safeguards for MAID in this province. We know that this is an incredibly sensitive area, and we know that it is important that all of those involved get it right. There is simply no do-over in these areas, and we think that it's important that there is some oversight to protect vulnerable people from undue influences. The legislation will likely be introduced or tabled in the Legislature this session, and the member will see some of those safeguards, but I can say that all of the anticipated provisions of that legislation and the subsequent regulations have been informed by a robust, province-wide engagement of those who are interested or affected by MAID. I hope that is helpful.

I can also say that the work that we're doing with our federal counterparts is also robust. We have a representative at the federal, provincial, and territorial meetings involving MAID or concerning MAID, and we are represented by the Ministry of Hospital and Surgical Health Services.

I'll go back to the family justice strategy just to address a few of the comments that the member made in relation to the precourt services, if you will. I would certainly say that they do not cause delay. These are precourt services, sometimes informal and often extremely effective in helping families navigate their difficult situations in a way that doesn't put families, partners, and children in a courtroom. I think that for anyone who has practised family law to any degree, having children go through an informal or an ADR process carries with it far more value than having families and children subjected to the formal court process.

I can also tell all members of the committee that the ADR processes involving family are not income tested. We want to be able to provide these services to every single family in our province. I can say that civil is tested, but family matters are not income tested. The purpose of that is because we want to make sure that everybody has a fair crack at resolving their family law issues in a more comfortable and maybe less stressful way.

Where court is required, there will always be an opportunity for families to seek the relief of our courts. That is why there is an additional ability for any family who feels that ADR is inappropriate to seek waivers and go directly before a judge to get

the resolution they deserve. In addition to that, we know and we're well aware that some matters can't be resolved through informal processes like ADR and mediation, and for that the courts will be available. There are emergency scenarios that require immediate court attention, and for that the courts are always available to provide those services.

The question of consultation is important here because the family justice strategy was informed with close collaboration by the courts and stakeholders in the legal industry. I can also tell all members of the committee that the Court of King's Bench adopted as part of their ongoing family law practices components of the family justice strategy to move forward in a more structured and streamlined way. We know that it's important to have these matters adjudicated quickly, and the court is working hand in hand with Alberta Justice to accomplish this.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the Official Opposition.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. I think some of the things I talked about with respect to the rule of law were not my assertion, through you, Madam Chair; they are coming from Chief Justices of Alberta. They are coming from lawyers, former Attorneys General, retired judges like Adèle Kent.

Another thing through you, Madam Chair. That federal judicial advisory committee consists of seven members, all of them Albertans: a nominee of the Chief Justice of Alberta, a nominee of the Law Society of Alberta, a nominee of the Canadian Bar Association, a nominee the Minister of Justice, and three nominees of the federal government. They are all Albertans. I'm not sure what more influence government is looking for.

Moving on. I will talk about page 114 of the business plan. It talks about outcome 2, Alberta's justice system is fair and accessible. The department is talking about some steps to streamline the garnishment process. The question I have through you, Madam Chair, is: what are some of these challenges, and what are some of the changes to the garnishment process that will make it easier for Albertans to collect on their judgment? What are the plans?

Another question. Page 114, outcome 2, also talks about precharge assessment. Through you, Madam Chair, government has criticized previously triage processes, but precharge assessment is essentially a triage process. The question I have is: are there dedicated Crown prosecutors who are doing this precharge triage process work? When was the program implemented? How many Crown prosecutors are designated for this work? Is the program available all across Alberta or limited to certain areas? When will this program be available across the province?

Another question through you, Madam Chair, is about delays facing the justice system. We know that government tracks Jordan delays. This information is tracked and monitored continuously using the prosecutor information system manager and scheduling management systems and follow up with Jordan prosecution coordinators. My question through you, Madam Chair, is: how many summary conviction offence charges are awaiting trial that are over 18 months old? Second question through you, Madam Chair: how many indictable offence charges are awaiting trial and are over a 30-month time frame? To be clear, I'm not asking how many Jordan applications were made to the courts. I'm just asking about the offences that are awaiting trial that are over 18 months or a 30-month time frame.

Another question through you, Madam Chair, is: what will the ministry do to address these delays? Will they open more courtrooms? If there are sufficient trial times available in courts and

enough Crown prosecutors, then we wouldn't need to be placed in a situation where these applications are being made for delays. What does the ministry intend to do to proactively handle this situation? Another question through you, Madam Chair: can more courtrooms be opened and made available to hear trials on criminal matters? Complainant victims should have timely access to justice instead of a triage system.

Moving on to performance metrics in the business plan, 2(a) performance measure, Alberta Court of Justice lead time to trial for serious and violent crimes. The target for this year is 23 weeks. When we talk about serious and violent matters, are we talking about indictable offences? Are we talking about all convictions? How is this target reached? Another question through you, Madam Chair. While the operating budget of the department is being cut, there are no additional resources that this budget will provide to meet these targets. Does the department not understand that without additional resources there will be further delays?

Page 116, statement of operations. Under revenue transfers from the government of Canada is estimated to be \$45.4 million. Can the minister provide a breakdown of this transfer?

Through you, Madam Chair, a question with respect to page 116, which lists revenues from maintenance enforcement, which is the same as last year, \$18 million. So what's the caseload like in this program? What's the amount of support outstanding for the families waiting to collect these supports?

10:00

Outcome 1, page 113, talks about Alberta rights and interests. I have a number of questions with respect to that. Chair, please allow me to offer some context. The Canadian Bar Association, Civil Liberties Association, and many others have raised concerns with respect to the government's repeated use of the notwithstanding clause, removing the judicial branch from the democratic lawmaking process, and the impact it has for Albertans' rights.

There was also a joint statement from the civil liberties organization Amnesty International Canada and Anglican Diocese of Edmonton to similar effect. There was a statement from Calgary's criminal defence bar, Edmonton trial lawyers association, Red Deer defence bar, and southern Alberta defence lawyer association. So, through you, Madam Chair, how does this repeated use of the notwithstanding clause align with the ministry's outcome 1, which talks about Albertans' rights and interests being protected? Do Albertan trans rights or teacher rights not get the same protection, as others?

The next question, through you, Madam Chair, is that I also understand teachers have challenged Bill 2 in the courts. What is the anticipated cost of that action for the government?

Next question, again about outcome 1. It talks about defending Alberta's jurisdiction, so specific questions through you, Madam Chair: what is the estimated total cost the department will incur on cases against the federal government? Will there be any outsourcing of legal services in such cases? How is such outsourcing done? Which law firm has been hired so far for this purpose to represent Alberta in the courts? Through you, Madam Chair: why does the government continue to prioritize legal battles with Ottawa over properly and adequately funding essential justice service that Albertans rely on?

Through you, Madam Chair, another question: the department is defending the government against a lawsuit from the former CEO of AHS. The claim is about \$1.7 million in compensation. But the question through you, Madam Chair, I have is for the minister: is it correct that the risk management fund has had a cap of \$450 per hour for outside legal work? If it's correct, has this cap been waived for government following this cap and paying outside lawyers at

this rate? The lawyer of record is public information, so the government lawyer in this case is Munaf Mohamed. So to date what expenses have been incurred by the government in this case, and what is the expected total cost of this litigation in this fiscal year?

Another question: what is the cost of the government intervention at the Supreme Court of Canada in Quebec's secularism law bill about Bill 21? This bill discriminates against religious symbols and people wearing hijabs and turbans. Why does the government think siding with Quebec and defending Quebec's discriminatory law is the best use of Albertans' public dollars? How does it align with the government objective of upholding people's rights?

These are my questions for now.

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

We will return to the minister for his response. Please proceed.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and once again, thank you to the member for those questions. In relation to the question on judges, we work year round to fill vacancies on a regular basis. There is a very small at any given time number of vacant FTEs in relation to Justice positions here in this province. We just made, as of yesterday, an additional six new appointments, clearing up some of the vacant FTE positions.

As the member will know and I think as everyone will know, judges typically move to part-time basis, they will retire at times, they will move, so the pressures are ongoing to fill these vacancies. But I will say that we maintain a small number of vacancies at any given time, and when we do find vacancies, we work to fill them up as quickly as possible.

When it comes to the garnishees and the question on garnishments and whatnot, I can say that the amendments to the Civil Enforcement Act and the civil enforcement regulation are required to streamline the garnishment processes and are expected to come forward in the '26-27 year. There are a number of processes being undertaken right now to better understand the implications of streamlining the garnishment process, particularly in respect to reducing the involvement of the clerk's office at the Court of King's Bench. We expect that work to happen in the '26-27 year. We are, again, working on a number of different initiatives to help better understand how the most efficient way of doing it is accomplished.

When it comes to the precharge assessment I think that the hon. member might be trying to conflate what the NDP had put in a number of years ago and compare that to what we have endorsed as a precharge assessment. Let me just clarify for the record the difference. When it comes to the NDP triage protocol, that was a guideline issued by the then Minister of Justice, who the hon. member worked very closely with to encourage prosecutors to triage criminal cases in the order of importance. It was incredibly difficult for me to accept that that was an appropriate way of doing things. It was difficult because there is no one criminal matter that is more important than another. Criminal matters are important to everybody here in this province, whether it's the family that was the victim of a vandalism at their property or whether it was an assault or something more serious. I think that it is incumbent upon our Alberta Crown prosecution service to treat every single criminal matter with the same respect as any other.

The triage protocol required or compelled prosecutors to pick and choose, and I don't think that's a fair assessment whatsoever. The difference is that the precharge assessment program that we've implemented is a program that provides for collaboration between police and prosecutors in looking at all precharge matters to assess whether or not there is anything that might be deficient in the file at the very beginning of the process. What that means is that through this collaboration, prosecutors and police officers engage directly

on a particular matter, look to the quality of the evidence, and ensure collaboratively that the evidence and the material and the charge itself are viable and have a reasonable likelihood of conviction and are in the public interest to prosecute. This is a stark difference from simply picking and choosing what a prosecutor should prosecute.

What this has resulted in are better quality prosecutions because when police officers and Crown prosecutors work together, we know that the evidence is more complete, we know that the evidence is of better quality, and we know that if anything is missing in a file, it is caught at the very beginning of the process and not at the very end, when the prosecutors are in court. That is why when in areas that we have piloted the precharge assessment process, we've seen higher likelihoods of conviction and we've seen matters that are not viable dismissed earlier, because we do not want individuals who are charged with a crime to have to go through a process from beginning to end to get resolution when it can be caught much earlier.

Now I can tell members of the committee that there are approximately 18 prosecutors across our province working on the precharge assessment policy, and I know from some of the questions that we've received that it is certainly a goal of this government to implement the precharge assessment all across our province. We know that there are a number of policing detachments who are working on this, and we know that Calgary has recently signed on. I personally attended a meeting with members of the prosecution service along with the Calgary police chief and members of her division to talk about the rollout and implementation of the precharge assessment process.

10:10

But here's the good news. The good news is that approximately 20 per cent of the files entering the criminal justice system have been reduced because of better vetting, better eyes on a file, and those that are going through the criminal justice system have a better likelihood and a greater percentage of conviction rates than those that do not. Everything about the precharge assessment is vastly superior to the triage policy protocols that were implemented by the NDP. It was for good reason that we got rid of that program some time ago.

When it comes to the question of prosecution services and what we're doing to make sure that the criminal matters are being advanced quickly, I can advise this committee that we currently have 391 trial prosecutors, which marks an increase of approximately 62 new prosecutors over the 2019 figures. I can also advise the committee that the Jordan backlogs, which the member was very particular about and I applaud the member for asking about it, are at historic low numbers as well. I think in '24 and '25 there were a very low number of Jordan applications that were successful.

The question of whether – and the member was very particular about this question, so I'll have to answer it in a particular way as well. The question was: how many cases are there that exceed the 18- or 30-month thresholds when it comes to Jordan cases? I would say to the member that there are a number of reasons why a case might exceed an 18- and 30-month time limit. Some of those are attributable to Crown delays, and some of those are attributable to defence delays. As the member knows full well, Jordan matters only arise when delays are attributable to Crown delays. It is very difficult for me to provide or articulate a number of how many matters are currently beyond the Jordan timeline deadlines because it is simply not a question that we can assess before this committee. There are criminal matters that have exceeded the 18- and 30-month timelines, but the vast majority of those are because of decisions

that individuals accused or their defence make. They do not pose a Jordan threat to us in that sense.

When it comes to the question about how many – well, I want to talk a little bit about the use of the notwithstanding clause. I think that's very important. I think it would probably take up the majority of this segment. I will say unequivocally that not only is the notwithstanding clause meant to preserve democratically elected legislators' ability to legislate for the public good, but we will not hesitate whatsoever to use every single legal tool that we have when it involves the safety and well-being of our children. I can advise this committee and members of this committee that we did not hesitate to take immediate action to use the notwithstanding clause when it involved the best interests of our children. At the end of the day, this government is laser focused on the work that it does to protect children and to protect the vulnerable. That's exactly why we had to use it.

It was a difficult decision, but at the end of the day we use it to preserve the integrity, the safety, and the well-being of our children. That is why the government decided, through an act of the Legislature and through a tool that is available within the Charter, to implement the notwithstanding clause on three very important bills involving the safety and the well-being of our children.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll go back over to the government side now.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I think I got to go first here. Through you, Chair, to the minister: are you good with back and forth?

Mr. Amery: I prefer to keep the process consistent.

Mr. Getson: Unfortunately, I'm going to show protest on that, but I will go along with your decision, sir. You get to listen to me in a monologue for a bit. I'll try to make it a little more articulate and entertaining for you. I know it's been very formal business. Even though we do have the questions of the day, there are going to be a few little jabs I'm going to throw in here and there if you're okay with that, sir. If you've known me well enough for the last seven years, it shouldn't be unexpected.

On page 113 of the ministry's '26-29 business plan, outcome 1, it states that "The ministry continues to stand up for Albertans and make the province's voice heard in Ottawa. By challenging federal legislation and policies that are unconstitutional or harmful for the province . . ." and as you just articulated, with the notwithstanding clause and some of the circumstances I think that's been demonstrated. We know that federal decisions can have significant impacts on Albertans' safety, economy, and constitutional authority. The business plan notes that Alberta continues to partner with the province and other territories to push back against federal overreach, however, and that's including challenges to the Federal Impact Assessment Act, zero emissions, vehicle standards, Emergencies Act, and the federal government's decision to label plastics as a toxic substance.

Albertans expect their provincial government to defend provincial jurisdiction and ensure that federal legislation does not undermine Alberta's economic interest or public safety priorities. It's also essential that Albertans maintain a legal expertise and capacity required to respond effectively when the federal decisions infringe upon provincial authority.

Now, Minister, we've heard lots of rhetoric back and forth in the media, and this really helps our constituents in this format, when it's not the banter that takes place in question period, so I appreciate

you taking the time to answer these. My constituents, obviously, need some of that clarity.

With that, Minister, on those first items can the minister elaborate on how Budget 2026 supports Alberta's continued efforts to defend provincial jurisdiction and protect Albertans from federal overreach? Again, it's a good policy to make sure that you've got good partners in the federation. How does the legal service division support this work? What messages does this send regarding Alberta's commitment to defending its constitutional authority, again, knowing that that is the mother document of our country?

The next one, sir, is a little bit closer to my heart. It's a little bit potentially contentious, so I'll try to get through this as well with that. On page 113 under outcome 1 a key objective of the business plan speaks to "[taking] actions to protect Albertans' rights, including the establishing safeguards to ensure medical assistance in dying is regulated consistently." The business plan notes that the legislation is being developed to ensure greater oversight and that appropriate safeguards are in place when Albertans seek medical assistance in dying. This is complex, and it's a sensitive issue, as I stated earlier. Many Albertans have emphasized the need for giving strong safeguards to protect the vulnerable individuals and provide clarity for practitioners. Given evolving federal direction in this area, it's important that the provincial oversight mechanisms are clear, consistent, and enforceable.

I'll share, Madam Chair, through you to the minister and other members here, too: my father-in-law was a doc. He was a military doc, chief of staff in Lac La Biche. He had a cancer that came on really fast, and I was there. I was the one that had to go get the nurses in the hallway to do that, and he chose his method on the way out the door as a medical person that's very aware of that. The circumstances around that condition, of that gentleman knowing exactly the medical outcomes and what he was doing, is substantially different from what the federal government is leaning into. I said it nicely here, but there is a massive contrast between the two of what we're seeing, of the intent and what the medical community contemplated in the first place. We've had a number of doctors and nurses showing their concerns.

Being sensitive in the issue so this doesn't get taken out of context is not because I haven't been part of that process on a personal level or as an MLA. It's finding that balance of standing out what the intent is and how this could be potentially sliding down a different path. Albertans need to know that there are safeguards. So can the minister explain how Budget 2026 supports the development and implementation of safeguards related to medical assistance in dying? What role will Alberta Justice play in ensuring that oversight and compliance, and how will these measures protect vulnerable Albertans while providing that clarity for those practitioners?

Then through you, Chair, to the minister, another one on key objective 1.4 speaks to defending Albertans' right for lawful and safe permission of firearms. Back in the day I was very proud to be part of the task force that started bringing more active participation with our CFO. If I can, prior to just jumping in that, Minister, a compliment to the CFO and her staff of how she has taken that balance between public safety and advocacy and having that in. It's a great comparator and contrast to what we had before. Having that CFO actively participating and making sure that the public safety is there: absolutely fantastic feedback on where we're going there.

10:20

The business plan indicates that in '26-27 the ministry will invest \$9.2 million to enable the Alberta Chief Firearms Officer to deliver the Canadian firearms program in Alberta and to support Alberta's lawful and abiding firearms ownerships under the Alberta Firearms

Act. Many Albertans – farmers, hunters, sport shooters, small-business owners – have expressed concerns regarding federal firearms policies, and they feel the disproportionate impact of lawful owners rather than criminals. At the same time maintaining public safety is an absolute priority. The Alberta Chief Firearms Officer, as stated, plays an absolute critical role in that process. I think you can see the comparator in contrast when it comes down to the acumen, the understanding, the knowledge, and the practicality of what the intent was of the laws and what we see happening in federal. I'm very, very in place to emphasize that you're standing up for what is right in those areas.

With that, can the chief minister elaborate on how the \$9.2 million investment strengthens the Alberta Chief Firearms Officer's ability to deliver service and promote public safety? Further to that, is the office balancing the regulatory role with the advocacy for the law-abiding firearms, and how does that work? What improvements in the service delivery timelines can Albertans expect?

With that, I'll transfer over now to another one here. Through you, Chair, to the minister, outcome 2 of the business plan states that Alberta's justice system must be fair and accessible. Key objective 2.2 commits the ministry to advancing digital transformation and streamlining processes to improve Alberta's access to justice. Like everything else, we're moving from paper and fax machines down to something a little bit more interactive here, it looks like, as well.

Page 114 of the business plan outlines a \$16.7 million dollar investment in enhanced online services, digital platforms, and videoconferencing. As Alberta's population grows, modernized digital services can reduce administrative burdens, improve scheduled case management, and increase accessibility for rural and remote communities. The caveat is if we have the darn fibre optics out in the area, so I'm going to hit you on that, too, Minister. Digital service can also reduce unnecessary courthouse visits, freeing up times for the courts for serious, complex matters.

At the top surface everything works great when we start transferring over. Again, we touch on rural and some of our populations having – and again, Chair, through you to the minister, to make sure that this works properly, if we're putting this investment in place and we're looking to move there, then there needs to be some certainties, obviously, that the system works when it needs, and I'm probably one of those examples. I get near something electronic; it fails every time.

With that little bit of skepticism in there, can the minister outline what specific enhancements Albertans will see through the \$16.7 million Justice digital investment? Further to that, how will this investment reduce delays and improve access to justice? How will the ministry ensure digital services remain secure while maintaining in-person options for those who require them?

With that, Minister, I think I'm about done as to my questions. I'll turn it over to you.

The Chair: Please proceed, Minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you once again to the hon. member. I'll talk a little bit about it. That was a lot, and I'm going to try and unpack it as much as I can. I'll begin by saying this. When it comes to defending Alberta's jurisdiction, we will not hesitate to do everything we can and use every single constitutional and legal tool available to us to address federal overreach. As you may recall, we took the federal government to court over the largely unconstitutional Impact Assessment Act, and we continued on despite the minor and, I think, insignificant changes that the federal government made in response to that Supreme Court decision by going back to court again on it. That

court matter was just heard in February of 2026, but we are awaiting the court's decision.

I think it's important to keep in mind that some of this might touch on some of what the hon. member asked earlier about the use and the work of the legal services division and the role that they do. Certainly, the legal services division provides support services all across the province to various ministries but also defends the government of Alberta and advances its interests as well through the use of primarily civil Crown counsel from within internal counsel. Some matters are typically referred out to external counsel as well.

Now, the cost of a legal services division lawyer is lower than the cost of external services. I can advise the members of the committee that the use of our internal lawyers averages about \$206 per hour whereas a similarly retained external counsel averages about \$426 per hour. Those numbers continue to be consistent across the board. Now, that's to say that those are averages. Some lawyers will cost more, and some lawyers will cost less.

The government typically reserves the use of external counsel to particular matters that require a specialized type of expertise, for example. One example of that is a case that we are currently litigating in the jurisdiction of Quebec, and because of that, it makes entire sense to hire somebody or retain a law firm in Quebec to help advance our interests there. These are the types of things that external counsel is used for, but the vast majority of cases in this province are handled by our legal services division.

Now, of course, we continue to do everything we can to protect Alberta's interests both from federal overreach and ensuring that its interests are protected and advanced on behalf of all Albertans. We continue to do this through a number of mechanisms, of course, as I mentioned earlier, closely working with our legal services division and the remarkably talented lawyers that we have within Alberta Justice, also utilizing at times, where appropriate, some of our external counsel to help with either complex or specialized matters that the legal services division doesn't necessarily have the expertise in. We do that on a case-by-case basis.

We know that we've had some great successes in recent years. We know that the Impact Assessment Act, which was challenged at the Supreme Court, for example, some years ago, we were largely successful with. We know that we are continuing on with a second challenge of that. But as many members heard just recently, we think that the Premier through her advocacy and the work with our Prime Minister and federal government has yielded some very impressive concessions by the federal government that we'll continue to advance and push while at the same time continuing on with our current legal challenge.

We're involved in litigation. Adding plastic manufactured items as a toxic substance – as you know, we call it the plastics ban. That certainly is one that is ongoing. We were successful at the Federal Court in affirming that Canada's use of the Emergencies Act was unreasonable, and we are monitoring to see whether Canada will appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada. We'll continue to stand up for Albertans, families, businesses, and investors to make sure that this jurisdiction remains the best in the province to invest in.

I want to move on to talk a little bit about medical assistance in dying. As you mentioned earlier, it's an area that is not only, I think, near and dear to your heart but impacts so many families here in this province. As I mentioned earlier, it's anticipated that we will be tabling legislation this current legislative session to establish and introduce safeguards for MAID here in this province. Not only would this fulfill one of my mandate items that was issued in September 2025, in particular to work with relevant ministries to introduce legislation to provide greater oversight and appropriate safeguards for MAID, but it would also be informed by what I had

mentioned earlier in the way of comprehensive and robust engagement with various organizations, agencies, and individuals all across our province. We are closely working with our ministries of health to implement the new legislative requirements, if they are passed, within the Alberta Legislature.

Through some of the work that we learned on MAID through the team that you see here and behind me, we have brought forward, I think, a very comprehensive set of safeguards that were communicated to us as being very important to families and to loved ones and to those impacted by serious medical issues that might give rise to a MAID assessment and provision of MAID. We know that the federal government is currently contemplating a number of changes and planned expansions of MAID eligibility to include MAID for people, potentially, whose sole underlying condition is mental illness. And we think that the federal government might be coming up with various expansions around this time next year. We've made it clear as a province that many health systems are not prepared for this type of MAID expansion and that there are a number of concerns that have been raised to us in relation to these types of issues.

10:30

We also know that Alberta has taken a very comprehensive approach when it comes to recovery-oriented care here in this province. We want to make sure that we utilize that strategy in helping to assist people with mental illnesses as their sole underlying issues in determining whether or not we can provide the treatment that they need and deserve before allowing the federal government to create this expansion of MAID services and provisions in our province.

I think the best thing that I can tell the hon. member is this, Madam Chair: in just a few days we expect to table legislation. I think it will be comprehensive. I think it's going to be revolutionary, and I think that all Albertans will be better off for it.

I appreciate the kind words that you mentioned about our Chief Firearms Officer and our chief firearms office because I think that, hands down, we have the best team in the province when it comes to the chief firearms program here. We are investing \$9.2 million to make sure that the chief firearms office has the tools that it needs to ensure that law-abiding Albertans in this province have all of the information and safeguards available to ensure that they feel safe and that they feel supported here in this province as it relates to the lawful ownership of firearms. We know that the chief firearms office plays a critical role in doing that, and we know that the chief firearms office here in Alberta has taken a leading role not only here in Alberta with law-abiding gun owners but also all across the country. We have offered our support and our resources and information sharing to all provinces across the country, and we know that with the federal gun buyback program, this conversation is front and centre, and we've certainly been having those conversations with our counterparts all across the country.

We know we're not alone. We know that a number of different provinces have aligned their positions when it comes to the gun buyback program, like the one that Alberta led. I think that it's a testament to how effective our office has been in making sure that law-abiding gun owners in this province are protected and that safeguards are in place to ensure that they are not criminalized by a misguided federal policy.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll go back to the government side.

Mr. Getson: Thank you for that, Minister. I'll make it brief, and then I'll cede my time to my colleague to my right. Where I was

going to go with that, and once I cede it to her, hopefully you can follow up as well.

It comes back up to the collaboration. There are a number of items out there, and, again, cutting through the rhetoric for the folks at home in 30 seconds or less, there are a number of files where we get put as an outlier. Again, if you could, through you, Chair, to the minister, expand a little bit on that collaboration and what the positivity and the uptake is. Is it one province, two provinces? I have a feeling that it's a little bit greater and broader than that, that we actually have the majority of the provinces coming back to us because of the work your group are doing.

With that, I'll cede the rest of my time to my colleague to the right.

Mrs. Johnson: Unless the minister wanted to respond?

The Chair: This would break our block rule, so I'm sorry. We decided at the beginning.

Member, you're ceding your time to Jennifer, then?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, I would love to take that time. I would thank my colleague from Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland, God's country, for bringing to our attention so many important issues with MAID. Of course, as you said, it is such a sensitive topic, and I'm very excited to hear that we're going to be seeing some legislation on this to bring some safeguards in. It's high time that that happened, so kudos to your department for that, and I'm looking forward to that legislation soon.

For the firearms as well, I would add my kudos to that, that it is just – I come from . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

Do you want to take a five-minute break now? How about we just have a little break? Yeah. Let's step away.

[The committee adjourned from 10:35 a.m. to 10:40 a.m.]

The Chair: All right, everyone. That's our time for the break.

It's now time for us to move back over to the Official Opposition. Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. I will move now to the Justice estimates page 160, line item 1, ministry support services. It's getting a significant increase, a 15 per cent increase, at a time when Albertans are asked to buckle up. Ministry support services, which includes the minister's office, the deputy minister's office, and corporate services is getting a fair bit of an increase. So the question I have is: what is the reason for this increase? How will it be used?

The second question is with respect to court and justice services. There is a slight increase in this budget, too. Madam Chair, we do know that Alberta courts are struggling with significant backlogs and delays in processing criminal as well as civil matters. These delays are regularly cited in applications under Jordan and viewed as undermining the right to a timely trial and Albertans' trust in the justice system. These issues are tied to resource shortages, system capacity such as judges, courtroom Crown prosecutors, and staffing levels. The question, through you, Madam Chair: does the department believe that an increase in this budget to court and justice services is enough to address these concerns? Can the minister provide any specifics on how this budget will help address these delays? And will there be more courtroom prosecutors, clerks, and support staff?

The next question is with respect to the same line item. How many federally appointed judges' positions are vacant? Given the

recent comment from the government about federal judicial appointments, has the government stopped requesting federal judge appointments against the vacant positions?

Another question with respect to the same line item is the fact that the justice system is out of reach for far too many Albertans. This increase is the number of self-represented and unrepresented individuals in the court system. These barriers to access lead to poor outcomes for Albertans without financial means, weakens fairness in our justice system, and increases inefficiency and inequality for these Albertans. We do have legal aid, but the threshold for its eligibility leaves far too many Albertans out to fend for themselves. In the past some of these Albertans have relied on Alberta Law Foundation funded initiatives, community legal clinics, which have also been cut by the UCP since they took over the AFL, Alberta Law Foundation, funds.

In short, this budget doesn't change anything for those Albertans who are unable to access the justice system. Through you, Madam Chair: what does the minister have to say to all those Albertans who only have enough to disqualify them from legal aid but do not have enough financial means to access the justice system in any meaningful way? Access to justice is further delayed as Albertans cannot afford to hire lawyers.

Another question through you, Madam Chair. We also have a long-standing issue of overrepresentation of Indigenous people, black people, and people of colour in our justice system along with other systemic inequalities throughout the justice system. In fact, Stats Canada data suggests that Indigenous people are much more likely to be incarcerated than non-Indigenous counterparts; 32 per cent in federal institutions and 36 per cent in provincial institutions. Alberta has the highest Indigenous incarceration rates, and that's shameful. Through you, Madam Chair: what does this increase in the justice services budget mean to the Indigenous peoples stuck in the justice system? What will change for them? I don't see anything in this budget that will help address the overrepresentation of Indigenous people or support their unmet needs in any meaningful way or eliminate systemic barriers to their fair treatment and fair outcomes in the justice system.

With respect to line 2.1, business and resolution services, there is a slight increase in the budget. However, we do know that family-related matters remain one of the largest parts of the civil docket in the Alberta family justice system, yet there is nothing in this budget to assure families that all those children who are often caught in these conflicts, that their experiences will be any different because of this budget. Does the department think this increase is enough to address the crisis facing Alberta's family justice system?

I think I will leave it here and let the minister answer these questions.

The Chair: All right. That concludes the section for the Official Opposition. We'll return now over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and once again thank you to the member for the questions. What you'll see in the Justice Budget 2026 are increases in virtually every line item. Almost every single area of Alberta Justice is receiving an increase, and that is to meet the demands of a growing population, a more complex justice system, of course, and to make sure that the people that work within Alberta Justice are receiving fair compensation for the work that they do. We all know well that a number of different collective bargaining agreements have been reached this year, and some of those increases include compensation increases for the 3,500-plus FTEs that work within Alberta Justice. We know that court and justice services, which is our biggest line item, is

receiving a substantial increase to help the courts meet the demands and the needs that they have communicated to us.

In relation to the question of judges and judicial vacancies, I can confirm to the committee that we have at the provincial level, at the Alberta Court of Justice, very low vacancies, that fluctuate from time to time due to judges retiring or moving or going part-time, but as of current we probably have just a very small handful of vacancies.

In addition to that, the Court of King's Bench currently has one vacancy, but it is federally funded, and the number of judiciary in the Court of King's Bench is currently 92. There are nine application judges that work across the province: four in Edmonton, four in Calgary, one in Red Deer. At the Court of Appeal level there are no vacancies at all. I am very proud of these figures, Madam Chair, because they represent a judiciary that is well funded, well supported. I think the number of vacancies, the very limited or low number of vacancies, is a true testament to the work that we've done here at Alberta Justice to make sure that our courts are well stocked with the judges they need.

In addition to that, if you look at Budget 2026, the change in FTEs from last year is very small and is attributable primarily to increased efficiencies that reallocate some of our FTEs into other areas so that they can perform their work in a more efficient manner. With that, it is important to keep in mind that we maintained not only a relatively consistent number of FTEs but, again, the increases in the line items. I think the vast majority of Budget 2026 as compared to Budget 2025 shows increases line after line after line, and I think that we can all be proud of a budget that demonstrates our commitment to the work that Alberta Justice is doing and the importance that Albertans place on public safety and the rule of law.

I want to address some of the comments made with respect to self-represented individuals and also the interplay between Legal Aid Alberta and the Alberta Law Foundation. I will reiterate what I think is important with respect to Legal Aid Alberta and that is that they are doing a remarkable job in providing eligible Albertans with legal representation all across our province. They do this through a combination of roster lawyers as well as staff lawyers. In doing so, they are able to reach all corners of our province, both urban and rural. That is important to me to maintain a model that makes sure that Albertans all across this province have the legal representation they deserve.

10:50

The Alberta Law Foundation is an independent entity, and it operates independently. It continues to provide grants to various organizations all across our province. There are no impacts on the grants that are being provided, and the continuity has been maintained and upheld. The Alberta Law Foundation is incredibly important for access to justice in our province, and we'll continue to do what we need to do to support them in every way that we can.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister. I appreciate the response.

Now, in my haste and my excitement to hear the thoughtful questions from all the members and the response from the minister I neglected to read a portion that I should share with you all now.

We're moving to the second round of questions and responses. The caucus rotation going forward would be the same as in the first round, starting with the Official Opposition, which we've done, followed by the government members, and then if any independents join us, they would have an opportunity to speak as well. However, the speaking times are now reduced to five minutes for the duration

of the meeting. We have begun the rotation with members of the opposition, who have taken five minutes, and response from the minister, who had five minutes.

After both individuals have had the opportunity to speak, then now we're going to move over to the government caucus. If the member and the minister agree to share time, we will proceed with a 10-minute segment, during which neither the member nor the minister may speak for more than five minutes at a time. That's important to note. Members are reminded that they may not share any unused portion of their five minutes with another member. We're in that section now, so that's why I felt it was important for me to read this to you.

Let's proceed now with the government side. Go ahead, please, Member.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair, and, again, thank you to the minister and to your staff for joining us here today and for such thoughtful answers. I appreciate the questions that have come out today from opposition and my colleague from Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

We've heard this morning already a little bit about the precharge assessment system, and I want to continue on with some questions about that. You may have touched on it a little bit. I'll ask you to expand and put some more clarification on that. The business plan on page 114 highlights the continued rollout of the province-wide precharge assessment system to ensure that changes are reviewed by a prosecutor before being laid by police. Precharge assessment helps ensure that only viable cases proceed before the courts, which conserves court resources and focuses judicial time on serious matters. Given ongoing pressures on Alberta's courts, initiatives that improve efficiency and reduce unnecessary case volumes are particularly important.

[Member Arcand-Paul in the chair]

My three questions regarding this are as follows. Can the minister explain how precharge assessment is improving efficiency within Alberta's justice system? What impact has this had on court capacity and trial delays? Is there any further expansion of this system anticipated? I'll leave that with the minister.

I will go on to one more to finish off this block of time, and it is on safe roads. We heard from my colleague some really vulnerable information that he shared with us, and I'm going to do the same here today. It's not regarding me, but it would be on safe roads. My husband's sister was killed by a drunk driver, so this impacts our family directly. I suspect there's others in this room who have been impacted by this as well. I really appreciate this initiative. It's very personal and very important.

Key objectives 2.3 and 2.4 on pages 114 of the business plan speak to ensuring fair and efficient adjudication processes for administrative penalties related to alcohol- or drug-related driving and modernizing administrative processes for traffic offences. The business plan outlines a \$7.6 million investment to support the safe roads program, and it includes performance targets for increasing the proportion of traffic ticket matters handled online. Impaired driving remains a serious public safety concern, and efficient administrative processes help ensure swift consequences while reducing strain on our courts. At the same time, procedural fairness must be preserved.

My questions are: can the minister elaborate on how the \$7.6 million investment strengthens the safe roads program? How is the ministry balancing efficiency with fairness and due process? And what progress is being made toward increasing the proportion of traffic matters handled online? I am really excited to hear these answers because there's nothing I'd like more than to see MADD,

Mothers Against Drunk Driving, put out of business. I love the work they're doing, but I think you know what I mean by that. Let's put them out of business because we don't need that resource anymore.

In these final few seconds I'm going to throw one more question out there, and it's about the Court of Appeal. On page 108 of the fiscal plan it outlines that \$67 million is being allocated for the Court of Appeal facility in Calgary. The Court of Appeal located there hears criminal appeals from the provincial court and both criminal and civil appeals from the Court of King's Bench. The Court of Appeal has the important job to determine whether errors of law or fact were made in a decision.

My question is: since the Court of Appeal has a very important role to play in the Alberta justice system, can the minister explain if the Calgary Court of Appeal is a top priority for this ministry? And if so, why? Then, my last question, I think, to take up this last block of five minutes is key objective 2.1, where it talks about utilizing our court infrastructure efficiently and effectively. These are the two key words of the day – aren't they? – efficiently and effectively. Can the minister explain how this funding for the Court of Appeal meets this key objective?

This is the hometown of our minister here today, Madam Chair – Mr. Chair. Oh. I apologize. I apologize. Through you, Mr. Chair, I'm looking forward to the minister's responses on these. This is your hometown. I look forward to your response.

The Acting Chair: Thank you to the Member for Lacombe-Ponoka for the question and for adequately gendering me, so I appreciate that.

We do have two introductions to make that were not made yet, one introduction from the government side and one introduction from the opposition side. Please state your name for the record and introduce yourself.

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

The Acting Chair: Thank you.

Member Gurinder Brar: Gurinder Brar, MLA for Calgary-North East.

The Acting Chair: Thank you, members.

Now, Minister, I will turn to you for your five-minute block for answering the question.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Chair, and welcome to our two MLAs as well. Thank you for joining us. Thank you, MLA Johnson, for sharing with us a personal story, and thank you for your advocacy in the area of impaired driving. I think we all can agree that if we can do everything possible to put MADD out of business, we would all be better for it as a community and as a society. I would be the first to say as well that if we could somehow do whatever we needed to do to put me out of a job as well, that I would take it at any time.

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

Thank you for the questions. I'm going to start in the order that you provided them to me, and that is to talk a little bit more about our precharge assessment process. This is a collaboration between prosecution services and the policing agencies all across our province. The precharge assessment system requires investigative materials to be sent to a prosecutor to review prior to police making a decision about whether to lay a charge, and this ensures that the evidence required to support a prosecution is complete and it is

available at the earliest possible opportunity. I spoke a little bit about that earlier today.

I think that what we found, time and again, is that when the collaboration between police and prosecutors is strong, we find that the quality of the evidence and the likelihood of conviction increase significantly, and these are important things for us to keep in mind. Where the evidence doesn't meet the standard for prosecution, charges are not laid against an individual. Albertans who would have otherwise been required to retain legal counsel or seek legal aid or go about it on their own would not have to go through the difficult and stressful process of having to attend court and deal with these criminal matters because they would have already been dealt with at a very early opportunity. The exclusion of cases that don't meet the standards of a prosecution team ensure that court time is preserved for some of our more serious and some of the most viable cases to prosecute.

11:00

The precharge assessment has had a huge impact on court capacity and delays. There is a variety of different factors, as you know, that can impact or affect case processing, and that is a wide number of different issues: the complexity of a matter, how many people are involved, the type of court appearances required, whether or not an individual chooses to oppose or challenge the charges, and whether a preliminary inquiry was requested or held. The idea of implementing a robust precharge assessment process is to do away with some of those issues, help streamline the process, and create a better system. I think, again, we can all benefit from that, including our courts, who have the challenge of dealing with a number of different criminal matters each and every year. I think it's important for us to give them all the tools they can to succeed.

When it comes to your question about safe roads, safe roads is, in my view, one of the most comprehensive and probably best supported policies we have in relation to impaired driving. It has the strictest penalties for impaired drivers anywhere in the country. It is endorsed and supported by MADD Canada and other advocacy groups, and we know that it has been very effective in getting impaired drivers off our streets. The money that is being allocated to the safe roads program will be dedicated to staffing and core infrastructure. It supports targeted improvements to digital systems used by safe roads Alberta, making sure that the process is streamlined and moves more quickly and ensuring that those who are going through the process get a fair adjudication of their matter.

The idea of moving to an online system is important because it gives Albertans the opportunity to have their matters adjudicated wherever they are. As we move towards province-wide digitization and ensuring that rural and remote communities have broadband Internet services, we know that the implementation of online features within our court is absolutely essential.

I'll stop there.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll head back over to the Official Opposition.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. I think a couple of questions were completely overlooked in the last section, so I will ask them again. Ministry support services, which includes the minister's office budget and the DM's budget, is getting a 15 per cent increase. Any reasonable justification for that?

In the second question, through you, Madam Chair, I talked about court and justice services, that there is a long-standing issue of overrepresentation of Indigenous people, Black people, and people of colour along with systemic inequalities throughout the justice system. I also cited Stats Canada data showing that Indigenous

people are much more likely to be incarcerated than non-Indigenous counterparts; 32 per cent in federal institutions, 36 per cent in provincial institutions. Alberta has the highest provincial incarceration rates. The question I have is: what does this increase mean to Indigenous people in their interaction with the justice system? What will change for them? Will we see any change in their overrepresentation outcomes for them in our justice system?

Moving on, the next question is about line 2.2, Alberta Court of Justice. The question I have is in relation to the expanded civil mediation program, which supports Albertans with a civil claim in Alberta Court of Justice. The question I have, through you, Madam Chair: is this program available to all Albertans? If not, what's the income threshold? For the parties that cannot meet the income threshold, what are their options? Why do they have to pay out of pocket to access justice? Does the department think that by creating this additional layer, which is income tested, the government is limiting access to justice and delaying justice and deterring those in need away from the justice system? That's not a good management of caseload.

Also, through you, Madam Chair, this could effectively keep women and children in abusive situations longer than necessary. What message is the government sending to them? That they cannot rely on a timely court system if they don't have money?

With respect to legal services, the department provides legal services to all government of Alberta ministries and represents them in matters before the courts and tribunal. A question through you, Madam Chair: the government has announced its intention to hold some referendums in October. The minister is responsible for referendum legislation, the Citizen Initiative Act. I have budget line item 3.1, civil law. The question I have is: we do know that Justice Colin Feasby of Court of King's Bench has ruled in a reference under the Alberta citizenship act that any referendum on Alberta separation will offend the Constitution and treaty rights. Has the department done any analysis of its own or given the government any advice on the constitutionality of these separatist referendums?

Another question, through you, Madam Chair: has the department done any work or plan to do any work on the application of the federal Clarity Act to these separatist referendum questions? Another question, with respect to 3.2 . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, I'm so sorry. I have to interrupt. We're here for the purpose of budget estimates. Your questions are not related to that at all. If you could please direct your questions towards the budget estimates, the purpose for our meeting, that would be sincerely appreciated.

Please proceed.

Mr. Sabir: Chair, help me understand why you think they are not related to estimates. I don't understand the ruling.

The Chair: What line are you referring to?

Mr. Sabir: The line is line item 3.1, civil law. We are paying \$73 million of public money to the department for legal services to all government ministries to represent them before courts. The government has announced its intention to hold six referendums, including separatist referendums, so I am asking what advice the government has given to Executive Council, what work the government has done on the Clarity Act. All those are relevant to the work that the government will do with this money.

The Chair: Thank you for your clarification. I'll leave it to the minister to decide if he's going to answer that portion.

Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Sabir: With respect to 4.1, operations and bail prosecutions, there is no increase in this. The question I have is: what percentage of Albertans are in pretrial detentions? A research report, through you, Madam Chair, from the Canadian Civil Liberties Association and the Civil Liberties Education Trust from 2024 suggests that over 70 per cent of people in detention are in pretrial detention. This report didn't collect data from Alberta but relied on data from other provinces. The question I have is: Minister, does that number sound correct for the Alberta justice system? If so, what about the presumption of innocence and people's right to . . .

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

We'll move over to the minister for his answer. Thank you.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Once again, thank you to the member. There is a lot to unpack in five minutes. I'll do my best, certainly. To answer the question about the ministry support services, the increase was twofold. It was to support the increase of FTE growth and to address compensation increases due to collective agreements.

On the question of the steps that Alberta Justice is taking to implement or work on Indigenous justice strategies, certainly we have advanced a number of different strategies aimed at improving how Indigenous people navigate and experience the justice system. This includes, first and foremost, the implementation of Indigenous courts. They exist in Calgary, Edmonton, St. Paul, and Lethbridge, as well as courts operating directly within Indigenous communities such as the Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation, Siksika Nation, and the Tsuut'ina Nation. These courts all use a restorative and holistic model that brings together elders, community justice partners, and social service agencies. They focus on addressing the root causes of offending behaviour and reducing, specifically to the member's point, overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in the justice system.

11:10

We also have the Indigenous court workers program, which provides for Indigenous court support individuals to come and work directly with Indigenous community members and help them navigate the system as well as a very robust Gladue report program as well. I hope that answers your questions in respect to that.

I'll talk about the civil mediation claim and, I think, an allegation that I heard from the hon. member that the family justice strategy puts children in scenarios of safety at risk. That is absolutely not true. The family justice strategy approaches family law matters where appropriate by providing for informal processes to deal with matters without having to go to court, but let me make it unequivocally clear to everybody in this room: matters that require emergency intervention will always have a judge available immediately to provide relief, and that includes where children are involved and where there are safety concerns at play. Those will continue to be able to go directly to court, and they will always be available to families who need immediate court intervention. The family justice strategy applies where it's appropriate, and that means in areas that don't involve matters of immediate safety or risk of children being harmed.

I'll talk a little bit about the referendum question. Certainly the Ministry of Justice is responsible for the Referendum Act, but as the members here know, Elections Alberta is responsible for the implementation of referendums, and they do so within the budgets that they receive from the appropriate committee. Those committees meet each year along with officials from Elections

Alberta and other independent offices to discuss the needs of their budget, and those are approved independently of the Minister of Justice.

The question of what advice was received by Justice officials or the Justice department in relation to the referendum questions is something that I cannot comment on. Legal advice is not something that we would typically comment on for many reasons, but what I will say is this. I know that the member is fixated on what he characterizes as the separatist referendum. I'm not sure I understand if the concern about the cost of implementing these citizen initiatives is only in relation to the referendum or if that same vigour is going to be expressed about all types of referendums. I'd love clarification on whether the member believes that citizen initiatives are appropriate, or if it is just the ones that he prefers.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: All right. Thank you so much, Minister. I appreciate the answers to those questions.

We will now move over to the government caucus for your questions. Please proceed, hon. member.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister. I take it it's block time.

Mr. Amery: Yes. I would like to keep the process consistent for all members in this committee. Thank you, all.

Mr. Singh: Again, thank you, Minister and the team, for ensuring Albertans have a fair and accessible justice system where the rule of law is upheld. My questions are on Legal Aid Alberta. I know previous members have touched on it, but I will circle back to it as it's very important to the Calgary-East constituency.

On page 86 of the fiscal plan I note that approximately \$105 million is allocated towards Legal Aid Alberta. Legal Aid Alberta plays an essential role in ensuring access to justice by supporting vulnerable Albertans who may not otherwise be able to afford legal representation. Access to timely legal advice and representation helps ensure fairness within the justice system and also reduces delays by supporting early resolution of matters. Legal aid services support a wide range of areas including criminal defence matters, family law disputes, and matters involving vulnerable Albertans navigating complex legal challenges. Ensuring stable, predictable funding allows Legal Aid Alberta to plan effectively and meet growing demands.

Through you, Madam Chair, can the minister please explain how Budget 2026 supports Legal Aid Alberta and ensures Albertans continue to have access to these important services? How does the ministry work with Legal Aid Alberta and the Law Society of Alberta to ensure funding is used effectively? Are there particular areas of increased demand that this funding is intended to address?

My next set of questions, through you, Madam Chair: I see page 86 of the fiscal plan and I note changes with administrative law programs including the establishment of a new strategy and policy branch. Administrative tribunals and adjudication bodies play an important role in providing Albertans with accessible and effective dispute resolution outside of traditional courts. These bodies handle matters that can significantly impact individuals and businesses. Governance and policy oversight is essential in maintaining fairness and transparency. As administrative matters become increasingly complex, strengthening strategic policy co-ordination can help ensure that tribunals operate effectively and in alignment with legislative intent.

Through you, Madam Chair, can the minister please explain the purpose behind establishing the new strategy and policy branch within administrative law programs? How will this branch improve

co-ordination or oversight across Alberta's administrative tribunals? What benefits will Albertans see as a result of this change?

My next set of questions are on human rights education and the multiculturalism fund. Through you, Madam Chair, within the fiscal plan funding of human rights education initiatives and the multiculturalism fund remains steady this year. Programs that promote education, awareness, and understanding of human rights principles play an important role in preventing discrimination and supporting inclusive communities across Alberta. Proactive education can reduce disputes before they accelerate into formal complaints or litigation. Stable funding also allows community organizations and partners to plan programming that supports cultural understanding and respect throughout the province. Can the minister please explain how maintaining funding stability of human rights education initiatives supports Albertans?

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

To the minister for his response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for your questions. I continue to maintain and it is in my humble opinion that legal aid is the fundamental mechanism by which legal representation and access to justice is achieved in this province. We know how important it is to Albertans to make sure that there is a process in place by which they can seek legal representation whenever they need it. Eligible Albertans are able to access legal aid services all across this province. We know that Budget 2026 supports continued funding to Legal Aid Alberta in really unprecedented ways.

11:20

We know that in recent years we've taken additional steps to increase the financial eligibility guidelines to encompass more Albertans. In addition to that we increased roster compensation for lawyers so that we could attract new and better talent as well and make sure that those that are on the roster are fairly compensated for the important work that they do. These are the types of things we're doing to make sure that Legal Aid remains a strong organization here in this province.

Let me give you a little bit of a breakdown as well on what we've done. As I mentioned in parts of this meeting, \$104,500,000 in Budget 2026 will go to supporting Legal Aid from the provincial government and the federal government contribution as well. Another portion, which is still to be determined, will be paid by the Alberta Law Foundation arising out of the revenues it receives from trust accounts all across this province. The funding that we provide is governed by a governance agreement that we reached just recently, which I think sets clear expectations for service delivery, financial accountability, and reporting. Through the framework the ministry supports stable access to legal aid services while ensuring that public funds are used for their intended purpose.

I want to address what I think are three of the big areas that Legal Aid is currently operating in. The first ones are by far the biggest, and that is in the family and criminal realm. Those are the two areas that Legal Aid provides I think most of its support, but we did receive federal funding and support as well to improve and expand upon our immigration and refugee legal aid services as well. So with that I'm proud to report to this committee that Legal Aid is not only providing services in two of its more major areas, which are family and criminal, but also in the areas of immigration and refugee supports as well. I'm very proud of what we have done in

recent years to make sure that the needs of eligible Albertans are met by doing this.

I want to talk a little bit about the question you asked about our administrative law programs. It's a relatively new branch of Alberta Justice, and what this does is it provides for a dedicated, centralized capacity for policy development, legislative co-ordination, educational initiatives, and long-term planning. The administrative law programs now oversee a multitude of complex statutory and independent adjudicative bodies. As the division expands, it becomes clear that policy, legislative, and modernization work was being managed in different ways. This is not sustainable. The new branch will allow for adjudication and tribunal functions to remain focused on decision-making while the policy development, the legislative design, and the cross program co-ordination are going to be handled in a different way.

The benefit is simple: Albertans are going to see a coherent, modern, and resilient administrative justice system. These are oftentimes, you know, quasi-judicial processes whereby individuals can seek relief and recourse by addressing them through our administrative law programs, the tribunals that have been established across this province. They strengthen the foundations, I think, of our tribunals so that they can function more efficiently, fairly, independently, and meet the growing needs of a very complex environment.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Perfectly timed.

We'll head back over to the Official Opposition for the next round of questions.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. I do have some questions left, but the minister did ask me for my preference about referendums, so with your permission I might add that my preference – and there are many Albertans at this point – is for a referendum on this government called general elections.

With that, 5.1, justice supports and strategic services. There is a slight increase in this budget, and it's the area that is also responsible for Indigenous Services and restorative justice initiatives. The question, through you, Madam Chair, is what work has been or will be done on the restorative justice program? Who has been consulted? How much money out of this will be spent specifically on that initiative, and when will it be rolled out?

The second question, through you, Madam Chair, is: how many people in our justice system identify themselves as Indigenous? Is it correct that the government is relying on data for the Indigenous justice strategy that's from 2007 and 2008? If the government doesn't collect race-based data, what kind of data do they use to inform their Indigenous justice strategy?

The next question is with respect to line item 5.3. That's Chief Firearms Officer. Last year the chief firearms office engaged with members of the firearm community and participated in 37 gun shows. The question I have is: what exactly did the chief firearms office do at these shows to promote firearm safety? How much money was spent on these safety engagements? Are there any manuals, are there any documents that are available to the public to learn about this safety work? How do we measure the effectiveness of the work of the firearm office that they do to promote safety? Gun proliferation and gun violence is a huge issue in our communities. Just in the last few days we have heard about at least five or six incidents of homes being shot at in east Calgary alone.

One more question with respect to 6.1, Alberta human rights: the Alberta Human Rights Commission's latest report tells us that the most cited ground for complaints made to the commission by far was disability, at an alarming rate of 47 per cent. It is a reflection

of Alberta's lack of accessibility legislation, decreasing disability benefits, deepening poverty and isolation. What specific steps does the department intend to take to address this issue and make sure that we are able to address this rising rate of discrimination based on disabilities?

There are new line items; 6.4 is a new line item that has \$1.8 million. What will that be used for?

Then there are a few questions that were not answered earlier. There are many of them. I would appreciate if the minister could provide answers in writing, but I will repeat one question. Through you, Madam Chair: Alberta is intervening in a Quebec secularism law, Bill 21, case before the Supreme Court. Just for the committee's awareness this is the bill that discriminates against people and religious symbols, people wearing hijabs and turbans. Why does the government think that siding with Quebec in defending Quebec's discriminatory law is the best use of public money? How does it align with the government's objective of upholding people's rights, including the rights of people who would like to wear hijabs, including the rights of people who would like to wear turbans?

That's all for this block.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. Member, for your thoughtful questions.

We'll now turn it over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair. Once again I'll address them in the order that they came. Restorative justice grants are pivotal to providing alternative resolutions to members of the public, and there is a wide variety of supports that Alberta Justice provides to restorative justice agencies all across this province. In the '26-27 year the government of Alberta will invest \$920,000 into restorative justice initiatives and an additional \$350,000 into youth justice committees.

11:30

What this does is that it provides direct funding to organizations all across this province providing restorative justice services in ways that they have provided to us when we do a grant call. Typically what happens is that a grant call is made to organizations that provide restorative justice services. They submit their applications. Those are reviewed and vetted by the department and then selected in that manner.

The important thing to take away from this is that restorative justice plays an important role in dealing with matters here in this province. It often takes matters out of our criminal justice system. It allows communities that rely on or work well within the restorative justice realm to deal with their matters in a much more appropriate way. The reality is that the levels of repeat offenders, or recidivism, are much, much lower when restorative justice outcomes are implemented and are effective.

On the question of what guides our Indigenous justice strategies, I would say to the hon. member that the data reference that suggests that we look at data from 15 or 20 years ago is false. We continue to work with our partners within the courts and within the Indigenous community and all stakeholders involved to inform our decisions. A lot of that includes attending justice subcommittees that are closely connected with First Nations communities as well as adopting and implementing and supporting the court Indigenous justice strategy at the Alberta Court of Justice and working with all of our partners to make sure that the issues of overrepresentation and ensuring that culturally appropriate court processes are respected and upheld all across our province.

I spoke a little bit earlier, and I'll reiterate for the member, that we've got courts operating directly within Indigenous communities in various areas of our province, and we've got Indigenous courts in many of our major cities all across this province as well. I think our approach is comprehensive, and we certainly will continue to expand and work on our Indigenous justice strategies and our approaches alongside Indigenous communities and the courts.

On the question of the CFO, I think it's important to keep in mind that the outreach that the CFO does in this province is important. The Alberta chief firearms office attended 38 gun shows in the 2025 calendar year, and the Chief Firearms Officer attended most of these events personally. In addition to that, the Alberta chief firearms office attended more than a dozen other firearms community events in the 2025 calendar year and conducts regular and ongoing stakeholder meetings to understand the perspectives of the diverse range of firearm owners that make up this vibrant community.

What I think is important is what happens at these events, and that is that the chief firearms office always engages in education, training, and transfer procedures for the acquisition, purchase, and sale of firearms. To do so is to ensure that the chief firearms office is front and centre when it comes to the transfer of firearms in our province. That is, I think, a true indication of how important this role is and how effective it has been. You will notice that the Alberta chief firearms office is in attendance at almost every gun show in this province, and what that ensures is the safe and full transfer of firearms all across Alberta, which is important.

I'll reiterate for the member who referenced the gun crimes that are happening in our province that it is and always has been, historically, a very, very small number of law-abiding registered firearm owners that are committing gun crimes. It is not the typical practice of a criminal to go and register their firearm with the Alberta chief firearms office before going and committing a gun-related crime. That doesn't happen. There are no registration practices from our criminal organizations, our cartels, or other people who are committing these crimes. The fact of the matter remains, and this is as factual as it gets, that law-abiding gun owners are not the ones that are responsible for serious gun crime in our province.

I want to touch on one comment that the member continues to advance, and it is wholly incorrect, and that is that Alberta is participating in the support of Quebec's secular laws and challenges with the Supreme Court. That is unequivocally false, and the member knows that. Alberta appeared in a limited role to argue about the importance of the use of the notwithstanding clause and the preservation of that for all provinces. It did not take a position on the Quebec law.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll now move back over to the government side for their questions. Please proceed, Member.

Mrs. Sawyer: I'll just ask it in case – oh. The timer is there. For a second it was not, and I was going to say that if you want to watch everyone's eyebrows go up, we could share the time just for fun since it wasn't showing the clock. But the clock is back, so I will not put you on that spot.

Through the chair, thank you to the minister for his thoughtful comments today. I appreciate the clarity that you're giving around some of the questions we're having today and the work that your ministry is doing.

I'm going to go to page 86 of the fiscal plan. Funding for the Alberta Crown prosecution service is increasing by \$9 million from the '25-26 budget. You mentioned it in your opening statements,

that operating funding for 2026-27 is \$163 million. We all know that Crown prosecutors play a vital role in Alberta's justice system. It ensures that criminal cases are prosecuted fairly and effectively. They respect and represent the public interest, working to uphold the rule of law, maintaining the integrity of the legal process. The responsibilities include assessing evidence, determining appropriate charges, presenting cases in court, and ensuring that justice is served for victims and society as a whole. Without having enough prosecutors, the justice system becomes strained, leading to delays in the proceedings and a backlog of cases, which can compromise the quality of justice.

Sorry; I'm starting to get a tickle, too.

When cases are prosecuted efficiently and fairly, it reinforces trust in law enforcement and the courts, demonstrating the justice system is working to protect citizens.

Sorry; I've got a lot of preamble. I'll get to my question. I'm going to cut to the chase.

Again, I'm thankful to the government for its tough-on-crime approach, and I want to focus on a couple of questions. Would the minister please explain what the priorities are for the Alberta Crown prosecution service and how these funds will be allocated? Can the minister provide an update on Crown prosecutor hiring for '26-27? What is the plan for recruiting and retaining Crown prosecutors?

My second bit. We've discussed a little bit the legal services division, otherwise known as LSD. On page 87 of the fiscal plan it shows an increase in the legal services budget for 2026-27. I'm going to focus on the funding, and I think you touched on what work is done there.

We know it's the legal adviser to the government of Alberta. It works hard to defend Alberta's government in matters of federal overreach but also matters all across the government. I will say that for my constituents, they greatly appreciate how our government is working hard because they are definitely frustrated in the federal overreach that we see. So thank you for that. Can the minister explain why an increase to legal services was necessary? What are the costs of an LSD lawyer? What are the typical costs associated with employing a legal services division lawyer? Is it more cost-effective for the ministry to add full-time legal staff as opposed to retaining external counsel for legal matters? Can the minister speak to how the ministry determines when to rely on internal legal capacity versus engaging outside counsel and how this ensures value for money for Albertans?

I'll throw one more in with one minute to go.

On page 113 of the business plan, specifically key objective 1.3, it talks about reviewing election-related regulations to ensure the integrity of Alberta's elections. This is another one that I get asked about in my constituency, to ensure that the process is free, it's fair, there's proper democracy.

11:40

Would the minister explain what prompted the need to review election-related regulations? Can the minister outline the timeline for this review? Is there any dedicated funding within the ministry to support this review? If so, how will those resources be used? Lastly, what specific outcomes is the minister hoping to achieve from this review to ensure Alberta's elections remain fair, transparent, and do run efficiently?

Now, the one thing I don't think that I asked or even commented on with respect to the elections process – well, I touched on it a little bit. I do have people coming in and asking me and having some concerns when it comes to our elections and how they are run.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member. I know you were right mid-question. I was just hanging on to the edge of my seat waiting to hear what it was going to be.

Please, let's proceed to the minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Thank you to the hon. member as well for your insightful questions. We spoke a little bit about the Alberta Crown prosecution service, and let me take this opportunity to recognize the remarkable work that they do. I am always humbled by the opportunity to meet with the Alberta Crown prosecutors in this province, who I know work extremely hard to make sure that we remain safe communities all across this province. I think Budget 2026 is another testament year after year after year to my dedication and commitment to our Alberta Crown prosecution service.

What we have seen is an increase in their budget to help them expand their work into the areas of, again, the precharge assessment as well as ensuring that our Crown prosecutors are adequately compensated for the great work that they do. A lot of that is done or achieved by some of the negotiations that we've had, which have been very good in terms of the ratification of various agreements to make sure that our Alberta Crown prosecution offices all across this province are well staffed and well supported by Budget 2026.

I can talk a little bit about the work that we've done. The salary freeze was lifted in 2022. Recruitment and retention in the Alberta Crown prosecution service has substantially improved. From December 2025 to December 2026, for example, 94 per cent of Alberta Crown prosecution positions were filled. In addition to that, there was a ratification of an agreement with the Alberta Crown Attorneys' Association, which happened on July 9, 2024, and the correction of salary anomalies that occurred as a result of that freeze has now improved. In addition to the increases already provided, Crown prosecutors will receive 3 per cent increases in April 2026 and April 2027.

In addition to that, we have a 10 per cent retention bonus for prosecutors who work for one year or more in some of our more remote offices. Those offices are St. Paul, Slave Lake, Peace River, and Grande Prairie. What this means is that Crown prosecutors who choose to work in those offices will get that retention bonus. I think the important thing is to communicate to you and to members of this committee as well is that we have seen the recruitment and retention in those offices improve because of that bonus. We will continue to do everything we can to make sure that all of our offices, not just the ones in the major cities but the ones in rural and remote communities, attract the best and brightest to come and work for the Alberta Crown prosecution service.

In addition to that, the ACPS recruits 20 articling students per year, who have the opportunity to then transition, after their articles, into Crown prosecutors once they are admitted to the Alberta Bar. Many of the articling students who come and work with the Alberta Crown prosecution service end up in some of our smaller and more regional offices, and it is a great opportunity for young law graduates to transition into a career within the Crown prosecution service.

Talked a little bit about the legal services division, and I'll try to talk a little bit more about these increases to that budget, primarily focused on compensation increases. We have, again, remarkable civil Crowns as well who are doing everything to defend Alberta's jurisdiction, uphold the Constitution, and represent the interests of the province of Alberta and the people of Alberta in court, whether it be here or in the Supreme Court or anywhere else in Canada.

Talked a little bit about some of the reasons for why legal services division lawyers do some types of work and we use external counsel to do others, and that's primarily due to three factors: number one,

jurisdiction; number two, urgency; and number three, expertise. Where we have the ability to appear with appropriate expertise, we will certainly use a legal services division lawyer, which typically costs around \$206 per hour, inclusive of salary, benefits, training, and fees. Where the expertise or the jurisdiction or the urgency requires it, we will use an external lawyer, which costs more than that but is used only in those circumstances.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Thank you so much, Minister. I appreciate the answers.

We'll move over to the Official Opposition. Please proceed, Member.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister. Looking at the ministry support services budget, this line item has an increase of \$1.7 million, with the bulk of the increase going to corporate services and a modest increase in the minister's and the deputy minister's office. I'm curious if these are due to what will be required for approvals, as the minister must make statutory decisions for the Alberta Law Foundation to use their reserves for anything above \$250,000. I know the minister just said that ALF is independent, but the statute dictates ministerial approval. I certainly do not see additional staff going into Justice either, so I'm curious if the ministry is prepared for that additional burden. Is there anything in this budget to speak to that? Specifically, how will the ministry take on this additional administrative burden that the independent institution ALF and their reserve is calculated in their revenue here, and in what line item that may be contained?

I further note that this government is finally assisting First Nations with their own police forces through the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services, the work through organizations that may receive funding through you and ALF, although more important particularly when it comes to enforcement and prosecutorial powers by the Indigenous nations. I know that's not your ministry, but I do think there are foundations out there that would require the additional funding from ALF.

Secondly, I've had the privilege of appearing before the Indigenous court in Calgary, and just this summer I was fortunate to receive a tour of the Indigenous courtroom run by Native Counselling Services of Alberta, who are truly doing tremendous work around diversion and which has reduced recidivism of Indigenous peoples, which thereby could lead to a decrease in the number of Indigenous peoples incarcerated in this province with their transformational work. Looking at the budget, I see line item 5.1, justice supports and strategic services. Madam Chair, I'm wondering if the minister can expand on the increase in funding for this line item, and specifically what programs such as NCSA can expect to receive to continue providing the vital services, including data collection with respect to Indigenous peoples in the Indigenous courts here in Edmonton and in Lethbridge and, if I may be so bold, hopefully in other parts of the province. Specifically, how much is going to Indigenous courts in this province? A hard figure would be appreciated.

Finally, I'm curious about the increase of \$6.3 million for civil law, which accords for representing the UCP government in courts and tribunals, as indicated on page 160 of the estimates. I also note on page 111 of the business plan that the ministry is engaging in private firearm judicial reviews. Can the minister elaborate whether this is a combination of all civil law matters or just the latter private interventions in judicial review applications and appeals, or will these dollars come from the \$9.2 million identified in the strat plan on page 21 of the Chief Firearms Officer? Madam Chair, can the

minister please explain the rationale for using Alberta tax dollars to have the province of Alberta intervening in private judicial reviews? I think this is particularly important given the minister's comments earlier this morning, where he said that, quote: no one criminal matter is more important than the other. End quote. Regardless, through you, Madam Chair, can the minister speak to the increase in civil law, obviously in high generality; do not breach privilege? What other matters is this government anticipating with respect to the increase in the next year?

I know my friend from Calgary-Bhullar-McCall has referenced it, and I do know there may be some notwithstanding clause interventions at the Supreme Court of Canada that the minister just referenced. Earlier the minister mentioned another case in Quebec that may elevate these costs. I'd like for you to provide further clarity on the exact amounts that this has cost Albertans and if there are other jurisdictions that the province is party to with respect to the increase of the civil litigation amounts that the ministry is looking at increasing.

11:50

To sum: one, ministry-specific funds or full-time equivalents to manage ministerial approvals for access to justice programs through ALF; two, Indigenous courts and supports, how much specifically to those; and three, the civil law budget increases. What more can Albertans expect to be on the hook for in litigation the province is party to? Is this increase connected to prepare in light of all referenda presently before Albertans, or is it in relation to the decision by Justice Feasby against the Alberta Prosperity Project and the government as respondents in litigation brought forward by the Chief Electoral Officer and the subsequent fact that such a petition has been deemed already unconstitutional a few months ago? Treaty chiefs would like to know this answer to the question as well, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Madam Chair. Those are all my questions.

The Chair: My goodness. You still had 13 seconds left, Member. You didn't have to rush so quickly. There was time to pause and have a breath. Good questions. Thank you so much.

We'll move over to the minister now to hear his answers.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you again to the hon. member for that insight as well. I want to commend the member on some of the work and the advocacy that he has provided to Indigenous groups. Certainly, both of us have had the fortune of touring some of our Indigenous-led courts here in this province. I think that they serve a remarkable need for Indigenous groups, and we'll continue to support them in every way possible.

I want to begin by answering some of your questions because I think you provided quite a bit, so I want to get through all of them. I'll reiterate once again that line item 1, which is the ministry support services, is an increase to support not only collective agreement compensation increases but additional FTEs. According to Budget 2026 line item 1 there will be 74 FTEs supported by ministry support services. That includes the minister's office, the deputy minister's office, and financial services as well. There are a number of individuals that comprise these offices and keep the operations ongoing.

The member has asked about the Alberta Law Foundation and the Alberta Law Foundation's mandate, commitment to providing front-line services to organizations all across this province. I would agree with the member that they serve an incredibly important role in delivering access to justice by way of their funding supports to the organizations that many of us have used and relied on here in

this province, and that will continue. The budget is typically decided by ALF. The grant approvals are decided by ALF, and ALF continues to operate in a wholly independent way in terms of providing the necessary budget allocations as they deem appropriate. We know that the recipients of most of the ALF grants that were historically in place continue to be in place, and we hope that ALF will continue to develop its policies, its programs, and its bylaws in ways that will create consistency and stability for many more decades to come.

The member asked about increases in line item 5.1, which is really the justice supports and strategic services. In Budget 2026 there is a \$4 million net increase primarily due as follows: \$3 million to address compensation increases; \$1.6 million to justice supports and strategic services transferred for advanced projects and information system budget from the Alberta Crown prosecution service; \$1.2 million increases through federal contributions to support the national action plan to end gender-based violence, which is the project aimed at strengthening and supporting Albertans navigating the justice system; \$600,000 increases for full staffing complements as provided in Budget 2026 for strategic planning and policy; and a \$500,000 increase for in-year funding for the Indigenous court worker program.

When it comes to the question about the increases in civil law, or line item 3.1, I can advise the member and this committee that that increase was primarily owing to addressing compensation increases, again, the result of collective agreements, ensuring that that increase meets the needs of the 400 FTEs that are employed in this particular line item.

I'll talk a little bit in the last remaining time that I have again about the work that we do both within the legal services division and our civil Crown as well as the external counsel. The vast majority of cases that are handled by Alberta Justice are handled by internal counsel. Once again, I'll say this, and I'll say it very clearly on the record. The cost of internal LSD counsel is much lower than external counsel, but it remains the case that Alberta has not only an obligation but also a duty and a responsibility to defend the interests of Albertans wherever they may come. With that, it's important to keep in mind that some of these cases arise in different provinces where we don't have lawyers, and that's where we retain external counsel.

The Chair: Well, thank you so much, Minister.

We'll return to the government side for their final round of questions.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm going to go to quite a specific question here in central Alberta. I do so because I had the privilege of touring this amazing facility with the minister last year. In the capital plan on page 116 there is a \$2 million investment being put into the Red Deer Justice Centre, which opened last year and that I was able to attend, as I said, with the minister. The new facility has increased the number of courtrooms from eight to 12, allowing more cases to be heard at one time. This new justice centre is also a major benefit to the people of Red Deer and central Alberta, who don't have to travel as far to attend court. This is particularly important in rural Alberta, and that is a large part of the population that it is serving.

Besides the 12 courtrooms, Red Deer Justice Centre is also fully built and equipped with videoconference equipment to allow witnesses to attend remotely if they can't travel and vulnerable witnesses to testify from outside the courtroom, particularly important. The new justice centre also has spaces for people taking

alternative approaches to the traditional courtroom trial process, with three new suites for judicial dispute resolution services, a specific suite for other dispute resolution services, like family mediation or civil, and a new Indigenous courtroom with dedicated venting for smudging purposes, and we were able to see that. Can the minister explain what impact has this new Red Deer Justice Centre already had on the community, and what will this \$2 million in the budget be used for?

The Chair: You have not agreed upon shared time, Member. If the minister agrees to change that . . .

Mr. Amery: In the interest of, if I may . . .

The Chair: I'm talking.

Mrs. Johnson: In block does it not just go to the minister now?

The Chair: No. I said in the rules at the beginning. You have to continue on.

Mr. Amery: Madam Chair, may I change the format to answer the member's question in the last two minutes that we have?

The Chair: Minister, it's your call.

Mr. Amery: I would like to do that, if I may. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Thank you. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Okay. I apologize. We are following the rules today.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Member, for bringing up the Red Deer Justice Centre, which is the newest courthouse here in Alberta and really a comprehensive justice centre that includes with it a number of wraparound services to help deliver justice to central Albertans. We had the pleasure, you and I, of touring this wonderful facility, and I think that it speaks for itself. You mentioned a lot of the remarkable improvements – the dedicated technology, the dedicated Indigenous courtroom, the wraparound services, which you saw all around – to provide a comprehensive and holistic approach to justice here in our province as well as an increase in the capacity.

Now, you may have seen the 12 courtrooms, which is a 50 per cent increase from the former Red Deer courthouse, but what you might not know is that there is additional space for expansion as well. That gives Alberta Justice the opportunity in the future to even further expand the capacity of the court in much greater ways. I'm very proud of that building.

Let me conclude in the last 20 seconds by saying this. Not only am I proud of the work that we're doing, but I'm proud of the people who sit to my right and to my left and behind me. The team at Alberta Justice works day and night to ensure that public safety and access to justice is upheld. I'm incredibly humbled, honoured to work with these people, and I thank each and every one of them.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right, everyone. Thank you so much. I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded.

I'd like to remind the committee members that we are scheduled to meet on Monday, March 16, at 7 p.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Services.

Thank you, everyone. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

