



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Legislative Offices

Friday, February 7, 2025
12 p.m.

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Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

Getson, Shane C., Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland (UC), Chair
van Dijken, Glenn, Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock (UC), Deputy Chair

Batten, Diana M.B., Calgary-Acadia (NDP)*
Chapman, Amanda, Calgary-Beddington (NDP)
Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (NDP)**
Dyck, Nolan B., Grande Prairie (UC)
Eremenko, Janet, Calgary-Currie (NDP)
Long, Martin M., West Yellowhead (UC)***
Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC)
Lunty, Brandon G., Leduc-Beaumont (UC)
Renaud, Marie F., St. Albert (NDP)
Rowswell, Garth, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright (UC)****
Shepherd, David, Edmonton-City Centre (NDP)
Sinclair, Scott, Lesser Slave Lake (UC)

* substitution for Janet Eremenko

** substitution for Marie Renaud

*** substitution for Nolan Dyck

**** substitution for Brandon Lunty

Legislative Officers

Kevin Brezinski	Ombudsman, Public Interest Commissioner
Diane McLeod	Information and Privacy Commissioner
Shawn McLeod	Ethics Commissioner
Terri Pelton	Child and Youth Advocate
Gordon McClure	Chief Electoral Officer
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Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications
Christina Steenbergen	Supervisor of Communications Services
Amanda LeBlanc	Managing Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

Participants

Ministry of Children and Family Services

Cynthia Dunnigan, Assistant Deputy Minister, Indigenous Partnerships and Strategic Services

David Wheeler, Assistant Deputy Minister, Child Intervention Delivery

Ministry of Justice

Tracy Wyrstiuk, Assistant Deputy Minister, Court and Justice Services

Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction

Coreen Everington, Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy and Programs

Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services

Toby Schneider, Assistant Deputy Minister, Employment and Financial Services

12 p.m.

Friday, February 7, 2025

[Mr. Getson in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to welcome members, staff, and guests to the meeting of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices.

I'm Shane Getson, the MLA for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland, but I call it God's country. It's so pretty. We've got to brag a little bit about our own areas. I'd like to ask the members joining the committee at the table to introduce themselves, and then we'll go to the folks remotely. We'll start to my right.

Ms Lovely: Good afternoon, everyone. Jackie Lovely, MLA for the Camrose constituency.

Mr. Sinclair: Hello, everyone. I'm Scott Sinclair, the MLA for the amazing people of Lesser Slave Lake.

Mr. Rowswell: Garth Rowswell, MLA, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

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

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

Mr. Dach: Good afternoon. Lorne Dach, MLA for Edmonton-McClung.

Dr. McGraw: Rachel McGraw, research officer.

Mr. Koenig: Trafton Koenig, office of Parliamentary Counsel.

Ms Robert: Good afternoon. Nancy Robert, clerk of *Journals* and committees.

Ms Rempel: Good afternoon. Jody Rempel, committee clerk.

The Chair: We'll go to members on the phone.

Ms Chapman: Amanda Chapman, MLA for Calgary-Beddington.

Mr. van Dijken: Glenn van Dijken, MLA for Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock.

The Chair: I see Ms Diana Batten.

Member Batten: Good afternoon. Diana Batten, MLA, Calgary-Acadia.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you. MLA, I apologize. It took me off guard there. I'm not used to seeing you in this committee like this, so I apologize for that.

For the record we have a few substitutions today. We have MLA Rowswell substituting for MLA Lundy, MLA Long is substituting for MLA Dyck, MLA Dach is substituting for Ms Renaud, and Member Batten, as we just found out, is substituting for Member Erenenko.

A few housekeeping items before we turn to business. Microphones: they're run by *Hansard*, so you can keep your hands off of those, which is awfully handy for tongue-tied days like today. Committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. Members participating remotely, ensure that you're prepared to speak when called upon. I would like you to have your camera on when available as well. When not, please mute yourself on that side. For those here, please turn your cellphones to the least disturbing setting possible.

With that, we have an agenda. A draft agenda was distributed for this meeting. Would someone like to move a motion for approval of that agenda? MLA Rowswell. Go ahead. All yours, sir.

Mr. Rowswell: Oh, okay.

The Chair: Just read it into the record. Otherwise, the clerks will give me heck here again.

Mr. Rowswell: I move that we approve the agenda.

The Chair: Perfect.

Having heard that, all in favour, please say aye. Any opposed? Online, all those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed? Motion carried.

We also have a set of meeting minutes from our last meeting. Would a member move a motion to approve those meeting minutes as well? MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: I move that we accept the minutes.

The Chair: Having heard the motion, all those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed? Online – now we got the routine going – all those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed? Motion carried.

Why we're really here is to review the office of the Child and Youth Advocate annual report. We have presentations from several invited ministries, and then we'll have questions and discussion on those presentations. Today we are continuing our consideration of the annual report of the Child and Youth Advocate. The committee decided to invite four ministries to meet with us today to discuss the responses to the recommendations from the office of the Child and Youth Advocate.

At this point I would like to invite the officials from the ministries to join us at the table with a few introductory comments, and then we'll also get you to read your name into the record. Representatives from each ministry will have an opportunity to make a presentation of up to 15 minutes in length. After all four presentations there will be time for committee members to ask questions, which the appropriate ministry representative can respond to. I'd also like to thank the officials from the office of the Child and Youth Advocate who are in attendance here today. They've joined us. It was requested they provide technical support to the committee during this portion of the agenda.

Again, for those following along at home, the Child and Youth Advocate had presented at a different meeting. They gave us that very fulsome report with a lot of the recommendations and considerations. We're not going to go back to that today and the review of that. They're literally here for technical support so they can provide clarification about the contents of the report, et cetera.

With that, I would like to welcome our presenters to the meeting. I'll turn the floor over to the Ministry of Children and Family Services. If you'd like to introduce yourselves, that would be perfect.

Mr. Wheeler: Good afternoon. David Wheeler, assistant deputy minister of child intervention delivery in Children and Family Services.

The Chair: Please introduce yourselves around the table if you could.

Ms Everington: Good afternoon. I'm Coreen Everington, assistant deputy minister of policy and programs with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Wyrstiuk: Good afternoon. Tracy Wyrstiuk. I'm the assistant deputy minister for court and justice services at Justice.

The Chair: Thank you.

And the gentleman in the blue shirt.

Mr. Schneider: Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Toby Schneider. I'm the ADM for employment and financial services at the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services.

The Chair: Perfect. With that, I'll turn the floor over to you.

Ministry of Children and Family Services

Mr. Wheeler: Thank you. Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to respond to the recommendations from the office of the Child and Youth Advocate 2023-24 annual report. I'm David Wheeler, assistant deputy minister of child intervention delivery, and I am pleased to respond to the issues raised and provide additional information on behalf of Children and Family Services. I am also joined by several assistant deputy ministers from Children and Family Services in the gallery: Joni Brodziak, assistant deputy minister of youth and preventive family services; Brian Makowecki, regulatory compliance, business supports and quality assurance; and Cynthia Dunnigan, Indigenous services and strategic supports.

The safety of vulnerable children and youth is the top priority for this ministry, and we are committed to working with partners such as the Child and Youth Advocate to make a meaningful difference. The Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act, or CYFEA, requires Children and Family Services to publish a response to the office of the Child and Youth Advocate report recommendations. The legislation also requires Children and Family Services to publish statistical data about incidents that lead to serious injuries and deaths of children and youth that occurred while they were receiving intervention services. The ministry is legislatively required to report all deaths to the minister and the OCYA, and the ministry fulfills the obligation of this legislation and takes it very seriously.

Apologies. There's a delay on the clicker.

The Chair: You're doing better than I usually do.

Mr. Wheeler: Yeah. Every third time.

There's no greater tragedy than the death of a child, youth, or young adult. When a child or youth receiving intervention services dies or is seriously injured, we report it publicly and conduct a rigorous, transparent examination of what happened. Children and Family Services has a comprehensive process to review deaths and serious incidents. We are committed to continuously improving our system to support the safety of children receiving intervention services.

All deaths of children, youth, and young adults receiving services go through an internal child death and serious injury review process. This process looks at what was happening at the time of the incident, helping us to understand what the factors were that contributed to decisions during our involvement with the child and the family. As a part of this we also complete child intervention service reviews, which are comprehensive reports that summarize and analyze child intervention involvement on all reports of death where a child was receiving services or where a file closed before they passed away as well as reports of all serious injuries. The

Children and Family Services team also conducts analysis through other data and quality assurance activities.

In addition to the ministry reviews under sections 9 and 9.1 of the Child and Youth Advocate Act, the advocate has a mandate to review cases where a child died or was seriously injured while receiving child intervention services. This also includes cases where a child passed away within two years of receiving services through CYFEA or the Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act, or PSECA. Section 15.5 of the Child and Youth Advocate Act requires that ministries that receive OCYA recommendations publicly respond to those within 75 days of receiving them.

CFS and the OCYA have a long-standing collaborative relationship that supports effective information sharing. With the OCYA's changes to the reporting and evaluation processes, CFS is working collaboratively with the OCYA to support open communication before recommendations are issued throughout the year in advance of their evaluation cycle and, ultimately, after the evaluation cycle, too.

Monthly leadership meetings take place between the advocate's office and the department, and ad hoc meetings are scheduled around specific deliverables as required. To further collaboration, executive-level representatives from CFS and the OCYA meet every month. At these meetings we discuss emerging themes and issues that come to the attention of the OCYA through investigations and advocacy. We also share information about changes to programs, policy, and processes, and the OCYA shares the status of their upcoming reports.

12:10

The following slides outline our progress on recommendations made to CFS by the OCYA in this reporting year. These are found on page 31 of the OCYA's annual report. On January 23, 2024, the OCYA released Beyond Barriers, a special report on young people with disabilities in the child intervention and youth justice systems. The report included eight recommendations, with two directed at Children and Family Services. I am pleased to share updates on these, as the ministry is dedicated to making sure all children who receive child intervention services can access the supports they need.

The first recommendation for CFS was regarding young people with disabilities and placements, and it reads:

The Ministry of Children and Family Services should partner with external disability experts and young people to review and identify actions to meet the needs of young people with disabilities in placements.

In our public response CFS accepted the intent of this recommendation and considers the recommendation to be in progress. We are responding in the following ways. In terms of policy and practice a protocol between our ministry and Seniors, Community and Social Services was established several years ago. It's called supporting Alberta's children, youth, and parents/guardians with disabilities. This protocol reflects a commitment to collaboration and understanding between both ministries and emphasizes the importance of continually assessing caregiver capacity and meeting the special needs of youth and children. CFS supports this protocol through child intervention services and the supports for permanency program.

Under this protocol we have established transparent collaborative casework practice to make sure that no disruption or gap in services occurs as the child, youth, and/or family transitions from one program to another and that the child, youth, and family are not limited in access to appropriate supports and services by accessing one program or another. As well, a comprehensive review of the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act is under way. The

review committee may hear from disability experts as a part of their review.

In addition, the transition to adulthood program, or TAP, which serves young adults, including those with complex needs, was fully implemented in December 2022. This important program invests in the future of youth and young adults. It provides readily available services and supports to youth transitioning into adulthood. Young adults enrolled in adult disability services and other federal or provincial programs can receive soft supports such as mentoring, life skills, employment support, mental health and addiction support.

Further, the supports for permanency program provides financial and other support to families who have adopted or obtained private guardianship of children in permanent government care. CFS engages with the family supports for children and disabilities program under the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services to find ways to co-ordinate supports through both of those programs. CFS also has 64 licensed personal community care beds that provide tailored programs for children and youth with unique needs. These beds are for youth with complex mental health needs who require specialized care beyond what is available in regular placements. CFS is developing a procurement strategy for this service to better address the diverse and complex needs of children and youth in care.

In January 2024 we launched a pilot survey to learn more about the diverse backgrounds of children and youth aged 10 to 17 in permanent care as well as young adults receiving support through the transition to adulthood program. A Youth Advisory Task Force is gathering direct feedback from youth and young adults currently or formerly in care. Task force members provide perspective, insight, and feedback on programs, policies, and services that affect children, youth, and young adults receiving child intervention services. The OCYA has not publicly evaluated this recommendation yet.

The second recommendation for Children and Family Services in Beyond Barriers is that

the Ministry of Children and Family Services should partner with external disability experts and young people to complete a review and identify actions to meet the needs of young people with disabilities involved with the Support for Permanency program.

In our public response CFS accepted the intent of this recommendation, and it is considered in progress. We recognize that children and youth with disabilities require specialized services and that this need continues even after they are adopted or achieve permanency through private guardianship. Our policy directs practitioners to engage with other ministries so the child or youth can access all available supports and services for which the child or youth might be eligible, both before and after permanency is achieved.

The crossministry protocol I mentioned earlier outlines that children and youth with disabilities and their adoptive parents or private guardians may receive supports for permanency and family supports for children with disabilities concurrently. The workers, together with the family, identify their needs and determine what supports and services are available through the two programs. The workers from the two programs work as a team and co-ordinate who will provide which services as per their program mandates and policies and who will have primary casework responsibilities. The intent is to streamline supports and services for families, provide services in the least disruptive manner, and reduce duplication.

Initiatives I previously mentioned such as our survey on diversity, the transition to adulthood program, and the review of the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act may also assist this recommendation. CFS meets with SCSS monthly to discuss

challenges Albertans are experiencing in accessing both systems. CFS and SCSS are working collaboratively to update the crossministry protocol to support co-ordination of service delivery to children, youth, and their families.

In addition, Children and Family Services conducted a formal review of the supports for permanency program in 2023 to assess the current service delivery model. Recommendations from both the spring 2022 review and this one will inform potential improvements. The OCYA has not yet publicly evaluated this recommendation.

Thank you again for the opportunity to respond to the recommendations from the office of the Child and Youth Advocate 2023-24 annual report.

The Chair: Well, thank you for that.

The questions, folks, we'll just pause those until the end until we get through all of these, if that's okay.

And again, from us to you – I think I can say this on behalf of all the committee members – thank you for the work that you do on that file. It's very difficult heavy lifting, of course, so thank you for your commitment and the service to that.

Next up is Seniors, Community and Social Services. If the clicker works for you, too, we'll be doing great here today on technology.

Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services

Mr. Schneider: Okay. It looks like we're ready to go. Thank you. I guess I'm going to test it now. It worked. Okay.

To begin, thank you very much for the opportunity to respond to the recommendations from the office of the Child and Youth Advocate 2023-24 annual report. I am Assistant Deputy Minister Toby Schneider, on behalf of the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services. I am joined today by Samara Ilyas, executive director for disability policy and supports, in the gallery. I am pleased to be here today at this committee to provide a brief update on our ministry's response to the OCYA recommendations referenced in their 2023-24 annual report.

I don't have to change slides because I was ahead of myself. Seniors, Community and Social Services provides a range of social supports for Albertans, including services for children, youth, and adults with disabilities and for their families; financial benefits; housing and homelessness supports; as well as supports for seniors and assistance to help Albertans connect to the workforce. SCSS provides programs and services that target all age groups and services with programs like the family support for children with disabilities, or FSCD, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, FASD, which have a strong focus on children and youth.

Our ministry is also responsible for the office of the public guardian and trustee. We have several legislative programs, including FSCD, persons with developmental disabilities, or PDD, the AISH program, the income support program, that operate within the parameters of respective legislation. In addition, we provide a number of programs and services that support the stability of Albertans and their families and that promote their ability to participate and be included in their communities. I will briefly highlight some of the programs, services, and initiatives that may be most relevant to children and youth and their families in the next slide.

12:20

Success. SCSS shares the OCYA's commitment to improving outcomes for children – I want to make sure I'm on the right slide, folks; I was successful; sorry about that – and youth with disabilities in Alberta. Transitioning to adulthood can be especially challenging

for youth in government care and for young adults who were previously in care. Seniors, Community and Social Services staff work closely with the Ministry of Children and Family Services to support youth transitions to adulthood as part of the transition to adulthood program. This program provides specialized, co-ordinated, and consistent services to prepare young adults to live independently, pursue education, and build their careers. Depending on the assessment of need young adults with disabilities may access relevant services and supports through the PDD program, persons with developmental disabilities program; financial supports through either the income support or the assured income for the severely handicapped programs; and education and employment supports through the disability-related employment supports program.

The PDD program helps adults with developmental disabilities live as independently as possible in their communities. The program provides access to disability support services such as home living supports to help with daily activities, respite care, community access supports, and specialized supports for mental health and behavioural issues. In 2023-24 SCSS invested \$1.2 billion to provide PDD supports and services to over 13,400 adults.

The FSCD program offers a range of child- and family-focused supports. In 2023-24 over \$233 million was invested to provide FSCD supports to just over 20,000 families. With FSCD the department enters into agreements with the eligible families to fund the supports and service providers of their choosing that they feel will most benefit the children and their families. In 2023 and '24, as previously mentioned, we served over 20,000 families through this program.

The PDD program helps eligible adults plan, co-ordinate, and access services to live as independently as they can. The PDD program supports over 13,000 Albertans.

The AISH program provides financial supports to Albertans with a permanent disability that substantially limits their ability to earn a livelihood. Eligible Albertans receive a monthly financial benefit as well as additional personal benefits depending on household circumstances and individual needs, such as if there are children or some type of medical need. AISH supports approximately 78,000 Albertans right now and was recently indexed to inflation as of January 1, 2025.

Income support provides financial benefits to support basic living expenses. The support an individual receives depends on their needs, their household composition, their ability to work, and the existing financial resources. Approximately 57,000 Albertans are currently receiving income support. This program was also indexed on January 1 this year.

The career and employment supports are provided by SCSS to help Albertans become ready for work, train or improve their skills, find a job, and keep a job. The ministry supports tools like the alis.alberta.ca website and other supports to help Albertans make informed career decisions, develop their plans for training and education for securing employment.

The fetal alcohol spectrum disorder work that SCSS does is a \$27 million program to support individuals and families impacted by FASD, including education and school supports and a host of services and resources made available through regional FASD support networks. In 2023 approximately 1,600 children and youth with FASD, their families, and caregivers received support and services for the FASD network.

The family and community housing program. The community housing program provides subsidized rental housing to families who may not otherwise be able to afford it in the private market. In 2023-24 \$73.5 million was expended through this program. The rental assistance program similarly provides long- and short-term

benefits to subsidize rent for Albertans with low income. Program eligibility is weighed to consider the number of children in the household, and in 2023-2024 it supported an additional 1,661 through rental assistance. In total more than 105,000 Albertans have been supported.

We also support FCSS through partnerships with municipalities, Métis settlements, and others to develop and deliver preventive community social services locally, as well as the office of the public guardian, which plays an important role in ensuring vulnerable Albertans have someone to make important decisions for them on issues related to finances, medical needs, and legal matters.

Continuing care also. Under the refocused Alberta Health system, SCSS is the lead for continuing care and is working towards standing up a new provincial assisted living agency called assisted living Alberta. The agency will provide a comprehensive system of care as well as a full range of wraparound supports and services, including medical and nonmedical supports, home care, community care, and social services. This will broaden the available supports for all Albertans who need daily assistance and service in continuing care homes, supportive living, or through home and community care.

SCSS values the advocate's recommendations regarding how to better support and serve children and youth and provide a high standard of public accountability through our public responses and progress daily. Where SCSS is identified with other ministries, we work collaboratively with our crossministry partners to address the identified issues. SCSS is currently providing progress updates for the four active recommendations released between 2020 and 2022.

There are five recommendations identified in the 2023-24 annual report from the special report Beyond Barriers. In the interest of time I'm going to jump ahead to get to those responses. I would like to mention before I jump in here that the five recommendations relative to SCSS were identified in the special report Beyond Barriers. The department responded and acknowledged the report, advising that the report and recommendations will help inform continued program improvements. There is no legislative obligation for SCSS to respond or report on recommendations made in the special report. While that is the case, the department will work and report on the progress of these recommendations in March 2025.

The report highlights the key themes, five of which are related to the service and supports provided to children and services. The first recommendation asks SCSS to release a plan to address the challenges a stakeholder identified in 2021. SCSS reviewed the FSCD program in late 2020, early 2021. A what-we-heard report was developed and summarized the main themes of feedback provided through engagement to the families, stakeholder organizations, and public. The report was made publicly available on alberta.ca. Many improvements have been made to the programs to streamline the process and enhance client experience while also addressing feedback from families through the 2021 FSCD review.

Work completed up to March 2024 includes FSCD in 2023 implemented improvements to the multidisciplinary team, or MDT, process to improve the experience of families who access specialized services and aligned practices across the province. The directive was issued in 2023 on reducing the MDT reviews and fewer face-to-face reviews by authorizing caseworkers to make determinations regarding specialized services based on information and documentation provided by the professionals the families have been working with. This would be the case where there is sufficient information and would allow them to proceed without requiring an MDT. The face-to-face MDTs continue to be offered at the family's request or if the program requires, because perhaps the information is not as clear. The directive has been incorporated into FSCD policy under section 10, specialized services, and section 8, service

delivery procedures, ensuring alignment with the program and providing clear procedural direction. After implementing the change in August 2023, there was a 33 per cent reduction in MDT reviews between the second quarter and the fourth quarter.

12:30

I'm going to jump ahead here. There may be more questions on this, but I want to make sure I touch on each of these recommendations. The second recommendation says that the FSCD program should provide direct services to families who have urgent needs. The FSCD program is family centric, recognizing the primary role of parents in decision-making. It is designed to support parental choices by giving options that align with the needs and circumstances of each family. Families have the flexibility to choose who will provide the services to their children, whether they choose to privately hire or access services through an agency.

SCSS also contracts with over 40 service providers across the province to facilitate service delivery. FSCD staff work with families to identify and access changing needs and circumstances that arise, and if additional supports are required to address changing needs, including things such as additional respite or out-of-home care supports. Additionally, the relationship between the family and the caseworker is critical to support the family's access to resources that they may need.

The third recommendation suggests the FSCD program needs to provide more out-of-home arrangements for children with disabilities. SCSS again believes that disabilities in the family should receive the support and services they require in the least intrusive way and in a manner that recognizes the values of the family as a primary source of care for the children. Prior to considering out-of-home living arrangements, the FSCD program looks at the continuum of supports and services to meet the needs of youth with disabilities and their families. This includes exploring provision of increased respite and/or higher levels of support to maintain the family unit. A comprehensive process is in place to review requests for out-of-home living arrangements when there is a time-sensitive need to consider these options to meet the needs of the family and children.

I think I am out of time.

The Chair: Actually, your colleague was a little more expeditious, so he gave you two minutes if you want to use it. We can definitely keep on track here.

Mr. Schneider: I've been talking so fast. I wish you would have let me know that.

The Chair: Well, as a legislator – and my colleagues around the table will know – we're always on the shot clock, too, in there, so you're in good company. If you need a little bit of extra time, we definitely want you to be able to talk about the recommendations, to get that out for the committee's benefit, so please do.

Mr. Schneider: Thank you. I will complete this section, then. Recommendation 4 is for the expansion or broadening of eligibility for the PDD program. The PDD program helps eligible adults plan, co-ordinate, and access services to live as independently as possible in their communities. Eligibility for the program is defined in the Persons with Developmental Disabilities Services Act and associated regulations. Any decision around eligibility would be required to go through a government decision-making process.

The fifth recommendation highlighted in the annual report refers to the 2021 PDD report and implementation of the recommendations about the alternative housing supports. SCSS released Stronger Foundations: Alberta's 10-year Strategy to Improve and Expand

Affordable Housing in 2021. The strategy identifies population groups that are likely to face barriers to finding and maintaining housing and commits to make policy decisions to support these groups, including people with disabilities. The strategy seeks to smooth transitions across the housing continuum.

Access to housing accommodation that meets the needs of Albertans at different points in their lives is essential to their quality of life. In 2021 the government redesigned the rental supplement program to be more flexible. This is now tied to tenants instead of to a unit, allowing the benefit to move if the tenant needs to move. Through Alberta's affordable housing partnership program, our current and new partner offering, an innovative approach to giving housing providers more flexibility to meet the unique needs of communities they serve, we provide capital funding to support innovative and sustainable housing solutions for Albertans in need.

Thank you.

The Chair: Appreciate that. Again, similarly to the last comments, thanks for your work on this file, back to your team as well. It's a lot of heavy lifting, so thank you for doing what you're doing.

Mental Health and Addiction, you are up.

Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction

Ms Everington: Good afternoon, Chair, hon. committee members, and colleagues at the table with me this afternoon. Again, I'm Coreen Everington, assistant deputy minister of policy and programs with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction. Thank you for the opportunity to provide information and an update to the committee today.

The Chair: Now you're going to have my luck.

Ms Everington: There we go. All right.

The Department of Mental Health and Addiction was established in October 2022 in an effort to address mental health and addiction system pressures, steer recovery-oriented policy across government, and provide broader level system oversight. Our mandate to lead and establish crossministry and cross-sector recovery-oriented systems of care has been consistent since 2019 and was most recently reinforced in the Premier's mandate letters to the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction, Minister Dan Williams, and other department ministers in August 2023.

As a result of the health refocusing initiative, the Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction is now comprised of three organizations. The Department of Mental Health and Addiction, or MHA, as I'll refer to it, is responsible for implementing a comprehensive recovery-oriented system of care, increasing access to evidence-based services and supports, funding community-based programs and services, licensing addiction and mental health service providers, and ensuring mental health and addiction services are safe and high quality. Recovery Alberta, established in September 2024, is now the lead provincial health agency responsible for the delivery of mental health, addiction, and correctional health services care in Alberta, and, established in June 2024, the Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence, also referred to as CORE, has a mandate to inform best practices for recovery through program evaluation and analyzing data to support developing objective and practical recovery-focused policy.

MHA assumed responsibility for mental health and addiction related OCYA recommendations issued to Health prior to the department standing up. This was to support continuity of the work as well as to support continuity of reporting. As a result, MHA collaborates with Health, Public Safety, Justice, Social Services,

and Education sectors to align mental health and addiction services across systems, in part to address the advocate's recommendations.

Establishing a recovery-oriented system of mental health and addiction care is the primary policy focus of MHA. Our approach is rooted in ensuring that all Albertans, including children and youth, have access to the supports they need to maintain overall mental wellness and for those experiencing mental illness or addiction to have the supports and resources they need to pursue and maintain long-term recovery.

As you can see from the ministry business plan – just a portion of it's here on the slide – MHA has publicly committed to achieving and reporting on objectives that directly align with many of the OCYA's recommendations. Some of the key objectives include expanding facilities and services for youth experiencing mental illness, developing a continuum of culturally appropriate mental health and addiction services to support Indigenous people in Alberta, and expanding access to mental health supports for youth across the continuum, including prevention, early intervention, and treatment initiatives. The ministry will report publicly on these key objectives as part of the annual reporting process.

As MHA's primary policy, recovery-oriented systems of care are co-ordinated networks of community-based services and supports that are person centred and build on the strengths and resilience of individuals, families, and communities. They create environments that support those at risk or experiencing substance use or mental health challenges to achieve improved health, wellness, and quality of life. This approach also emphasizes prevention and early intervention, helping individuals and families promote and maintain overall mental wellness and address early risk factors before symptoms intensify.

12:40

The vision is for all Albertans with mental health and addiction concerns and issues to be effectively supported in their personal pursuit of recovery through integrated, whole of community, recovery-oriented systems of care that are easily accessible when needed. This includes providing and supporting a full continuum of care, including prevention, early intervention, treatment, and recovery supports, and this is also known as the Alberta recovery model.

Encouragingly, and what I'd like to share: in recent Alberta substance use surveillance system data, so ASUS, which is the publicly available dashboard that reports substance-use related outcomes, this data suggests a downward trend in substance-use related deaths among youth aged 12 to 24. When we're looking at January to October both 2023 compared to 2024, the rate per 100,000 youth dropped from 23.1 to 12 for opioid-related deaths, and for methamphetamine-related deaths, they've also decreased in terms of the count from 86 from January to October '23 to 45 from January to October in 2024. We've also seen similar reductions in cocaine-related deaths and pharmaceutical opioid-related deaths over the same period.

The department's legislated mandate mirrors that of other departments as it relates to the OCYA recommendations, which requires a co-ordinated, crossministry approach to responding to OCYA recommendations. Responses are legislatively required to be publicly posted within 75 days of the report being released, and to support this, crossministry collaboration and collaboration with the OCYA provide an opportunity to align our priorities, discuss OCYA recommendations, and plan next steps. Ongoing engagement through existing committees will continue to strengthen collaboration and co-ordination across ministries.

For example, the department leverages a crossministry community of practice that meets quarterly to discuss the release of

consolidated reports, fatality inquiries, and recommendations like those from the OCYA to align responses and share best practices. We work in collaboration with other departments to ensure alignment of programs and initiatives. An example of this is the provincial implementation committee, which was established to guide the implementation of new school-based mental wellness and clinical services.

While no new recommendations were issued to Mental Health and Addiction in the OCYA's 2023-24 annual report, the advocate highlighted several themes directly relevant to the ministry's work. These include the ongoing mental health and substance use challenges faced by young Albertans in care, the need for a co-ordinated continuum of supports as youth transition to adulthood, the critical need for culturally appropriate mental health services, and the importance of early intervention to prevent severe mental health issues.

As an update on our work, I would like to highlight some of the key initiatives MHA is leading or partnered on to support children and youth, including those with complex needs. In terms of prevention we've taken important steps to advance recovery-oriented systems of care by building capacity in the mental health and addiction system and enabling easier access to programs and services for children and youth.

Some key initiatives include an investment of \$16.5 million over three years for the integrated school support program, or ISSP. This program provides prevention and early intervention wraparound supports for children aged 5 to 15, including access to a mental health professional to enhance their mental well-being. ISSP's reach has doubled since it first began, now operating in 31 schools across 22 communities, supporting over 10,000 students to date. Plans are in place to expand to at least 19 more communities by fall 2025, including three Indigenous communities.

Collectively, government is also doing work to reduce youth suicide in Alberta with a focus on supporting at-risk groups, including Indigenous youth, LGBTQ2S-plus, newcomers, refugees, and those impacted by adverse childhood experiences. Based on preliminary data from the Centre for Suicide Prevention, which was updated in January 2025, the rate of youth suicide aged 15 to 19 in Alberta has gone down by over 50 per cent since 2022 and lower than prepandemic levels. Similarly, a 30 per cent decrease for youth aged 20 to 24 is also reported. We know that we need to be cautious with these numbers as cause of death, particularly as it relates to suicide, does take time to determine and register. So while this trend is encouraging, we remain committed to strengthening efforts through targeted investments and community-led efforts.

Another initiative is through AHS's Indigenous wellness core, where \$5 million annually is provided for the honouring life Indigenous youth suicide prevention initiative. This initiative is intended to support Indigenous communities and organizations to lead and deliver life-promoting initiatives and programs to enhance and maintain youth resiliency. Honouring life has supported over 64 Indigenous communities and Indigenous-led organizations to date.

In terms of our early intervention work MHA is also expanding accessible, community-based, and virtual services to ensure young people receive timely support before challenges escalate. Some key initiatives include investing \$13.6 million over three years to implement youth mental health hubs across Alberta to provide comprehensive wraparound support for youth aged 11 to 25. This is an annual increase of \$2.1 million since the initiative was first announced in 2021. Our 10 youth mental health hubs offer access to counselling, peer support, primary care, and social services in one location, supporting early intervention and co-ordinated care,

including with three First Nation communities. The funding also supports virtual services through Kickstand Connect.

We're also investing \$11 million over three years to expand counselling services through Counselling Alberta, which is an average annual increase of \$1.4 million since it was first announced in 2022. Counselling Alberta provides virtual low-cost or free counselling with no wait-lists, including in-person options in the seven major cities. In '23-24 Counselling Alberta delivered nearly 12,300 counselling sessions to Albertans, including about a quarter of them to youth.

In terms of the treatment initiatives Alberta's government is significantly increasing the availability of recovery-oriented mental health and addiction treatment for youth. One of our focuses has been on building system capacity, which includes a \$23 million investment to establish a 105-bed northern Alberta youth recovery centre in Edmonton, which will provide comprehensive addiction treatment for up to 300 youth annually and is expected to open in fall 2026. This centre will take a holistic approach to recovery, offering opioid agonist treatment medications, counselling, mental health support, employment and training opportunities, as well as financial and housing assistance.

MHA is also providing more than \$200 million over three years to CASA Mental Health to support a continuum of child and youth mental health supports. This includes \$112 million over three years to construct three new CASA houses, including in Fort McMurray, Calgary, and one in southern Alberta, with that location to be determined. These CASA houses will provide bed-based and day treatment for youth in grades 7 to 12 with severe mental health, addiction, intellectual, family, and social challenges. CASA houses are expected to support over 300 youth per year once operational by 2028. Additionally, serving students in grades 4 to 12, we are expanding CASA Mental Health classrooms from 20 up to 60 by 2026, with a \$91 million investment over three years. This is an average annual increase of \$10.25 million since CASA classrooms first began.

Supporting children and youth, including those in care, to access needed mental health and addiction treatment is a priority for MHA. In collaboration with Children and Family Services, or CFS, we are investing in specialized programs like the personalized community care program, that provides intensive live-in treatment for children and youth in care, ensuring access to both clinical and 24/7 nonclinical support. We also worked in partnership with CFS and Recovery Alberta to expand access to the virtual opioid dependency program, or VODP, for young people by establishing a dedicated youth team in the program.

12:50

The youth VODP offers same-day access to treatment medications like methadone and Suboxone with no wait-list. MHA and CFS are providing \$4.5 million over three years for the youth VODP program, which was designed to serve up to 125 youth annually. Youth VODP includes access through community group care, provincial campus-based care, and through the protection of children abusing drugs programs. For emerging adults, youth VODP services have been extended to youth transitioning out of care, providing support until the age of 22.

We know that families and friends play an important role in an individual's recovery journey, including helping them build recovery capital. To help to develop these informal networks of support, MHA is supporting the development of recovery on campus programs at each of Alberta's 26 publicly funded postsecondary campuses. Through a \$1.5 million investment over three years to the University of Calgary to lead this project, students, faculty, and staff across the 26 postsecondary institutions

have increased access to peer support, social activities, and education on substance use and addiction.

I think I'm out of time.

The Chair: That was well timed. I was just going to give you two minutes of additional time there.

Ms Everington: All I have left to say is thank you so much for the opportunity to provide the information.

The Chair: Thank you. Again, great work on getting that file up and running. We heard a number of items out of the report; hence, why a lot of the members wanted to have you here today to ask questions, so thank you for that.

Ms Everington: Thank you.

The Chair: The next presentation we have is from Justice. The floor is yours.

Ministry of Justice

Ms Wyrstiuik: Great. Thank you, everyone, for the invitation to speak to the committee today regarding how the Ministry of Justice is responding to the recommendations put forward by the office of the Child and Youth Advocate in their latest report. I am Tracy Wyrstiuik. I'm the assistant deputy minister of court and justice services, and I am pleased to respond to the issues raised and speak on behalf of the ministry today. Also with me today is Matthew Reid in our gallery, who is also from the Ministry of Justice.

I want to first acknowledge the important work that the office of the Child and Youth Advocate undertakes with the goal of ensuring young persons are adequately cared for, represented, and included in all aspects of our justice system. Of course, the Ministry of Justice shares this goal. The Ministry of Justice helps ensure all Albertans have access to fair and accessible justice systems where the rule of law is upheld and government undertakings are administered according to the rule of law. Working alongside our partners in the judiciary, law enforcement, public safety, and health, the ministry provides programs and services that ensure access to justice and supports the needs of all Albertans involved in the justice system.

A key aspect of the justice department's mandate is to strengthen the justice system while making it accessible for all Albertans. Our justice business plan outcomes align with the intention of the office of the Child and Youth Advocate report recommendation in two ways: first, that Alberta's justice system is fair and accessible and, second, that Albertans are supported in their interactions with the justice system.

In 2023 the former ministry of justice and solicitor general was divided into the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Services. The Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Services is focused on ensuring all Albertans are safe and secure in their communities, that Albertans are supported in their interactions with the justice system, and that Alberta is prepared and resilient to the impacts of disasters.

I raise this because it's important to understand that the split of these two ministries did happen and moved the responsibility of correction services and policing to front-line areas with the most contact with youth to the Public Safety and Emergency Services ministry. Because of the strict nature of their involvement with youth, these areas primarily responded to the prior recommendations from the office of the Child and Youth Advocate directed at the former ministry of justice and solicitor general.

I want to speak to you a little bit about the ministry scope. The Ministry of Justice administers the courts at Alberta. It provides criminal prosecution services for adults and youth as well as providing legal and strategic services to the government as a whole. In addition, the Ministry of Justice also oversees the delivery of legal aid to Albertans and administers the federal firearms legislation and advocates for Alberta's firearms community.

The ministry also provides information and dispute resolution options for people with legal issues to assist them in the legal system and further supports Albertans dealing with their family law issues by collecting and enforcing court-ordered child, spousal, and parent support, otherwise known as the maintenance enforcement program.

The ministry also provides forensic death investigations into sudden, unexplained, or unexpected deaths in Alberta. In collaboration with other ministries and community organizations the ministry supports the delivery of alternatives to traditional judicial processes, including diversion and restorative justice programs and specialized courts.

While Justice's main role with youth is the administration of the courts and ensuring they have access to the courts and through criminal prosecutions, there are also some specialized programs that the ministry operates that offer support to youth in our community. This includes court navigation services to Indigenous youth through the Indigenous court work program. The Indigenous court work program provides Indigenous litigants and victims with services or assistance before, during, and after the court process for family and criminal matters. We also have the youth justice committees, that focus on youth diversion and community-based programming, and our restorative justice programs, which offer alternative and more holistic services as compared to the traditional court system.

Specialized courts, which we have, also offer youth 18 and over the opportunity to access supports for substance use disorder and other mental health issues while our brief conflict intervention service provides the voice-of-the-child report for eligible parties involved in a family litigation matter. Additionally, Legal Aid, an independent, third-party, not-for-profit organization funded by government, offers a suite of legal supports to youth involved in the justice system.

Justice very much values its relationship with the office of the Child and Youth Advocate, and department staff meet with the office on a monthly basis to provide updates and ensure that there's a regular channel for communication. As I noted in my earlier remarks, the majority of the office of the Child and Youth Advocate recommendations prior to 2023-24 relate to corrections and policing and are now under the responsibility of Public Safety and Emergency Services. That is due to a lot of the front-line nature of that ministry; for example, correctional officers and custodial centres and probation officers in the community.

I want to speak now to the OCYA recommendations. Of the recommendations within the 2023-24 annual report, one is relevant to the Ministry of Justice. The report specifically states that youth navigating the justice system have difficulties understanding court proceedings and that their disabilities are not being accommodated. In particular, the report noted a limitation in services for youth with invisible disabilities such as those that influence how a young person's brain functions on a daily basis. There is definite alignment with the intent of this recommendation and Justice's business plan as the ministry is committed to providing an accessible criminal justice system for all Albertans.

In December 2024 Ministry of Justice representatives took action to explore this recommendation and met with the government of Alberta's Advocate for Persons with Disabilities. We again met

with them in January 2025 with the ministry of public safety and security and had a conversation with the office of the Child and Youth Advocate to discuss the scope of the recommendation. We are committed to continuing to work with the office of the Child and Youth Advocate to identify the most appropriate external disability expert to further explore this recommendation. I can assure you that the Ministry of Justice continues to explore the implementation of this recommendation as we do believe that justice should not be out of the reach of any Albertan.

Thank you.

The Chair: I really appreciate the presentation.

At this point, really, again, thank you to all the presenters. We're going to open this up to questions and, hopefully, answers because unlike over there, where it's question period, not answer period, here you've got to actually answer the question.

Right now I have on the speaking list MLA Dach, MLA van Dijken, and MLA Lovely. What I do want to do, to my colleagues and members here, similarly to the last meeting – we've got a chance to really do something good as a group. I'm hoping that theme carries through and we keep it very professional. I know this is near and dear to all of our hearts. They're very sensitive issues.

With that, the chair will make sure that we do the best work for Albertans and get the answers you need. Just please be respectful and understand that as well.

With that, MLA Dach, I'll put you up, and then MLA Shepherd will follow.

1:00

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Chair, and thank you once again to all the presenters here today. I noted in Mr. Wheeler's presentation that he intentionally stated that he accepted the "intent" of OCYA recommendations. That word "intent" stood out to me. Mr. Wheeler, as ADM would you please explain the distinction you would like this committee to understand between accepting the intent of a recommendation made by an independent office of the Legislature, in this case the OCYA, versus accepting such recommendations wholeheartedly and without reservations? What implicit message are you trying to convey by limiting your acceptance to the intent of the OCYA recommendations? Are there parts of the recommendations that you reject or find problematic by intentionally using that word "intent" rather than unqualified acceptance of recommendations?

Mr. Wheeler: Thank you. As I mentioned in the presentation, when there is a recommendation that does come to our ministry legislatively, we have to respond to it within 75 days, and we do. We have an established, an effective process that allows for us to develop meaningful responses to the recommendations and figure out how to further action planning for them. While it's not legislated, we do provide annual updates as well to the advocate's office as we work through it, and they assess progress on it as well.

You know, the variables that impact the differences in how we approach it often are that language that you're speaking to. We'll often accept the intent of a recommendation, meaning that we share the advocate's desired outcome but do not necessarily agree with how to exactly achieve that. We put out our public response to it, and then we assess how we are progressing with that public response over time.

We do use different language at times than the OCYA as well. Often in the responses from Children and Family Services you'll see that we use the words "complete" whereas the advocate's office uses the word "met." That is partly because we also do receive recommendations from other bodies such as fatality inquiries and

so on. We do review every recommendation and try to find how to action them in the most beneficial way to Albertan children and families that we serve in the system.

Mr. Dach: Can I have a quick follow-up?

The Chair: Yes, sir. Go ahead.

Mr. Dach: Mr. Wheeler, when there is a difference in methodological approach to reaching the desired outcome, is this something that is made public between yourselves and OCYA? How do you come to terms with those disagreements when you disagree on methodology and implementation?

Mr. Wheeler: We do have regular conversations. Our interactions aren't just, you know, posting a public response. We'll have conversations with the OCYA. We work collaboratively with them through the evaluation process, both for us to get a better understanding of kind of the intent behind a recommendation as well as for the OCYA to understand how we're trying to approach it to meet the outcomes that have been identified in the public response.

There is a dialogue, and, you know, there are times when we will view something as complete whereas the OCYA doesn't. Sometimes those recommendations close; sometimes they remain in progress. Should they ever close with a disagreement, we're always willing to respond to an additional recommendation in the future. But it is a thorough dialogue that we have with them. We focus on what's within our legislative mandate and respond accordingly.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Wheeler.

The Chair: Thank you.

MLA van Dijken, you're up next.

Members, maybe we'll try to do this. I got everybody in a different order. Now we'll try to go back and forth, if that's amiable to everybody, so we can get a balance on that, okay?

MLA van Dijken.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to everyone for presenting to the committee today. Thank you for the work you do. I'm going to ask some questions to Children and Family Services. Seeing that the advocate's work is primarily to represent young people involved with the child intervention and the youth justice systems, I believe a lot of the work and a lot of the communication would be between the advocate and Children and Family Services.

You've spoken to that a little bit, Mr. Wheeler, meeting with the advocate monthly but also having regular conversations on how to proceed forward. From your perspective, can you please describe the nature of the relationship between Children and Family Services and the advocate, particularly with respect to the agreed upon objective of continuous improvement for outcomes for children and youth in care?

Mr. Wheeler: Thank you, and apologies if it is a bit repetitive to the previous answer. CFS and OCYA do have a long-standing relationship that's very collaborative and shares effective information. We also have an MOU with the OCYA as well for data. With the changes to their reporting and evaluation processes, we are continuing to work effectively and collaboratively with them and, wherever possible, communicate as openly as we can, and they do as well. This includes before recommendations are issued, throughout the year in advance of their evaluation cycle, as well as

after their evaluation cycle as we go through, you know, some initiatives that can take several years to fully implement.

As I said in my presentation, we have monthly leadership meetings that take place between our office and OCYA, and at times the advocate can request policy or practice information from CFS. So outside of specific recommendations per se they do come to us for further information, and we'll work with them to, you know, help provide that information for their office. We do respond quite quickly to those as well.

A couple of examples of that: we've recently had TAP program present to the OCYA Youth Council, and we recently provided presentations to the OCYA within the last year or so on a number of topics, including intake and assessment, cultural connections, and, again, we do connect with the Youth Advisory Task Force when we're requested to from them.

You know, once we receive a recommendation, we do focus on the public response to that recommendation and implementing it and then working with the OCYA as they go through the evaluation cycle.

The Chair: Do you have a follow-up?

Mr. van Dijken: A follow-up? Yeah. I guess I ask the question primarily to see if we can get an understanding as to – we're looking for a continuous improvement on outcomes. One of the things that struck me in the Child and Youth Advocate report was a recommendation that was closed, unmet with no progress. Now, I think each representative could possibly add to the conversation around – I'm speaking to recommendation 1 in the report – essentially looking to

develop and publicly report on a coordinated action plan to address service gaps for young people with complex needs while longer-term initiatives are under development. This plan should include targeted activities and milestones that meet the immediate needs of these young people.

I guess it's open to any of the panel to provide some insight to the committee regarding potential barriers or issues that impede greater co-ordination both in the short term and expanding on the longer term initiatives to address this issue. If you can provide some insight into some of those difficulties in covering up service gaps within.

Ms Everington: I can start, Chair, if you'd like.

The Chair: Sure. Go ahead.

Ms Everington: Thank you for the question. Maybe from the perspective of Mental Health and Addiction, just to start, and then I will turn it over to my colleague if he has any more to add. Just as a reminder, the Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction was established in October 2022 and assuming responsibility for addiction and mental health related recommendations that were previously issued to the Ministry of Health, so there's quite a transition period there. By us taking on responsibility for those recommendations, it did ensure some continuity in addressing that ongoing work that was dedicated to those system improvements and on the reporting.

1:10

We also acknowledge the concerns expressed by the advocate and recognize that this recommendation does remain unmet. We fully understand the importance of co-ordinated action to address service gaps for young Albertans with complex needs. While there are various initiatives under way across ministries, the development of a comprehensive, publicly reported action plan did require

extensive planning, resource allocation, and collaboration across multiple departments. Given the complexity of this work, meeting the requested six-month timeline after the recommendation was issued in September 2022 was a significant challenge for our department because we had just been formally established a month later.

Despite the short-term challenges, significant progress has been made in strengthening crossministry collaboration to enhance services for young Albertans with complex needs. Some of these things I talked about earlier in my presentation. Ministries are working together to streamline service pathways, improve data sharing, and develop policies that integrate supports across sectors. In March 2024 the ministry provided an update to the advocate on the work that had been completed to date, which included establishing new supports such as CASA Mental Health classrooms, that really do address those complex needs, and the virtual opioid dependency program, which was a big gap that CFS had identified.

Through sustained efforts in crossministry collaboration we will continue to develop and expand our longer term initiatives that address service gaps for young people with complex needs.

Maybe I'll just see if any of my other colleagues at the table have anything that they want to add.

Mr. Wheeler: Yeah. I can add to it from a Children and Family Services perspective and again just speak to some of the supports that we are focusing on on children and youth that fit in the category of that recommendation. They include referrals to appropriate community and government supports such as Alberta Health Services where appropriate, Recovery Alberta where appropriate for either Health or Mental Health and Addiction support. Our transition to adulthood program works collaboratively with all of the ministries at the table here today as well as with, again, Recovery Alberta, Alberta Health Services to make sure that youth who have transitioned out of government care have the supports they have at a very important time in their life.

Coreen had spoken to the personalized community care program that we are jointly funding in Calgary and Edmonton with a very strong Recovery Alberta connection in it. She also spoke about the youth virtual opioid dependency program, where our two ministries are working closely together to ensure that children and youth in the system have access to that support should they need it.

The Chair: MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to meet with all of you today, and thank you for joining us here at the table. Through you, Mr. Chair, to Ms Wyrstiuk, from the Justice department, I appreciate the differentiation you noted between Public Safety and Emergency Services and the Justice department and the different areas of responsibility. I note that in your presentation you stated you're determining how to proceed to respond to this recommendation from the Child and Youth Advocate in possible partnership with Public Safety and Emergency Services.

Now, a number of the issues that are raised in the Child and Youth Advocate's Beyond Barriers report, which informed this particular recommendation, do relate to supports or lack of supports for youth who are incarcerated, which, as you noted in your presentation, is the responsibility of PS and E. That being the case, it seems they should absolutely be a partner in those consultations and strategies to address the concerns that are being raised. I was wondering if you could just clarify for me why you are using that

particular language, why you're saying that it's possible you might partner with Public Safety and Emergency Services.

Ms Wyrstiuk: Thank you for the question. Very much that is a recommendation that impacts the justice system as a whole, corrections being a part of it. To your point, the report talked about the interactions with police officers, difficulty in court proceedings, not being able to accommodate people's disabilities. You know, as we look at the justice system, definitely, to your point, public safety and security have to be involved in those conversations. We have already started the conversation with them about: what will this report look like, this study look like? We are looking to try and figure out who is an expert that not only has knowledge of disabilities but also has knowledge of the justice system.

It's a bit of a unique blend that we're trying to look for. I guess I'll confirm and reassure you that we will work with the ministry of public safety and security. It is important that they are at the table with us. What the scope of the review for our ministry will look like will be somewhat different than for public safety and security because they have a different lens, but we will be working together with them. I know that's why we've started the conversations and have had the conversations, not only with our partners at this table about who we could possibly retain that has that type of lens and talking to public safety and security around: what part of the review do they want to focus on?

I guess my language perhaps was weak. I reassure you we will be working with them.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you. I'm pleased to hear that. I do note that public safety in their written submission did use that language as well. I'm glad to hear it, of course. We've heard the discussions, the comments, about trying to build more crossministry collaboration. I think that is indeed a good thing. We've seen that many of the recommendations that come from the Child and Youth Advocate are about wanting to see comprehensive strategies across ministries, so I think that is important.

Just as follow-up, would the intent then, you know, be to do mutual consultations? Obviously, a lot of the stakeholders that you're going to be speaking with are going to have interests on both sides of the question. It would seem to make sense to pool resources, have joint meetings, joint consultations, to work closely together despite the separations of the ministries, just in terms of, I guess, savings on costs and efficiency. Do you think that's something that would be reasonable and possible in the process?

Ms Wyrstiuk: Definitely we're at the point where we're looking at what this process will look like as it unfolds. I think that approach does make sense. We will have to see, though, when we land on who the expert is, then trying to define what the scope is, and would it be possible to do it in conjunction with the public safety and security ministry. I would think that, you know, because we're focused on different parts of the system – we're focused on the courts; they're focused on corrections – we are needing to work together because it's a holistic system and our stakeholders are often the same, whether it's the judiciary, the police, the community organizations.

I think for us it's sitting down with our colleagues and what makes the most sense when we, I guess, get to that point. Hopefully the expert can help us along with that as well, when we determine who this person will be that will help us with the review and what the scope will look like. Your approach makes sense. I think it's definitely something we'll be exploring as we figure out the best way to approach the review.

The Chair: I have MLA Lovely, followed by MLA Batten.

Ms Lovely: Thank you very much, Chair. This question is for CFS. On page 29 of the report there's information regarding investigative reviews when a child or youth receiving services is seriously injured or dies. Please describe the review process, including whether steps are taken by CFS as a result of the findings from those reviews.

Mr. Wheeler: Thank you for the question. As I mentioned in the presentation, we do review every death, serious injury, or substantiated incident to a child, youth, or young adult receiving services up to the age of 22 within the department through our internal child death review process. It's directed towards understanding and learning in order to prevent similar events in the future. The process shows that we want to be an accountable system and want to be focused on providing quality service and continuously improving from everything that we look at through those processes.

The review process provides an opportunity to learn, identify findings, and make recommendations intended to improve our system, and it focuses on the how and why of an event in order to prevent or reduce the risk of similar types of incidents in the future. We apply it consistently across the province, and we provide a production for the findings and recommendations as quickly as we can through those processes as well given the nature of what those reviews are looking at. Then we do disseminate the findings throughout the ministry in a way that supports timely, continuous improvement.

1:20

The Chair: MLA Batten, you're on deck.

Member Batten: Thank you so much, and thank you so much to everyone who presented today. I really appreciate your time and your insight into all of this. I actually just wanted to discuss the youth strategy or lack thereof that was mentioned a few questions ago. From what I understand from the presentations, you know, there are regular meetings between the different ministries and the OCYA. There are some meetings between ministries. There are some meetings with different youth groups. You had mentioned the youth council, which is fantastic, and of course the Youth Advisory Task Force. Given that we're looking at in this annual report reporting that 83 children and youth were involved in either a serious incident or death in the last year – these numbers continue to climb – I just want to again confirm that I'm understanding that we are not pursuing a youth strategy, like, a united ministry youth strategy.

The Chair: Which ministry did you want to ask that question to? Is there anyone in particular to direct it to?

Member Batten: Children and Family Services would be likely best. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Perfect.

Mr. Wheeler: If I may, Member, just to be clear on which strategy you're speaking to because I think we've mentioned a few today – I just want to make sure I'm answering appropriately.

Member Batten: No. Perfect. Fair clarification. I'm referring to, like, an overall youth strategy. The OCYA advocate has been asking over a number of reports – a number of annual reports, special reports, et cetera – for, like, a youth strategy that would

combine ministries, put folks actually in charge of looking at how we address this crisis we're under with our youth.

Mr. Wheeler: Sorry. Again, which recommendation are you referring to? Again, I just want to make sure I'm able to adequately respond to the question.

Member Batten: Absolutely. Okay. It's not of the eight. These are of the previous recommendations. I'm just looking for some language here; apologies.

The Chair: If I may, MLA, just to try to translate here as the chair trying to navigate through this, you're looking for a holistic response into the overall youth strategy being a collaborative effort between the four different ministries at the table. Is that what you're looking for them to comment on?

Member Batten: Thank you for attempting to clarify my question. My initial question is really just a yes or a no. Am I understanding correctly that each ministry, of course, is working on different aspects of strategies to work with youth? My understanding is that we do not have a committee, a working group, an advisory group, anything along those lines that's specifically set out with a mandate to look at youth strategy across all ministries.

The Chair: Okay. With that context I'll ask the panelists to answer as best they can.

Mr. Wheeler: Thank you for that. With that in mind, specific to recommendations we receive from the OCYA, they sometimes are directed to individual ministries, sometimes to two ministries, sometimes to multiple ministries. As we work through those specific recommendations, we will make sure that we're co-ordinating across departments as appropriate.

With respect to broader collaboration, that is something that we do regardless of whether there's a specific recommendation we're responding to from the OCYA to ensure that we're moving forward on a number of different areas where strategic actions are required. Children and Family Services is central to that. We work very closely with our colleagues in Mental Health and Addiction, exceptionally close with our colleagues in SCSS and other departments, as well as Recovery Alberta and Alberta Health Services, given the unique nature of children, youth, and young adults who are in the child intervention system or have transitioned out of it.

Many of the challenges that children in our system face could be faced by any Albertan, but when you're within the child intervention system and the legislation that captures that, there are unique pieces that go along with that and trauma that we work through. As it's a priority for me to connect with colleagues, we connect regularly regardless of whether we're updating on recommendations from the OCYA.

The Chair: Do you have a follow-up, MLA?

Member Batten: I do. Thank you so much. Thank you for that answer. Looking at the numbers that we're continuing to see – right? – we continue to see the same kind of group of children and youths who are being affected, well, across all of our ministries. The most recent, of course, moving past the current annual report, we're looking at these numbers continue to climb both in terms of numbers of deaths but also in terms of overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth.

I understand that we don't have an overarching youth strategy. This is not something that has been put forward. However, since

we're looking at an ongoing – like, what we're doing is obviously not working well enough. My question is, I guess, I mean, specifically to Children and Family Services, just because we were already conversing, what tangible changes have been made simply because of this continuing increase in numbers of deaths and injury for children and youth?

Mr. Wheeler: Thank you for that. I'll lean on some of my earlier responses to some of the other questions as well. You know, every death or serious incident is thoroughly reviewed. We do it internally. The OCYA has its roles and responsibilities to do it under their own legislation, and they come up with recommendations that we respond to. Over the last number of years we have focused on a number of tangible actions. We continue to learn from tragic events that occur to continuously improve our system, and we work with our colleagues from across other ministries.

Examples of what we do when we do go through these processes are to make improvements to our training, policy, and technology to assist our front-line practitioners in making the best decisions. We set the policy framework for that to occur with all of the issues that they're facing. That could be in the Mental Health and Addiction system. That could be with our colleagues in FCSS with the FSCD program. We respond as well as we can and continue to work collaboratively on that. We are consistently trying to bring forward trauma-informed, evidence-based care to ensure that our system improves and we get stronger over time to alleviate and prevent some of these types of incidents from occurring.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

I have MLA Sinclair, followed by Chapman.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the members and representatives from each ministry for coming here today. I think you've highlighted some incredibly important steps that we've taken in the province to be able to address, you know, some of these extremely complex but often impossible and tragic circumstances. I appreciate the work that you guys do. Mr. Chair calls it heavy lifting, but I don't even know if there is a word that describes it. I certainly appreciate it. Hearing about some of these programs, again, I think, through Mental Health and Addiction, I commend you on the ones that are hopefully going to help some more of our kids in schools and wraparound support. I appreciate that.

I'm just going to ask a question to Mr. Wheeler again and CFS. On page 30 of the report, Mr. Wheeler, we see that several of the children and young people who did pass away this year were identified as living in parental – I think it is highlighted at 24 per cent – or kinship care, which is highlighted at 6 per cent. How does Children and Family Services ensure that abuse and/or neglect is prevented for children who are known to the system but still living with family?

Mr. Wheeler: Thank you for that question. A child or youth can receive intervention service in various ways. These include arrangements with the family where the child remains in family care, through a family enhancement agreement, to the need for intervention and court orders related to temporary or permanent guardianship.

1:30

When a child or youth is receiving services, the enhancement policy manual, which guides our decision-making in the child intervention system, sets out the expectations for practitioners to have ongoing regular contact with them. This includes face-to-face

contact with the child and youth, their guardians, the caregivers, and other members of the network such as professionals and natural support involved with the family. Child intervention practitioners regularly engage with the family and their network and address safety concerns and develop safety plans as required. Any new concerns must be addressed through a review of and revisions to the safety plan and may require a change in legal status or placement in other settings if that's the outcome of what that assessment is.

When a child or youth in care is in the care of the director and placed in kinship care, the enhancement policy manual outlines the expectations for us and caregiver practitioners to determine whether the provider has the capacity to care in their residence safely, has the right quality of care and the supervision of all children who may be in that home. Kinship approval requirements include environmental safety assessments, intervention record checks, a criminal record check for all adults living in the home, training, and a home study. So there are quite a few requirements for those settings.

Recently, too, we have fully implemented our assessment for support for our kinship caregiving model, which was fully implemented in June 2024, and it includes delegated practitioners providing both assessment and ongoing support, which enables timely decisions and reinforces accountability for caregivers in that kinship grouping. Support planning is mandatory and identifies the initial and ongoing supports needed for caregivers to be successful in meeting the safety and well-being of the children and youth in their home, which is the primary focus of the work we do.

The Chair: Do you have a follow-up, MLA Sinclair?

Mr. Sinclair: No. I appreciate the answer, and thank you for all the work you do.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: MLA Chapman, you're next, and then followed by MLA Long.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have a question for I believe it was Mr. Schneider of SCSS. In your presentation on slide 6, which refers to recommendation 1 in the OCYA annual report, you refer to the "many improvements . . . made to the [FSCD] program to streamline processes and enhance client experience." Now, I know many families have identified long wait times, particularly to access therapeutic services. I understand, I hope correctly, but please correct me if I'm wrong, that families are being offered quicker contracts now for respite care. I'm just wondering if you can tell me how long the average wait time is for families to receive those professional support services like occupational therapists, speech-language pathologist and then the number of families that are currently on the wait-list to receive a contract for those services.

Mr. Schneider: Thanks for the question. Yeah. This is to do with recommendation 1. Thank you for that. We did acknowledge in April 2024 – SCSS provided the response to the OCYA acknowledging the report and advising the recommendations that will help us form continued program improvements. I already went through that we did do through the work – and, yes, I recognize you had a very direct question, but I'll just preamble just a little bit if you'll allow me. We did have the what-we-heard report. So we do listen very, very carefully to our constituents, and we are aware of the various pieces that they bring to our attention that would be areas for improvement, and, as the chair mentioned, continuous

improvement is very important in this space. It's where we generally make the best gains.

Many improvements have been made to streamline the process and enhance client experience while also addressing the feedback from the families. I breezed through this a little bit, and I apologize. If I can just revisit my speaking notes – I was rushed at that particular moment – perhaps that will help with this answer.

In the summer of 2023 FSCD implemented improvements to the MDT, and I did go through that multidisciplinary team piece, which we did hear quite a bit about, and that was also to empower our caseworkers ultimately to make more of those decisions and use that process less often. We do have the MDT process still available to us to use when the family requests or, as mentioned, when there is a lack of clarity to the evidence and there's more information needed. So that has been directed or incorporated into our policy, as mentioned. After implementing the changes in 2023, we did see a 33 per cent reduction. I believe I did mention that before as well.

Digital improvements. I believe I had to skip this part, so I'll jump back in here. Digital improvements such as a new assessment and case management system implemented in the winter of 2023 have reduced the overall time it takes to complete an assessment and develop an online application for FSCD, which was launched in the summer of 2023. The new online application provides more personalized and individual experience for families applying for the program. To ensure the system is user friendly, it was developed with input from members of the FSCD Provincial Parent Advisory Committee and representatives from Inclusion Alberta, Autism Alberta, Autism Calgary. Members were also able to test the application and provide feedback to the government.

We also increased the use of multiyear agreements – I think you just mentioned that as well – to enable families to have an agreement in place for up to three years to provide more predictable and continuity of services. The number of multiyear agreements has increased from 3 per cent of agreements in March 2023 to 32.8 per cent by March 2024. So we continue that change. The change has been incorporated into our FSCD policy under section 6 and section 7, and additionally we continue to work with the FSCD provincial parent committee and the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities to obtain community feedback.

The Chair: A follow-up there, MLA Chapman?

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Chair. Yeah. I really appreciate the context you provided, but I'm going to just circle back to that direct question that you noted. Are you able to provide us with information with the number of families that are currently on the wait-list to receive FSCD services or to be able to give us an average wait time that families are experiencing right now to get an agreement in place?

Mr. Schneider: To the wait-list, I can say that – and we have been public on this – between 2022-23 and the following year we did increase the number of families and clients on the program by 31 per cent, which was just close to 5,000 increase, so it's a very large increase. But I do not have information at this time on the wait-list.

The Chair: Are you able to provide that to the committee, with that, at a later date?

Ms Chapman: Chair.

The Chair: You can submit it at a later date if that works for you as well.

MLA Chapman, I'm not sure if I jumped in on you there.

Ms Chapman: No. I was going to ask you that exact same thing, Chair. Can we make the request that SCSS provide that information back in writing to the committee? Is that possible?

The Chair: Yeah. And I'll let you pair on my clarification back there because I wanted to give you not three chances, as the others.

But I would throw that back there for consideration. If you could provide that at a later date, that would be for you to reply to, sir.

Mr. Schneider: I'll take that back.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

We have MLA Long next.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, folks, for being here to chat with us today. Sort of directed towards CFS and SCSS. On page 30 of the report we see that most of the young Albertans who passed away or were seriously injured this past year were over the age of 18 and/or living independently. I've got a two-part question, so if it's okay with you, I'll just ask both parts now rather than have a follow-up after. Part one would be: how does childhood trauma affect the outcomes and well-being of young people as they transition into adulthood? Then part two would be: what policies and/or services does government have in place to help ease these transitions?

1:40

Mr. Wheeler: Thank you. I can start, for sure. I think specifically to the first part of the question – and I said it earlier – children and youth who have been in the system have experienced a very unique thing, which is why we've worked hard to ensure that youth in care and those young adults who are transiting out of care have the appropriate supports that they need. In 2023-24 of the 490 young adults who were receiving CI services, intervention services, at the time they turned 18, 448 of them, so 91 per cent of them, went on to access supports through the transition to adulthood program. So far this year results remain fairly stable from a percentage number, and before a child or youth turns 18, we focus to make sure they're aware of what supports exist going forward for when they do turn 18.

Youth in care and young adults transitioning out of care have access to a number of programs and services that support successful transition. These include advancing futures, the transition to adulthood program that I already spoke to, registered education savings program, and the youth in care mentoring program and youth apprenticeship connections pilot program.

Recently we've also put forward the foster caregivers caring for young adults family program, which ensures that kids who have been in the foster system also continue to have supports beyond their 18th birthday. Additionally, we have family resource networks, youth hubs, and the youth connections work. Young adults are also supported to access SCSS programs if applicable. We do work really closely between our ministry and SCSS accordingly, whether that would be the AISH program, PDD program, income support, or a combination thereof.

We know that transition to adulthood can be very challenging for youth in care, and that's why we created these programs, to ensure that we are setting them up as best as possible as they move into adulthood. TAP was fully implemented in 2022 and provides young adults with targeted services and supports social, emotional, transitional supports, provincial consistency in how that's applied, health benefits, and soft supports, that I spoke to in my presentation earlier as well. Financial core monthly benefits are provided to participants up to their 22nd birthday, and participants aged 18 to

21 have access to all TAP components, including the social and emotional support they might require.

The Chair: You waived follow-up?

Mr. Long: Actually, can I go back on that now?

The Chair: It's like a kid before Christmas. I get it. I understand. You don't know what you get until you have it. Yes, MLA Long. You can have a follow-up.

Mr. Long: Thank you so much. You sort of tweaked something there. The foster caregivers: I believe you said the caring for young adults program. Could you provide a little bit of a glimpse into what that looks like and what you're hoping to accomplish with that? Like, I do come from a family of – my parents were foster parents, and it's something I'm very passionate about, trying to give youth the best leg up.

Mr. Wheeler: Yes. It's very much focused on ensuring that, regardless of whether a youth who was in the foster program is 18 less a day or 18 plus a day, they have similar supports to other children who are transitioning to adulthood by ensuring that the family has the supports that they need. We recognize it's a very important transition in any child's life to adulthood, and the supports that are provided to most children in Alberta should also be applied in this setting, too.

Mr. Long: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have MLA Shepherd, followed by Sinclair.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll perhaps direct this question to Ms Everington, to put it colloquially, not to pick on you particularly but just because you had sort of spoken to this a little bit earlier in terms of the recommendations that we're getting from the OCYA here, where she is calling for these co-ordinated strategies, in this case, for example, calling for this co-ordinated strategy to co-ordinate a public strategy talking about how we're going to address the need for supports for youth with disabilities who have complex needs. So I appreciate what you had to say about the complexity of this, how it involves a lot of moving pieces, a lot of communication across ministries, a lot of different things, but I think one of the reasons this is called for publicly is because a public strategy does allow for accountability. It does allow for, I think, much more effective collaboration and co-ordination among stakeholders and partners who are working with government on a number of these issues.

For example, when we're talking about this youth opioid strategy, you know, which, of course, I'm assuming the responsibility for that is now falling with Recovery Alberta as having taken that lead and sort of inheriting that from Health, again, I recognize the complexity of things, and I recognize, of course, that each ministry is working at the direction and the will of the respective minister. What we have certainly seen is that complex things can happen in a relatively short period of time. By means of example, we're seeing an entire transformation of the whole of our health care system in about 18 to 24 months because there is the ministerial will to do so and the resources and funding provided to do that.

I guess my question is that it seems that these conversations are happening. What I've heard from yourself and from others at the table is that crossministerial collaboration and conversation, all these pieces are happening; it's just not making it to the point of

being iterated as that publicly communicated strategy. So is it a question, then, of a need of, I guess, the resources being there, the funding, the prioritization for this to rise to the level then of taking all these pieces that appear to already be going on and actually following through on that public strategy – in other words, that support of your work from the ministerial level in terms of the resources and funding – to complete that piece of the recommendation?

Ms Everington: Thank you. Thank you for your question. I think what you're describing and how you're describing it is quite accurate. It's a significant amount of resources and co-ordination that is required to put together a crossministry public strategy and also considering the number of actions and work and initiatives that are already under way by us at the table and other ministries and other community partners that we work with.

That particular recommendation around developing a co-ordinated action plan is really similar to another recommendation that the OCYA had made from the mandatory reviews into child deaths, the April 1, 2021, to September 30, 2021, recommendation as well, where we have been evaluated as having significant progress on that action. So we had work under way, and then the second recommendation came out asking for this co-ordinated action plan with the very, as I said before, very short amount of time, only six months to be able to do that while we were already trying to respond and co-ordinate for the other very similar response.

We do work, like I said before, we've all said, with crossministry and community partners on a number of different things to really try to meet the needs of those children and youth, young adults with complex needs. We've talked about a number of those initiatives already: crossministry initiatives in some cases, school-based initiatives like the mental wellness and clinical supports for children and youth across the province, like with CASA Mental Health classrooms, the integrated school support program. Those are all crossministry initiatives.

Mental Health and Addiction reports publicly on those in our business plan and through our annual reporting, as I'm sure other ministries do through their business plans as well. So we definitely leverage those government processes that are in place, like the business planning process, like the annual reporting process, to identify those crossministry and partnership initiatives.

The Chair: Appreciate it.

Do you have a follow-up question?

Mr. Shepherd: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you; I do appreciate that response. I appreciate you reiterating some of the programs, some of the pieces which have to do with a youth opioid strategy and, respectfully, some of which do not. What I would say is that while I appreciate the work and the collaboration and some of the communication on specific initiatives, I don't think that rises to the level of what has been requested or recommended by the OCYA, certainly, I would say, not even to the intent. But, again, I respect and recognize the processes that are at work and the resources and how those are directed.

1:50

I guess my question would be: is there, to your knowledge, the intent to come forward with a public youth co-ordinated opioid strategy, clearly stated, laying out what the intentions are, actions are, outcomes, et cetera? And if not, perhaps that's something, then, that we should be bringing up with the minister, I guess, at the budget and estimates table, about him choosing to make that a priority and providing the funds and resourcing to accomplish it.

Ms Everington: Yeah. Thanks again for the follow-up question. Again, I would point to the Alberta recovery model. We have information about that provincial strategy and overall policy publicly posted on our website, so you can search the Alberta recovery model; it is there. In addition, we do have, like I said before, the business plan and the annual report that will demonstrate the work that we're doing around our addiction crisis response, if you will.

The Chair: I have Sinclair, Lovely, Chapman, Long, and Batten. To be cognizant of time, folks, we have more on the agenda. I'm going to push this towards 2 o'clock-ish to give us enough time. Hopefully, that works and you can take that into consideration with your questions.

With that, MLA Sinclair, you're up.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to turn my attention to the recommendations made in the annual report for CFS again, Mr. Wheeler. I am very grateful to see on page 58 of the report, recommendation 1, that the Ministry of Children and Family Services has made ongoing progress in identifying tailored actions that build and strengthen connections with family, community, and culture for each Indigenous child. I have the highest percentage of Indigenous people in the province. I'm First Nation from Treaty 8, Indigenous myself, so these are more than statistics. I see all these first-hand and I grew up around it, so any meaningful change to me is quite impactful and incredibly difficult to speak about. I certainly appreciate the daily work you guys all do. But my question is: what work has been undertaken to make these connections more accessible for Indigenous children?

Mr. Wheeler: CFS is, as I have said probably in several of the answers, really focused on continuous improvement and learning from where we've been before in the past, and that also extends to the work for Indigenous cultural connections. Examples that we've done include revisions to policy and practice guidance on a number of topics, including consultation with Indigenous communities; involvement with children, youth, parents, and their networks in case planning and decision-making; and approvals for travel and financial expenditures related to cultural connections to reduce associated administrative burdens that may impede a child or youth from engaging in those cultural activities or even having an opportunity to visit and be connected with their community.

This also includes improvements to documentation in our information system to allow for better systemic data so that we can do something with that data. This ultimately will increase the understanding and awareness of what we are doing well and where further support for policy to translate into practice may be needed.

Cultural connections are integral to our legislation, and that translates all the way through to our practice policy manual. It's something we take very seriously as a department, and we'll focus on continuous improvement to make it stronger because it's such a critical part.

The Chair: Do you have a follow-up, MLA Sinclair?

Mr. Sinclair: Yeah, if that's okay. I'll try and be quick, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Please do.

Mr. Sinclair: Just to follow up on – you know, it's not directly related, but I asked this of the advocate as well in our last meeting. A lot of the First Nations are negotiating with all levels of government right now to bring their children home, so to speak, with lots of the sovereign children services. We're just wondering

what you see, if you could – I know it's not that easy because we're in a bit of an unknown territory right now, but I was just wondering if you could maybe speak on what that transition is going to look like for your ministry and department and maybe provide some insight to some of the people who aren't too familiar with the situation. If you don't mind, I'd appreciate it.

Mr. Wheeler: If the chair will allow, perhaps my colleague can provide a specific answer on that for the member.

The Chair: Yeah. Absolutely. It's like the millionaire thing. You get a lifeline.

I'll just have to get you to introduce yourself for the record as well.

Ms Dunnigan: Good afternoon. My name is Cynthia Dunnigan. I'm the assistant deputy minister of Indigenous partnerships and strategic services. To respond to the question, I guess, you know, we would say that the federal act was enacted in 2020, and it's about to undergo a five-year review. It is a First Nations led process, so we at CFS are available to work with any First Nation that comes forward and says that they are ready to take over authority for their children and family services. At this point we have transitioned to four First Nations.

Mr. Sinclair: Appreciate it. Thank you. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have MLA Chapman, followed by Lovely.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Chair. Before I ask my question, can I just get a point of clarification from you? You had said we were going to end this questioning at 2, but when I look at the agenda, I don't see an hour's worth of material left on there. I'm wondering if we can have a little bit more time in this question period, because we seem to have a lot of questions.

The Chair: Yeah. Well, I guess that if you were chairing, you might have a different shot clock than I do, and given the conversations we've had, that's the guideline I'm going for. I don't want to cut anyone off, but I do want our members to be cognizant that we do have a hard stop at 3. There are a number of potential motions and a potential of nonmotions that still require deliberations and recommendations plus other business, so chair's discretion trying to monitor that accordingly, Amanda.

Ms Chapman: Okay. Thank you, Chair. I'll be quick.

I'm back to Mr. Schneider. On slide 9 in your presentation, as related to PDD – now, this is on recommendation 4 in the OCYA annual report – if I have interpreted your slide correctly, it suggests to me that you have rejected that recommendation, and I just have a question about this. Recommendation 4 is that you should accept and action the PDD Steering Committee recommendation. I'll just remind folks that one of the recommendations from that PDD Steering Committee was to make individuals with IQs between 70 and 85 who have similar support needs eligible for PDD services. That's recommendation 2 from the 2021 PDD Steering Committee report.

Now, when I look at the regulations that you refer to around PDD eligibility, I see that there is, like, criteria for intellectual capacity but also adaptive skills. I know that there has been criticism that the regulations were never meant to solely focus on that intellectual capacity or an IQ number, so I want to check. Am I correct that PDD eligibility is strictly set on the metric of intellectual capacity, or will the department consider changing or following the

regulations more generally in terms of when it comes to those adaptive skills criteria as well?

Mr. Schneider: Thanks for the question. Our public-facing response from last April was that SCSS provide a response to OCYA acknowledging the report and advising the report and recommendations will help continue program improvements. So that is not a rejection. We didn't say "rejection," and I didn't use those terms. I know you're asking for the clarification, so to be clear, this is a matter of interpretation of regulation and act, and that is where we are at this time, which points us to a change such as recommended would need to go through an appropriate cabinet process to move forward. It is not our understanding from our advice, our legal advice, that the ministry would move unilaterally towards changing the interpretation as it has been. A consideration to do so would be a full legal and legislative process. Does that help?

2:00

Ms Chapman: Yes. Thank you. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to – I wasn't being negative on rejection. I was just trying to understand that I was interpreting your slide 9 properly.

Then a quick follow-up. You're going to recognize this question because it's similar to the one I asked on FSCD. I'm wondering if you are able to provide us with the current wait-list for PDD. If you don't have that information in front of you, may I also request that you provide that in a written submission to the committee, as you're going to do on the FSCD wait-list number?

Mr. Schneider: I'll take that back.

Ms Chapman: Thank you.

The Chair: Perfect. Thanks, MLA Chapman.
MLA Lovely, you're next.

Ms Lovely: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair. Recommendation 19 on page 64 of the annual report. We can see that the office of the Child and Youth Advocate recommended that the Ministry of Children and Family Services and the Ministry of Justice "should develop a protocol that requires Child Intervention Services be informed prior to the release of an individual who has been incarcerated for family violence."

Could I trouble you to ask the rest of my question? I'm losing my voice.

Mr. Sinclair: Yeah. No worries.

Pardon me, Mr. Chair. "Should develop a protocol that requires Child Intervention Services be informed prior to the release of an individual who has been incarcerated for family violence where the family was involved with Child Intervention Services." The advocate indicated its appreciation of the initial collaborative steps undertaken, with the recommendation assessed that some progress completed. It's a two-part question, so if I may I'll just try and squeeze them both in. Could the Ministry of Children and Family Services please explain to this committee some of the work that has been completed under this recommendation? Then also, afterwards – I guess I shouldn't. The follow-up is for the Ministry of Justice, so I should separate that. Apologies.

Thank you.

Mr. Wheeler: Thank you. I can speak to the work CFS has been working on this. Our internal portal for our staff, that's available to all our staff, has information on Clare's law, including a fact sheet, FAQs, a recorded PowerPoint presentation. These provide an overview of the legislation and how front-line staff can support

their clients in applying for disclosure and accessing supports through Clare's law. This information was incorporated into what I spoke about earlier, our enhancement policy manual, which guides the work that our staff does in the fall of 2023 and provides information and guidance to all of our practitioners to further support potential victims of family violence.

Currently our ministry relies on existing methods for reporting of children and youth in need by involved professionals, including law enforcement and the community. Our initial collaborations with the Public Safety and Emergency Services ministry to discuss the potential for mandatory pre-emptive reporting of an offender indicated concerns for potential privacy breaches as automatic notifications of releases do not necessarily serve the purpose of reporting safety concerns for a child or youth. We are continuing to collaborate with PSES, though, and have identified a mechanism which will allow our practitioners to submit a request to be directly notified of a specific offender's release in cases involving domestic violence, where there would be a need to complete updated safety planning in the event an offender is released from custody.

We're working on further guidance to our staff to support this and anticipate incorporating into a stand-alone safety planning practice support within our upcoming policy manual updates possibly as early as this spring.

The Chair: Okay. Then a follow-up? Is it back to Lovely? Sinclair, are you taking it?

Ms Lovely: Could the Ministry of Justice please outline what further collaboration is under way or planned to further enhance progress on recommendation 19?

Ms Wyrstiuik: Thank you for the question. This recommendation was issued in 2021, and the Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Services is the responding ministry. My colleague at Children and Family Services has spoken about some of that collaboration that they've had with Public Safety and Emergency Services. I would say this recommendation was made in relation to impacts that family violence has on children deaths and specifically referencing situations where offenders were released from custody and involved correctional services, victim services, and policing services. Those services are all now within the mandate of Public Safety and Emergency Services, and as such I'm unable to provide any more further information on this one.

The Chair: I have two remaining. If it's the will of the committee to make these snappy, to get through it, we can do those and then allow ourselves enough time for the remaining orders that we have on the paper.

With that, MLA Batten, you're up on deck.

Member Batten: Thank you so much, Chair. I will be brief. Through the chair to Mr. Wheeler for Children and Family Services, earlier you had mentioned learning from the past, and I completely agree, so I actually have a question about a panel. The walking as one Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention's final recommendation to the minister of children's services back in March 2018 – a number of recommendations were put forward, of course, to deal with what were increasing numbers of children and youth in care who were suffering injury or death during that time. My understanding is that all those recommendations were put forward, were accepted. My question is whether or not those recommendations are still moving forward, if we audit them to make sure that they're still happening, and whether or not a future kind of similar ministerial panel might be something that would be considered in light of these numbers.

Mr. Wheeler: Thank you for that question. The scope of our invitation here is to speak to the OCYA's 2023-24 annual report and the recommendations within it. I did mention in my presentation on the front end that there is a mandated review of the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act that has initiated, and there is a review panel that has been established for that. I had indicated that, particularly for some of the new recommendations, the panel may choose to look at specifically some of the recommendations that have come from here. But I think that's the process that the legislation sets out in terms of a mandatory review of CYFEA itself.

The Chair: Perfect. What I'm going to do, cognizant of time here, if you're okay, MLA Batten, is if there's anything else you need to get, maybe put it in writing or we can talk about it in deliberations, and I'll just go to MLA Long for the last one.

Member Batten: Sure.

The Chair: Thank you.
MLA Long, all yours.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Chair. Keeping it brief, there was a bit of a conversation around CASA and the three new houses to be established in Calgary, Fort McMurray, and a location in southern Alberta. I've also referenced the CASA website: a lot of great work going on. I'm just curious. On the consideration of new houses and programs is there consideration for how broad and how vast rural Alberta and, in particular, the north, actually is? I know that we fall into this trap frequently but, you know, under certain zones right now – we have Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie, for instance, that are both part of the north zone, yet they're about eight and a half hours in time span away. Therefore, realistically, it's hard to service people in the north in one location or the other when you have two mid-size cities that far apart. So I'm just curious what the considerations are around that aspect of how to bring those mental health services to the north and north rural.

Ms Everington: Thank you for that question. Planning for services in the north is a challenge, as it sounds like you're aware of. Currently CASA has a CASA house in Edmonton, and they reserve a certain number of beds in that location for northern families and children from those northern families to access, particularly Fort McMurray; that's where they see the largest demand. That was the reason for the decision to place a CASA house in Fort McMurray. It was done with an awareness that would also alleviate some of that pressure on Edmonton, which would make it easier, again, for other areas of the north to be able to access the Edmonton location, recognizing that it's not the perfect solution but wanting to create more capacity there.

CASA houses are unique in the sense that they really are for children and youth that need psychiatric care that we would maybe normally see in youth psychiatric units. CASA has developed this psychiatric program for them. But part of the work on CASA Mental Health classrooms is to catch those kids before they need that level of care. I don't have the specific locations with me now, but there are a number of CASA Mental Health classrooms that will be in the north, and part of that is to try to intervene early, before they require that level of intensity of psychiatric care.

Thanks very much.

2:10

Mr. Long: Thank you.

The Chair: Well, with that, thank you very much for all the presentations and members for being patient with each other and very professional in this area, for sure.

With that, that ends the question period part of this. You're more than welcome to stay with us in the gallery if you wish. Obviously, if you're more than inclined to get back and start working on some of these recommendations, feel free to do so as well.

Now, with that, members, we would like to turn this over to deliberations and recommendations. Maybe we'll just take a quick two-minute break while we reset the room here if that works.

[The committee adjourned from 2:11 p.m. to 2:14 p.m.]

The Chair: Thanks, members. Welcome back.

Again, really appreciate your careful consideration of the topic, the matter at hand. As part of our consideration of the office of the Child and Youth Advocate annual report '23-24 this committee has now received a briefing from the Child and Youth Advocate, a written submission from Public Safety and Emergency Services, and the presentations of the last four ministries.

To prepare for our discussion today, pursuant to Standing Order 52.041 committee members wishing to propose substantive motions were asked to put them on notice, which all members would have a chance to consider the various proposals that may be raised today. However, motions on notice may end up not being introduced for consideration if something unexpected comes up due to the deliberations of the questions and answers we just had. The committee members may wish to move a motion that is not on notice, may request permission for the committee to do so.

With that in mind, we'll open up for discussion. MLA van Dijken, you caught my attention first.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you, Chair. With that, I would like to move substantive motion 1, that was submitted prior. Should be able to get it on screen. I'm seeing it on my screen here. Moved by MLA van Dijken that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices recommend that the office of the Child and Youth Advocate continue to work with the relevant ministries to improve outcomes for children and youth in care in Alberta.

Why I put this motion forward is essentially – if I may speak to it.

The Chair: Yeah. We had a little bit of difficulty seeing it on the screen, so we'll just give ourselves a little chance with that, MLA, to get it on the screen. But please continue your discussion. Once we have it posted, then you can confirm, as you read, that it's consistent.

Mr. van Dijken: Okay. Yes. That looks correct.

The Chair: Please proceed, sir.

Mr. van Dijken: Why I bring that forward is that over the years as being an MLA and being part of this committee, it's been good to see the co-operation and collaboration between the advocate and the different ministries. Quite often I think, "Well, they'll be dealing with one ministry," but in all reality they probably deal with – and we saw it today – at least a half a dozen different ministries on a case-by-case basis. So I think it's important that we recognize the work that's happening and encourage that that continues to happen in a collaborative manner going forward, primarily for outcomes of children in care, the mandate the office of the Child and Youth Advocate is representing, the needs and the rights of the individuals, children in care within the justice system.

It sounds to me like we're seeing progress, and I would like to encourage that to continue to happen.

The Chair: I'll open the floor to any further discussion. Once; twice.

Seeing none, I am prepared to call the question. All in favour of the motion as presented by MLA van Dijken, please say aye. Any opposed? And we'll go online. All those in favour, please say aye.

Motion carried.

I'll open up the floor for any – MLA van Dijken.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you.

The Chair: You're like a gunslinger from the Old West here today. That was fast.

Mr. van Dijken: I'm also going to move the other motion that was submitted prior, that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices recommend that the government continue crossministry efforts to address the challenges identified for children and young people in care with disabilities and complex needs in the 2023-24 annual report of the Child and Youth Advocate.

You know, in our discussions I asked the question with regard to the difficulty in actually having a plan outlaid for the crossministry collaboration, as suggested by the advocate. The answers were relevant to the changes that happen and the differences case by case, what they have to deal with on a day-to-day basis.

We see recommendations that have come forward with regard to young people in care with disabilities and complex needs and whether that's with housing or other supports, and I think it's important that the different ministries that are addressing these needs continue to work together to come to results that are acceptable and what we all, here around the table, would like to see in that work and try to continue the work and address the challenges that are before them.

The Chair: MLA Shepherd, you caught my eye.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate Mr. van Dijken bringing forward this motion. I certainly would support it. Just a few comments in regard to it, I think. You know, following on some of the questions I raised and some of the comments I made at the table with the representatives from the ministries, I do appreciate the crossministry efforts that are happening and the work that is being done there, but I would just note again that what we have from the Child and Youth Advocate are very specific requests not just for folks to collaborate and work across ministries but to publicly report on that work and to articulate it in the form of a clear strategy, so actual intents, focuses, outcomes, steps that are being taken.

2:20

And I'd just reiterate, as I did with the representatives from the ministries that were at the table, that there are concrete reasons for that. That allows for much more accountability both to the Child and Youth Advocate themselves to ensure that we can track how this work is being done. That allows for public accountability. Certainly, for us as legislators I would think we would want to have that kind of accountability so we can better understand that work and ensure that we are doing our due diligence and then, lastly, the opportunities for that collaboration for those in the public, both for those who are needing to access these services and are having these concerns to see clearly what the strategy, intent, and the work of these ministries under the guidance of the government's ministers is but also those who are delivering services and who are essential

partners in this work in collaborating with government and often cases funded by government.

I remain disappointed that we continue to see stalling, obfuscation. I certainly do not blame the representatives that were here. They are doing their job as public servants. But this is something, I guess, that we will look for the opportunity perhaps to continue to raise with the ministers themselves in the upcoming budget and estimates process.

Thank you.

The Chair: Any other further discussion?

I am prepared to call the question. All those in favour of the motion, please say aye. Any opposed? Online, all those in favour, please say aye.

Motion carried.

Are there any other further items?

Mr. van Dijken: Okay. Moving right along, another motion with regard to our review of the annual report of the Child and Youth Advocate. I would move that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices (a) direct the Legislative Assembly Office to prepare a draft report on the committee's review of the 2023-2024 annual report of the Child and Youth Advocate and (b) authorize the chair to approve the report after making it available to committee members for review.

The Chair: I believe we have it on the screen if you can confirm it as read as printed.

Mr. van Dijken: Yes. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. With that, we'll open up for discussion.

Mr. van Dijken: If I may, Chair, I believe the committee was charged with this review, and it's our responsibility then to also report back. I would put it to the Legislative Assembly Office to be able to draft a report, the chair to approve the report after all committee members have been able to go through it and provide input if necessary.

The Chair: Okay. MLA Dach, you caught my attention.

Mr. Dach: Yeah. Thank you. Germane to MLA van Dijken's comment where he just recently said, "provide input upon review," I am wondering if indeed there were objections to the draft report, what opportunities would there be to amend it upon review? It's not really mentioned in the motion.

The Chair: Yeah. I don't know – and I'll check with the clerks – that you can amend the report. From my understanding, you can put your comments to it. It would be a secondary thing, but I'll defer to the clerk. Like, we can't amend the office of the Child and Youth Advocate's report.

Mr. Dach: No. I meant the draft report provided by . . .

The Chair: Oh, by the committee itself. Okay. Yeah.

I'll just defer here for a second. Go ahead, Nancy.

Ms Robert: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I think the way the process has worked is, you know, members review it, and if they notice that something's incorrect in the report, they would notify the committee clerk or the committee, and then at the committee's direction we would just correct that omission or error and then have it sent around again for another review.

The Chair: Does that meet the need for clarification?

Mr. Dach: Makes sense. I just wanted to make sure that there was an opportunity to bring objections forward and that it wouldn't be disseminated publicly until consensus was achieved.

The Chair: Okay. Perfect.
MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I guess while we're clarifying, and I know we've been through this process a few times, I just wanted to sort of clarify, then, as to what aspects, I guess, of the discussion will be reflected in the report. For example, I've raised the comments that I did about, I guess, the lack of that strategic planning, the feeling that that is not being responded to. Would that be reflected in this report, or if I wanted to see something like that reflected, would that be something, then, where we'd be required to put forward notice of wanting to submit something in the form of a minority report?

The Chair: I would suggest – and I'll defer to the clerk on that – if it was something specific, because you've already stated here, MLA Shepherd, on the record, what your concerns were, the clerks would reflect what the discussion is in the report. If you wanted something more substantive to further exemplify your points, then, yeah, it would have to be in addition to. I'll just defer to the clerk if that's the same understanding.

Ms Robert: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Yes. The contents of these reports are sort of a summary of what the committee did, how often it met, who it met with, who came in to speak, perhaps a little bit of context of what was spoken on, and then the recommendations and any debate that occurred with respect to the recommendations would be built in as context as well. That's it. Other than that, yes, if there is a specific thing, I would agree that a minority report would be the vehicle.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you for that clarification.

The Chair: Yeah. More vanilla, not Neapolitan, if that makes sense.
Go ahead, MLA van Dijken.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you. Just for clarity, like, one thing that will be included in the report are the dates that we met and what was provided on those dates. It's all been in a recorded manner, so it is on the public record for anybody that's interested. They are able to access that information through the Legislative Assembly

documents. I think all of that detail is available, and by moving this, essentially what I'm hoping to see, and I believe that's what is presented, is an overarching report on the work that was done: who reported, what was reported, and the like.

The Chair: I appreciate that. And then, just for potential clarification from the committee for the chair's purposes, how long would you like to review it for? I would suggest maybe one working week once it's gone in. If the chair doesn't hear anything past that, then the chair would be putting it into the Leg. Is that amenable to everybody here? Okay.

Mr. van Dijken: I think that's acceptable.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

With that, as the motion read and conversation taking place back and forth on it, deliberations, and with the clarifications without changing the amendment itself, I am prepared to call the question. All those in favour of the motion as presented, please say aye. Any opposed? Online, all those in favour, please say aye.

Motion carried.

With that, I am prepared to go on to next order of business unless there's anything else that's coming out of the woodwork here. Seeing none, the other business. We have an Auditor General update. A quick note for the record. Committee members are aware that we received an update from the Auditor General regarding the 2024-25 budget forecast and indicated that the officer no longer anticipates pursuing a supplementary request for the current fiscal year.

Are there any other items open for discussion for other business?

Seeing none, I just want to add for everybody here again that I really appreciate how professional everybody in this committee has done their work over the last bit. Exemplary work, folks. Again, it's a tough file, and really appreciate all your input into it. As the chair, gold star for everybody; well done.

The next meeting date will be at the discretion of the chair.

Now to most of the time everyone's favourite part of the meeting, the adjournment. Would a member wish to move to adjourn? Oh, there are hands going up all over the place.

Mr. Sinclair: Mr. Chair, I move to adjourn the meeting.

The Chair: All in favour, please say aye. Any opposed? Online, just to make sure the clerk doesn't kick me under the table, all those in favour? Motion carried.

Thank you very much everyone. Take care.

[The committee adjourned at 2:29 p.m.]

