



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Justice
Consideration of Main Estimates

Monday, March 18, 2024
7 p.m.

Transcript No. 31-1-7

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The 31st Legislature
First Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC), Chair
Gochring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP), Deputy Chair

Arcand-Paul, Brooks, Edmonton-West Henday (NDP)*
Batten, Diana M.B., Calgary-Acadia (NDP)
Boitchenko, Andrew, Drayton Valley-Devon (UC)
Eremenko, Janet, Calgary-Currie (NDP)**
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Johnson, Jennifer, Lacombe-Ponoka (Ind)

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participant

Ministry of Justice
Mickey K. Amery, Minister

7 p.m.

Monday, March 18, 2024

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

Ministry of Justice
Consideration of Main Estimates

The Chair: Good evening, everyone. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Justice for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025. I'd ask that we go around the table and have members please introduce themselves for the record.

Minister, when we get to you, if you would kindly introduce your members there to your left and right, that would be appreciated.

We'll start to my right, please.

Mr. Boitchenko: Hello, everyone. My name is Andrew Boitchenko, and I'm the MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon.

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Johnson: Good evening. Jennifer Johnson, Lacombe-Ponoka, and my assistant Rebecca Lees.

Mr. Amery: Good evening. Mickey Amery, MLA for Calgary-Cross, Minister of Justice and Attorney General for the province of Alberta. I will introduce my officials from left to right: Tracy Wyrstiuik, assistant deputy minister of court and justice services; followed by Brad Wells, assistant deputy minister of financial services and senior financial officer. To my immediate right: Malcolm Lavoie, deputy minister; and Elizabeth Macve, assistant deputy minister of strategy support and integrated services division. In the gallery behind me: Kim Goddard, assistant deputy minister of Alberta Crown prosecution service; Sue Stushnoff, assistant deputy minister of legal services division. I also have Keith Pridgen, chief of staff to the minister; Chinenye Anokwuru, press secretary; and Julie Williams, director of communications.

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

Member Eremenko: Good evening. Janet Eremenko, MLA for Calgary-Currie.

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

Ms Goehring: Nicole Goehring, deputy chair for this committee, MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs. I want to wish the minister and the critic, Member Sabir, Ramadan Mubarak.

The Chair: Thank you, everyone. I'm Jackie Lovely, MLA for Camrose constituency, and chair of the committee.

I'd like to note the following substitutions for the record: hon. Mr. Sabir for Member Batten, Member Arcand-Paul for Dr. Metz, Ms Eremenko for Member Tejada.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard*, so no need to press to turn them on. They'll automatically turn on. Committee proceedings are live streamed

and on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio and visual stream and transcripts of the meeting can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. We don't have any members participating remotely at the moment. Please set your cellphones to silent and other devices as well.

We'll have a break for 10 minutes at 7:48 for those observing Ramadan.

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Justice shall be considered for three hours. Standing order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table.

For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both minister and member agree to that. If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking time or rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee – well, we've already talked about the break.

Ministry officials who are present may at the direction of the minister address the committee. Ministry officials sitting in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table.

Space permitting opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused. However, the block of speaking time and overall three-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

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

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

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Chair, and good evening to all of the committee members. Today I am pleased to be here to discuss the Alberta Ministry of Justice's business plan and estimates. This plan was created in collaboration with several ministry officials, many of whom are attending in today's session with me.

Making sure that all Albertans enjoy the protection of our province's justice system is at the heart of our mandate. We believe that justice should not be out of reach for any Albertan nor should anyone who enters an Alberta courtroom receive more favourable treatment than anyone else. Working with our partners in law enforcement, the judiciary, and many other groups inside and outside of government, we strive to make our justice system as fair, as efficient, and as accessible as possible, but the protection we offer Albertans extends far beyond the courthouse.

Our mandate also includes shielding Albertans from federal legislation and policies that are unconstitutional or harmful or detrimental to this province and its economic prosperity. The

investments in Budget 2024 will help provide the Alberta justice system with the support it needs to safeguard the freedoms and interests of all Albertans, even those who may never set foot in a courthouse.

Budget 2024 provides the Ministry of Justice with a total of \$684.7 million. That is \$26.2 million above Budget 2023, an increase of roughly 4 per cent. These additional funds in conjunction with internal reallocation of existing funds will allow us to do a number of things.

It will allow us to ensure that the Alberta Crown prosecution service is able to address existing pressures and handle current caseloads. It'll allow us to expand online digital and court technology services, including videoconferencing technology in courtrooms across the province. It'll allow us to hire more staff to address the growing demands on Alberta courts. It'll allow us to better serve Albertans with legal family matters by expanding our family justice strategy, and, in addition to many other things, it'll support the important work being done by the office of the Chief Medical Examiner.

Some of these expenditures will go towards new initiatives while others will enhance existing services, and all of them will result in tangible improvements for anyone dealing with the Alberta justice system, from victims of crime to parties involved in lawsuits to grieving families and more.

I will now take a closer look at the budgets for individual divisions. The total budget for court and justice services is \$275.6 million; that is a \$23.3 million increase than in Budget 2023, or an increase of 9 per cent. That figure includes \$15.9 million in additional funding to increase staff and judicial supports at the Alberta Court of Justice, the Court of King's Bench, and the Court of Appeal.

With Alberta experiencing a population surge, our courts are experiencing a greater volume of cases, more complex cases, and more self-represented litigants, which is having an impact on caseloads. Budget 2024 provides funding for additional case coordinators, legal counsel, judicial clerks, and an additional applications judge, ensuring that courts can give greater individual attention to Albertans' legal issues and help them resolve them more quickly. I am pleased that the court operations will be able to hire 110 additional judicial clerks to manage courtrooms, process fines, and serve the public at front counters in rural courthouses.

Budget 2024 also provides further investment in families by securing an additional \$3 million for our family justice strategy for a total of \$8 million devoted to that program. Negotiating the terms of divorce, separations, child care agreements, and other things can be stressful and emotionally exhausting for Alberta families. Adding to this stress is a complex legal process and a court structure that can be difficult and intimidating to navigate for everyday Albertans, but with the launch of our family justice strategy we are providing Albertans with a streamlined, simplified, and integrated set of resources. We have collaborated with the Court of Justice, the Court of King's Bench to align procedures and to create a single point of entry for anyone seeking family law services. We also made it easier where appropriate for families to address family law matters outside of the courts through mediation and other less adversarial methods.

7:10

We want to make sure that our courthouses and other buildings are modern, safe, and accessible to everyone. That is why we are expanding videoconferencing services in Alberta courts, to enable the courts to operate more efficiently and increase Albertans' access to justice. We have already committed \$2.3 million per year over three years to support and enhance the videoconferencing capacities

of our courts. Budget 2024 will increase that commitment by \$1.7 million a year for a total three-year investment of \$12 million. Budget 2024 also invests \$2.2 million to improve courtroom technology service supports for our courtrooms, the judiciary, and court staff.

Moving on to the legal services division: its budget is \$70.2 million, a 7 per cent increase over last year's budget of \$65.8 million. The volume and complexity of government legal work has been growing as we work to keep our laws up to date and protect Alberta's constitutional jurisdiction, which Ottawa has continually attacked. These funds will allow legal services to add a net increase of seven FTEs to its ranks, which will allow us in turn to receive timely, reliable, expert advice on complex and sensitive legal matters without always needing to enter into expensive contracts with outside counsel.

On to the criminal law. This year's budget for the Alberta Crown prosecution service division is \$139.2 million, an increase of 8 per cent from the 2023 budget of \$128.9 million. That is a \$10.3 million increase. This is the latest in the series of investments that the Alberta government has made since 2019 to improve the work environment for our Crown prosecutors and make the government of Alberta a more attractive place for talented lawyers to pursue their careers. Furthermore, Budget 2024 allows us to continue the precharge assessment rollout, ensuring that only the most viable cases will proceed through the criminal justice system, helping to create a court capacity for other more viable cases. At the same time, the money that Budget 2024 makes available for prosecutions will help ensure that criminals, especially offenders who have repeatedly displayed their lack of respect for the rule of law, are appropriately held accountable for their actions.

Now, on to strategy, support, and integrated services, a division with a budget commitment of \$171.5 million, or 25 per cent of the ministry's budget. Budget 2024 continues the good work that we are doing to increase access to justice for Albertans, particularly the most vulnerable: \$110 million in the budget will support Legal Aid to maintain a strong roster of lawyers and increase access to justice for low-income Albertans, while millions more are allocated to funding technology, innovation to ensure that Albertans from corner to corner have access to justice.

Moving on to Alberta's chief firearms office. We are proud of the work that Alberta's chief firearms office is doing to promote public safety and stand up for law-abiding gun owners since it was established in 2021. Budget 2024 will ensure that the Alberta chief firearms office is sufficiently resourced to process applications, transfers, authorizations to transport, and make other administrative tasks faster.

Elsewhere in this division we will be funding the office of the Chief Medical Examiner by an additional \$1.4 million. This office performs a vital service to anyone who has experienced the loss of a loved one, providing closure and comfort to families during times of intense stress and grief. The office of the Chief Medical Examiner has been addressing backlogs by actively recruiting to fill vacant positions, and this budget will allow the office to hire six new FTEs in 2024-25. This means that the highly skilled team at the office of the Chief Medical Examiner will be able to deliver faster turnaround times to families and law enforcement while reducing stress and burnout among its staff.

The ministry's budget 2024 represents our government's commitment to providing Albertans with modern, efficient, and accessible justice. We are taking steps to ensure that matters proceed swiftly through our system, and the result is satisfactory outcomes that reflect the Alberta community at large.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

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

Members, would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Sabir: Yes, please.

The Chair: And, Minister, what's your choice?

Mr. Amery: My preference is block time.

The Chair: All right. We'll go with block time, then.

The block of shared time is 20 minutes, during which time you may go back and forth with questions, comments, and responses; however, neither participant may speak for longer than 10 minutes at a time.

Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's my pleasure to be here to discuss Justice estimates. Thank you, Minister, for being here, and thank you to all your staff for being here. I do have questions relating to the ministry's business plan, estimates, and some recent developments. Since we are doing block time, I do hope that you will provide an undertaking that if any of the questions asked are not answered, a written response is provided for that.

With that, I will start my questions about Justice's business plan 2024-27. Through you, Chair, on page 97 the opening line of the ministry's business plan states, "The Ministry of Justice works to ensure a fair and accessible justice system for all Albertans where the rule of law is upheld and government undertakings are administered according to law," certainly a laudable goal and exactly what this ministry shall strive to do. The first question I have for the minister through the chair is: would you agree that an independent, fair justice system must be free from all political interference for the rule of law to be respected and upheld? Yes or no?

The second question also relates to a fair justice system and the rule of law. Madam Chair, last May the Ethics Commissioner of Alberta found that the Premier broke the law and found her to have interfered in the administration of the justice system. I'm sure that you would agree that such incidents undermine the trust Albertans have in the independence of their justice system. The question I have is: what steps has the minister taken or plans to take to ensure that similar incidents never happen again and the rule of law is respected and upheld? Also, a related question: has the Ethics Commissioner made any further recommendation in this regard, and what's the progress so far on the recommendation that the Ethics Commissioner made in this regard?

Page 97 . . .

Mr. Boitchenko: Point of order. I believe the member speaks to matters other than in question here, under 23(b)(i), the matter under discussion right now.

The Chair: Member.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Madam Chair. I do not believe that this is a point of order. The member clearly articulated that this was under page 97 of the business plan. The very first statement talks about a fair and accessible justice system. I think it's a matter of debate and not a point of order. It clearly ties to the business plan.

Mr. Boitchenko: If we can maybe stay closer to the questions, though.

The Chair: I think what I'll do in this case is – please proceed, Member, because we do have a broad latitude, and the minister will address it in his opportunity to speak.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Chair. Page 97 of the business plan talks about advocacy for the firearm community while working towards public safety. The minister also mentioned that in his opening remarks. The same paragraph also talks about legal aid and then child and spousal support orders, forensic death investigations. I do have questions about all four of these topics.

7:20

I will start with gun violence and public safety. Through you, Madam Chair, gun violence is a huge issue in our communities. There was a report. It's a bit dated, but 38 per cent at least of that gun violence happening in Calgary was happening in the northeast quadrant that both the minister and I represent. The question I have is: what specific details and initiatives can the minister share with us that he is undertaking to curb the gun violence? All I see in the business plan related documents is that the government is talking about speeding up gun licence applications, and I'm unable to kind of see how that helps us curb gun violence and helps us with public safety.

Second question, through the chair . . .

Mr. Long: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order has been called.

Mr. Long: Under 23(b), just speaking to matters other than the question under discussion. I believe that tonight we're talking with Justice, and I believe that the member's line of questioning is around public safety, which we had an opportunity to do estimates last week.

The Chair: Member.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Madam Chair. I don't believe that this is a point of order. Again, the member is directly tying it to the business plan, where they're talking about advocates for Alberta's firearms community, so it's asking for a plan. I think it's a matter of debate, and it directly ties to the business plan, and I don't think it's a point of order.

The Chair: We'll continue, and I'll leave it up to the minister if he's able or wanting to address that.

Please continue, Member.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm just reading straight from the Justice ministry's business plan, that they advocate for the Alberta firearm community while working towards public safety. That's why I would ask where in the budget we can find the funding for specific initiatives that address public safety from the Justice ministry's perspective.

Second question. I would ask if there are any initiatives or any plan, then my question is how these initiatives prioritize a long-term solution and community engagement rather than short-term fixes or just political stunts.

The next question, Madam Chair, I have relates to child and spousal support orders. A simple question. Has the caseload increased or decreased? Next question, through you, Madam Chair: has there been an observable trend of increase or decrease in the workload of child and spousal support orders over the years? The

second question: are there any plans or measures being considered to streamline the process of handling these orders to ensure timely and fair outcomes for all parties involved, and what does that plan look like? Has any research been done or conducted on this particular issue?

Moving on to – there was a mention of legal aid. I do have a fair bit of questions about legal aid, but here I would like to ask – this year's budget cuts legal aid by \$33 million. A \$33 million cut. It's a huge cut. The minister mentioned in his opening statement that justice should not be out of reach for anyone. Justice is out of reach for far too many Albertans, and this \$33 million cut on top doesn't help. Through you, Chair, the question I have is: how does the minister think this will impact Albertans' access to justice generally and their right to fair representation?

The next question relates to forensic death investigation. Through you, Chair, Minister, can you share how many investigations are completed or ongoing into sudden and unexpected deaths? Are there any trends, findings that you would like to share from these investigations?

Page 97, another paragraph that talks about advocating for law-abiding firearm owners by challenging the lawfulness and constitutionality of firearm . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

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

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for that series of questions. He raises a number of important issues, and I think that it would be helpful for me to address some of those issues here so that we can clarify and clear up some of the record.

Certainly, the premise of our department and our ministry is to ensure an independent, fair, and accessible justice system for all Albertans, and that is what I'm absolutely committed to. We continue to work with our government officials and department officials to make sure that we provide and deliver access to justice all across this province in an independent and fair and accessible way.

We also maintain a strong relationship with the judiciary, with all three levels of Chief Justice as well to make sure that we are kept apprised of some of the developing issues in our legal system. We make sure that we continue to meet regularly with the judiciary and stakeholders all across our province to maintain a strong relationship and ensure that we continue to stay on top of all of the developments.

As the member knows – the member is a trained and experienced lawyer – the law develops and continues to do so all the time, so we continue to reach out to all members impacted or affected by justice in general to make sure that we're addressing some of these issues.

You know, certainly, following my appointment in June 2023, we've taken a number of steps following the Ethics Commissioner recommendations. All members of government caucus received governance training as it related to some of the recommendations in that report, and I personally provided members of caucus with extensive training in that regard.

We've also created and delivered and we published online, by the way, a procedure directive that details for all people the relationship between Executive Council and the Attorney General in this province. That describes the relationship between members of cabinet and the Attorney General and what sorts of things we can and cannot do and discuss. I think putting that online for the public to see and certainly distributing it to members of Executive Council is an important step towards moving forward to create the

awareness that is necessary between the Attorney General and Executive Council.

The member asked a little bit about further recommendations. No. No further recommendations from the Ethics Commissioner's office at this point in time, and the recommendations that were made have been complied with thus far.

There was a discussion by the member in relation to the firearms community, and that is something that we certainly value very much. The relationship with law-abiding gun owners is something that we think is very important. We are continuously working with our chief firearms office to not only ensure that it meets the demand that Albertans expect to see but also that the chief firearms office is reaching out to the community and addressing some of the issues that the member pointed out. We certainly are well aware of the issues of gun violence that are happening in this province, and indeed it is happening all across the country.

In October of last year I had the privilege of attending an FPT meeting that was comprised of all federal, provincial, and territorial justice ministers across the country. What became very aware to me was that every single provincial and territorial justice minister raised the issues of Bill C-75. Now, for those who don't know, Bill C-75 was a federal bill that was introduced some time ago in 2019, and that created changes in our bail reform system. The issue with Bill C-75 is that it created a default position that those who are charged with a criminal offence should be given the least restrictive types of release conditions when it came to assessing their eligibility for bail. That has been a real problem in this country and certainly in this province as it relates to serious and repeat offenders. People in this province do not suffer the consequences, and they don't see stiff consequences resulting from the introduction of Bill C-75, because the courts have been directed to take the least restrictive approach when it comes to release.

7:30

The member asked a number of questions about what we're doing, and I'm proud to be able to answer that question because I have any number of different things that I can bring forward to this committee. In September of 2023 I introduced the creation of a special prosecutions unit that was focused on areas of high criminality in the downtown Edmonton and Calgary cores. Through the work of the department a special prosecutions team was created in both Calgary and Edmonton, which was focused on handling cases from start to finish as they related to areas of high criminality in the two downtown cores. I think this is an important development because it was an opportunity for us to create a team that was focused on a very particular geographic area, communities and become familiar with some of those actors, those repeat and serious offenders that we just talked about.

We also did away with a disastrous policy that was introduced in 2017 by the NDP government at that time: the triage protocol. That was a practice that directed prosecutors to abandon certain cases while prosecuting other ones, and it was due to stress within the Crown prosecution service. The problem is that rather than focusing on supporting our Alberta Crown prosecutors, the response was simply to say: do away with some of those cases. I found it very difficult to accept the notion of abandoning certain cases while choosing to prosecute others. So that practice protocol, the triage protocol, was completely done away with in September of 2023.

In addition to that, the minister of public safety has committed an additional amount of money in Budget 2024 to shore up security at our borders and improve our Alberta sheriffs service. As I mentioned in my opening remarks as well, \$139 million has been allocated to the Alberta Crown prosecution service. This is an unprecedented amount. It is \$10.3 million more than Budget 2023

allocated to our Alberta Crown prosecution. I think that underscores and really highlights our commitment and our desire to ensure that criminals do not walk away without facing the wrath of the criminal justice system here in this province. Our Alberta Crown prosecution service is currently well staffed, it is well supported, and we are experiencing some of the lowest vacancy rates that we've ever seen in this province in that department. I say that because I'm tremendously proud of the work that ADM Goddard has done to make sure that our Crown prosecution service is fully staffed and has all the tools they need to prosecute crimes in this province.

The member talked a little bit about spousal and child support orders. I am pleased to report that we have, as I mentioned in my earlier remarks, worked on a family justice strategy that will help address many of these backlogs and these issues. The family justice strategy is working to ensure that families have the ability to seek resources above and beyond going to court every time there is a family law dispute. I think that's really important for Alberta families. I know that court is a difficult and challenging process, and I know that families are better served when they're able to attend other services such as mediation or other types of support services that will allow them to address some of their issues outside of a courtroom.

You know, prior to coming into this office, and the member will also know this, I was a practising family lawyer for a number of years as well. I know how difficult it was to navigate the court process with these families. These are sensitive issues, and I think that Alberta families are best served by an environment that allows them to discuss their issues and hopefully resolve some of them in an informal setting. I think that really is a long-term vision for making sure that we have the best interests of both the families and the children in mind.

Finally, I just wanted to address this important question that the member asked and that was a question about legal aid. That is an important one because it does appear in the estimates that the legal aid budget was cut by \$33 million. But the fact of the matter is that Alberta is absolutely committed. This province and this minister are absolutely committed to making sure that Albertans have an effective and affordable legal system, especially those who are low-income and vulnerable.

We have introduced, as of April 1, 2024, an increase to the financial eligibility guidelines, increasing the threshold to \$30,000. That is a significant increase from what it is today. I'll continue on in my next opportunity.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

That concludes the first portion of questions for the – oh, it doesn't, because that was only 10 minutes.

Go ahead, Member.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister. Through the chair I do understand that special prosecution teams were there before even you were minister. I don't think there is anything the UCP can take credit for. Ask your Crown prosecution division about it.

Through the chair page 97 again talks about the law-abiding and responsible sentence on gun ownership. I don't know much about the process, so through you, Chair, the question I have for the minister is: for instance, if someone is involved in a domestic violence dispute, can they or should they get to keep their gun license or guns?

Page 97, again talking about timely and accessible services and the precharge assessment system. In his opening remarks the minister said that this precharge assessment program is there so that

only viable and serious cases proceed through the criminal justice system. At the same time the minister also talked about the triage process back in 2017. Through the chair a question I have is: help us understand how this precharge assessment is different from the triage that you criticized. The second question is: what's the progress on this precharge assessment system? How many prosecutors are available to police to do this work? Because, Chair, we heard about this last year as well. Speaking of an accessible and timely justice system, can you also talk about Jordan delays and specific steps that you are taking to address those delays?

Next question through the chair: how many vacancies are there when it comes to judges and other support staff at all levels of courts? Recently I was talking to some practising lawyers and, through you, Chair, I was hearing that some trials are double-booked in our criminal courts due to lack of staffing, shortage of courtrooms. The Crown prosecutors are forced to stay charges or reschedule criminal trials; thereby, failing to abide by the Jordan deadlines or otherwise be able to deliver justice on time. The question I have is: how many charges have been dropped or stayed because of the reasons that I outlined?

Other questions relating to court delays through you, Chair. It's a serious concern, and it needs a real plan from this government so that those who are wronged by a criminal act don't see their perpetrator get away without any punishment. Why is it that the ministry is only prioritizing viable cases? Many Albertans who have been wronged by criminal acts don't get to see their perpetrators brought to justice in the criminal justice system. Any message for those victims of crime?

Next question. I guess it will touch a little bit on legal aid as well. It's well known that it's difficult for self-litigants to navigate the court system, and lacking a lawyer makes the process quite slower, yet, again, this year's budget sees a huge cut in legal aid funding, making the justice system more inaccessible, forcing more Albertans to go as self . . .

7:40

Mr. Lundy: Point of order, Chair.

The Chair: We've had a point of order called.

Go ahead, Member.

Mr. Lundy: Point of order under 23(c). It's my understanding that the minister provided an answer to this very question already.

The Chair: Go ahead, Member.

Mr. Sabir: I didn't hear what this is under. Is there a restriction that if one question is asked it cannot be asked again? Just a point of clarification. I don't see it as a point of order.

The Chair: I'm going to say that if you would like to ask the question again, by all means, go ahead. If the minister chooses to answer it again in a different way, then we'll allow that for him.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you.

Moving on to page 97, it talks about appointment of additional judges. How many vacancies are there? A question, through you, Chair, is: when was the last time Alberta made that request to the federal government to appoint additional judges?

Page 97, support for Indigenous people. Through you, Chair, Indigenous people continue to remain overrepresented in our justice system, so the question I have is: what specific steps have you taken to address their overrepresentation? The fact remains that murder and homicide rate for Indigenous women and girls is six times higher than those who are not Indigenous.

Another related question, through you, Chair. Minister, how do you plan to collaborate with Indigenous communities and leaders to develop a culturally sensitive and effective approach to address this systemic issue? Where can we find the results of any initiative that you have undertaken? Through you, Chair, are you not concerned, Minister, that you are failing Indigenous communities? Another question through the chair to the Minister: are there any Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations on the criminal justice system, and what progress has been made so far to implement those recommendations?

Page 98. It's an interesting paragraph. It says that

The Ministry of Justice remains committed to regulatory approaches and program delivery that reduce unnecessary government oversight and emphasize outcomes . . .

Through you, Chair, I don't know what exactly that means. If the minister can provide some examples where the minister was able to reduce that unnecessary government oversight. Would the minister consider a provincial police force an unnecessary government oversight?

Moving on to outcome 1, Albertans' rights and interests are protected. It talks about a lot of legal challenges. A simple question, through you, Chair: how much taxpayer money has the Justice ministry spent on these legal challenges so far?

Key objective 1.1, a question relating to that, though you, Chair, is: why is the government prioritizing the expediting of firearm licenses possession and processing time over other pressing issues facing Albertans such as gun violence in our communities?

Relating to 1.2, through you, Chair, the question I have is: how does the government plan on tackling intergovernmental conflict that hinders progress on issues that require multilateral cooperation, for instance, creating a unified family court?

Key objective 1.3, a question relating to that is: when will this review start? Who is involved? When will it be completed? What specific legislation are you looking to review?

Through you, Madam Chair, initiative supporting key objective 1.1. The first question: what are you doing specifically to address gun violence and the proliferation of illegal guns on our streets instead of making them more readily available?

Performance metrics. Through you, Chair, there's only one performance metric listed there, and that is about possession and acquisition licences of guns. So a simple question: why the minister thinks that this performance metric alone captures the outcome of outcome 1, Albertans' rights and interests are protected.

I will have more questions about outcome 2, but I don't have enough time. There are only six seconds left, so I will ask that in the next block.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

We'll move over to the minister now. But in order for us to take the break at I think we said 7:48, Minister, can we set it for four minutes for you to start? And then when you come back, we'll head back to you and then you continue on with your block of a complete 10 minutes.

Mr. Amery: Okay. Well, thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you once again to the hon. member. I'll begin where I left off, and that is our discussion about legal aid. I want to reiterate to all members of the committee that ensuring that Albertans have effective and accessible access to affordable legal service is absolutely paramount for this ministry, and this includes making sure that legal aid is available when and where Albertans need it.

The announcement that we made which will take effect on April 1, 2024, is, in fact, a very good announcement. It will increase the financial eligibility guidelines to \$30,000. Once again, this is a

significant increase over what was there before, which in turn addresses directly the member's question, and that is that more Albertans will be eligible and will qualify for legal aid services. In addition to that, \$110 million in Budget 2024 was in fact allocated to legal aid to ensure that Legal Aid Alberta maintains a strong roster of lawyers and make sure that justice is available for low-income Albertans.

Legal Aid Alberta – and this is what the member should know as well – has significant reserves to cover all of its budget requirements. The value or the balance of its reserves or of its deferred revenues has been confirmed to be significant, and we believe that, according to our forecasting, Legal Aid Alberta will have approximately some \$70 million in deferred revenues available as of March 31, 2024, that will in fact be carried over on to the next year. For the member's benefit I would say to him, through you, Madam Chair, that Legal Aid Alberta will receive \$110 million from the government of Alberta.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll start the break now.

[The committee adjourned from 7:48 p.m. to 7:59 p.m.]

The Chair: All right, everyone. That concludes our break.

Minister, we'll go back to you for your remaining eight minutes to answer questions.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Chair. You know, once again, I just wanted to reiterate, for the benefit of the member and the benefit of all committee members, that Legal Aid did in fact receive \$110 million this year but that they also operate with an expected \$70 million in reserves as of March 31, 2024. We are custodians of the public purse, and we will make sure that we are transparent and also hold those agencies accountable for responsible spending wherever that happens.

There will be no changes to the service level of legal aid. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, it will serve more Albertans through the increase in the financial eligibility guidelines. There will be no decrease in the types of services provided, the eligibility, or anything of that nature, and legal aid will continue to operate just as it has been for many years.

The question about gun ownership I find to be an interesting one. I'm not sure if the member is trying to equate gun licensing with gun-related crime, but I can assure all members of the committee that those that are committing the gun-related crimes are not the law-abiding citizens that are going through the Alberta chief firearms office to obtain their gun licences legally, they certainly aren't the ones who are going through an exhaustive vetting process or submitting all of their materials and waiting months for review and vetting to receive their licence, and they certainly aren't the ones who are following the rules in this province.

I'm proud to report to the committee that we have the highest proportionate level of legal gun ownership in the country, and we know that it is of high value to Albertans. We'll continue to do everything that we can to protect law-abiding, legal gun ownership in this province. I think that's important for a number of different reasons. It certainly is, and I just wanted to put on the record for all members and everybody watching: this government and this minister and this department will continue to protect the rights of legal gun owners in the acquisition and possession of legal firearms in this province and will do so through the shoring up of our Alberta chief firearms office, which has done remarkable things in this province, and in making sure that the vetting processes are as thorough as can be.

The member will also know that our Chief Firearms Officer, Dr. Teri Bryant, is probably first and foremost this country's leading expert when it comes to the type of work that she does. It's an incredible and remarkable type of work. She is well respected all across the country and, in fact, throughout North America and elsewhere, and we're tremendously lucky to have somebody of that calibre leading that office.

There was a discussion in relationship to whether or not the Alberta chief firearms office conducts thorough vetting of those individuals who apply for a PAL or RPAL. The answer to that: yes, there is a thorough review process involved. The member might like to know that the Alberta chief firearms office does complete, I think, a very exhaustive and detailed vetting of all people who are looking to obtain a firearms licence in this province. Those with a history of violence or those with any negative type of history are certainly reviewed, and those who are inappropriate for gun licensing will not receive one in this province.

I'll talk a little bit about the precharge assessment process. This is fundamentally a very important thing that we will do in this department. The precharge assessment office will be designed in a way to assess the viability of criminal charges from the early onset of when they are contemplated by police, and it does a number of different things. Firstly, it reinforces the position and the relationship of law enforcement and the Crown prosecution service by working together closely from the very beginning, when police are involved, all the way throughout the process to the end.

We ensure that the quality of the prosecutions is top notch. We make sure that prosecutors are involved in the review of the initial evidence. We ensure that the prosecution is involved right from the very beginning to assess the viability of those charges, to make sure that all of the evidence is in order, to make sure that if there is missing evidence, a prosecutor will communicate with the local police detachment to make sure that that evidence is provided or improved if necessary. The precharge assessment office will flag or identify important things about a particular case – for example, whether or not a Charter challenge is likely – and flag them for the trial prosecutor early on. Those are all things that will result in improved prosecutions in this province. I think that our precharge assessment office is going to significantly reduce and address some of the backlogs and caseloads that our Crown prosecutors are handling.

8:05

The member asked about Jordan. Budget 2024 will in fact directly address a number of Jordan applications in this province. For the member's benefit, in '22-23 there were 36 Jordan applications filed in Alberta. Of those, three were granted by the court. There have been very few successful Jordan applications in this province. In 2022-23, for example, about 0.003 per cent of the total of approximately 100,000 cases that entered the criminal justice system resulted in a successful Jordan application. The Alberta Crown prosecution service, of course, tracks criminal cases in provincial court and the Court of King's Bench to ensure that matters proceed to trial within the time limits specified by the Supreme Court of Canada and Jordan. There are many reasons why a file may experience delay, and that is not typically or always the result of factors that are attributable to the Crown. These include things such as defence witnesses, defence counsel availability, or delays caused by the individual accused themselves.

There was a question earlier about vacancies in the judiciary. Currently we have 7.5 vacancies in the judiciary at the provincial level. However, our office has been working closely to identify and recommend a number of different individuals to those vacancies. We meet with the Chief Justice of the Alberta Court of Justice on a

regular basis, sometimes monthly, sometimes quarterly but certainly regularly, in order to make sure that we are kept well aware of the developments within our provincial court, and we are constantly reviewing the applicants and making sure that we're making recommendations on those individuals.

There was a question, a very interesting one, that the member posed: what message do I have for victims of crime? The one message that I would say is that we would have loved for the opposition members to support us in opposing the continued detrimental impact of Bill C-75. I would encourage the member to stand up and do the same.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Back over to the Official Opposition.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. Pages 99, 100, outcome 2: the question is about digitalization. It's a good idea, but the question I have, through the chair, is: does that mean that there will be a reduction in front-line court services at the courthouse as we move towards more digital services? Many people don't have access to phones or computers. Have you considered how to address their needs so that they also have access to a fair justice system?

The next question is relating to performance metric 2(a), through the chair. The target is to reduce it from 26 weeks to 24 weeks. The Jordan time frame for indictable offences is 30 weeks. Is there a triage process in place? Is there criteria to determine what is a serious and violent matter? What about cases that may not be serious or violent but, sure, somebody was wronged and they want to see justice delivered?

Through you, Chair, the next question: what was the number of stays or withdrawal of charges due to the courts not meeting the Jordan time frames? The next question, through you, Chair: have more Crown prosecutors and judges been hired to address this and ensure criminal charges are not stayed due to lack of resources? Again, people should be able to see their perpetrators in court.

Performance measure 2(b), through you, Chair. The question I have is: what does this handling of traffic ticket matters mean? Is it entering a plea and removing access to an in-person Crown prosecutor? Making people bleed out doesn't mean it is just or appropriate. Again, the most vulnerable people are impacted by this.

Outcome 3, page 100. I have a question relating to this outcome and objective, through you, Chair. We are hearing that the federal government has the resources and are willing to establish a unified family court in Alberta and across other provinces, but what we are hearing is that the UCP government is dithering on it. What do you have to say about that, Minister?

Through you, Chair, I can also talk about the processes that are in place now. Earlier the minister talked about the family justice strategy, which includes that people must take a parenting after separation course, that there must be an alternative dispute resolution, and that they must meet with the family court counsellor. Many justice system participants will say that this family justice strategy is nothing but a triage system that is causing delays in the system. There is no evidence that this one is working better. The other thing is that sometimes these alternative dispute resolution services, if they are not available through the court, are quite expensive, and not everybody can afford those services.

Through you, Chair, I will move on to key objective 3.4. There were similar objectives in the ministry's business plan last year as well. Can the minister tell us what progress has been made, how funds have been used, and what enhancements have been made to

the policies and procedures to improve that investigation process in Alberta?

Next, on the same page, under Initiatives Supporting Key Objectives, how many preassessment and mediations have happened in 2023, how many parenting intervention programs were implemented, and what's the plan going forward?

Moving on to drug treatment court utilization, performance measure 3(a). Through you, Chair, the utilization rate is at 35 per cent; the target is to get to 60 and even more in out-years. Tell us how you will do that.

The next question is relating to performance measure 3(b). How many matters were resolved through this dispute resolution program? When will it be fully functional? What are the targets? Again, isn't it true that only those that can afford mediation can hire a mediator? Through you, Chair, also, there's a minimum income threshold for those accessing mediation through the court system. After implementing the justice system, has the government hired more mediators for the courts?

I will move on to page 102, statement of operations. This year's estimate for total revenue is \$237.8 million on a consolidated basis, which is \$14 million lower than what was budgeted for last year. What's the reason for this decrease in the revenue?

Moving on to the 2024-27 government of Alberta strategic plan, through you, Chair, referring you to page 18, it talks about enhancing treatment referral pathways in criminal justice systems. The question I have, through you, Madam Chair, to the minister: has your government consulted with mental health and addiction experts as well as impacted communities to ensure these allocated funds are being directed towards evidence-based strategies that effectively promote wellness and recovery while minimizing harm and stigma? What funds for this are being invested in comprehensive community-based supports systems?

Moving on to page 20, priority 2, through you, Madam Chair, can the minister explain why this family justice strategy is better than having a unified family court? As I mentioned earlier, the federal government says that they have money for unified family courts. The UCP is not willing to take up that money and work with them. Why is that?

The next question. Through you, Madam Chair, referring you to page 20, Minister, we heard about this precharge in your previous answer as well. But I think instead of setting up available Crown to be available for police officers, have you considered anything alternative – for instance, training police officers – so that they can maintain their independence and be able to assess those charges?

8:15

The next set of questions is about Justice estimates '24 to '27. Page 123 of Budget 2023 estimates under capital plan: less \$14.1 million for Justice. Just provide the detail of what it will be spent on.

Moving on to page 156, operating expense. In the minister's office estimates there is an increase, there is an increase in the deputy minister's office, and I think there is an increase in line 1.3 as well. All these three lines have increased, and line 1.3 is a significant increase, so help us understand what this increase will be used for.

Moving on to line item 2.4. That relates to Court of King's Bench. Again, there's an increase. Earlier you mentioned that there will be 110 new staff that will be hired. Help us understand how many staff will be hired in Court of King's Bench, how this increase will be used.

Same question in relation to line item 2.5. There's a slight increase there. Please tell us how that increase will be used. Are you hiring some new staff?

Moving on to legal services, line item 3.1. That's the civil law section. There is a significant increase in this. Help us understand about this increase, what it's for. Is government involved in more cases? Is there any outsourcing of cases that the government is involved in, and what's the total cost of that?

Moving on to line item 3.2, through you, Chair, Legislative Counsel. There is a slight increase. Line 3.3 is flat, and it has been flat for a while. The question I have in relation to line 3.3 is that despite the focus on increased research on justice processes and reforms outlined in the business plan, there is no corresponding increase in funding for law reform. What's the strategy here? Why not increase there?

I will go to line item 4.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

Minister, you have the remaining time in the block.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'll start at the very beginning. The hon. member alleged whether or not we would be looking at a reduction of front-line services. The answer to that is no. We certainly have the highest level of FTEs of any time in any snapshot in history. We'll have more FTEs available to Justice than ever before.

We're also working on increasing access to justice in other ways as well. We've introduced a community justice grant, which is intended to empower various organizations, agencies, not-for-profits, and Indigenous groups with funding so that they can develop their own strategies when it comes to addressing justice beyond the courtroom. That is, I think, important. That is a philosophy that I bring forward and I believe very much in. I want to make sure that I impart upon members of the committee that there are a number of different ways that justice can be addressed in this province, and it doesn't always mean courtrooms and more courtrooms. By allowing organizations to receive funding and develop their own programs in a number of different ways, whether that is improving their access to information or whether it's improving their technology or in other ways, we think that we will be able to see a number of benefits and advantages in doing that.

The question about Jordan once again: I'd like to address that one more time. The number of successful Jordan applications in this province is remarkably low. Three applications were successful in 2022-23. That is out of over 100,000 criminal cases in this province. That is a remarkably low number. That is largely due, in part, to the increased support and funding and close collaboration with the Alberta Crown prosecution service. There have been more than 50 new prosecutors hired since 2019 for this province, and the number of trial prosecutors that we have is 383 Crown prosecutors here in this province doing this remarkable work. Additional funding support and close collaboration with our Alberta Crown prosecutors is fundamentally the key to making sure that this work is being done.

The Crown prosecution service, of course, keeps track of these files and makes sure that they're prosecuted in a timely manner and makes sure that any delay attributed to cases is not the result of the Crown prosecution service. In addition to that, as we talked about earlier, the precharge assessment office is intended to increase and improve efficiencies in this province by making sure that the best quality evidence and the best quality cases are moved forward and that those unlikely to be viable are not prosecuted.

The member mentioned a little bit about traffic tickets and our move towards a digital system. This is, again, a very good-news story for this province. Albertans can access their courts in any number of ways now, including the traffic ticket digital system, which will allow them to address their court matters online, but that

doesn't take away from their opportunity to address their court matters in person either. There will be any number of options available for Albertans in order to deal with their traffic tickets, including by appearing in person or by telephone or e-mail or otherwise traditional ways of addressing their court matters as well as the digital way is the way that we are moving forward in this province.

There's a great deal of discussion about the unified family court, and this is important because this has been a debate that has been taking place for a number of years. My position has been clear. The relevant stakeholders who are impacted by a unified family court must be able to weigh in on the viability of an idea like this. I'm not simply going to impose a unilateral decision on our provincial level and King's Bench level justices on a unified family court without consultation with those impacted parties. There are problems with that, and that's why we've looked at other ways to help address our court backlogs and our court challenges.

One of those is, of course, as the member mentioned, our family justice strategy. There are many different ways to deal with justice in this province, including in the realm of family law, and some of that includes things like alternative dispute resolution and family court counselling services. Do they work? Absolutely, they do work. Many families would prefer to have their matters dealt with in a more informal setting of mediation or counselling than they would by going before a judge in a courtroom.

There are certainly methods available to those individuals where ADR or family court counselling services will not work or do not apply. In an emergency situation there is a way to avoid any perceived delay of that, but all indications suggest that this is a very effective way of helping some families deal with their family law issues without having to go to court. Now, does that work for everybody? Absolutely not. But for the vast majority of people the preference is to be able to weigh in on their future and their family law matters rather than having somebody else make that decision for them. I think that we are doing an incredible service in providing this option to Albertans and also keeping in mind that court is available for those cases where this might not work. I think that's an important component to make sure that we raise as well.

There was some discussion about the unified family court and whether or not it's a better strategy than the family justice strategy, and I would say that they're two completely different things. Now, the member mentioned that the federal government has promised a bunch of money and a bunch of judges if we went ahead with a unified family court. But the question really should be why the federal government is imposing conditions on providing us with the funding for King's Bench level judges when they know we need them and they simply want to attach conditions to them that simply don't work here in this province. It is an incredible disservice to suggest that we must adhere to their conditions before we receive judges in this province.

The problem is and the fact remains that Alberta has the lowest proportionate number of federally appointed superior trial court justices per capita of any other province in this country, and that means we are disproportionately impacted by delays in our superior court. Since I took this role, since I was appointed to this role, I have been advocating endlessly to make sure that our federal counterparts know and understand that we need federally appointed superior trial judges in this province. I've done that in October of 2023 at the FPT. I did that as recently as last month, when I travelled to Ottawa to meet with federal Justice minister Virani, and I highlighted this as being one of the key things that we need for this province.

8:25

This is an important component to keep in mind here for the members of this committee, and that is that not only are we vastly underrepresented in terms of proportionality, but we have a number of vacancies which have remained unfilled in our superior court for a number of years. That is something that the province does not have the ability to fill, so we advocate regularly to make sure that that happens. There are a number of judicial vacancies at the superior court level in this province, and we would certainly benefit greatly from receiving some of those appointments.

There was a discussion about the decrease in revenue. That is certainly the case. The member does identify a decrease in revenue. The estimate for 2024-25 is, for fines and penalties, approximately \$156 million, which is, as the member correctly identified, a \$15.2 million decrease from the 2023-24 budget. This is, however, driven by lower paid ticket volume on the Traffic Safety Act. There are a number of different changes that have happened. We're sort of moving out of the pandemic and the revenue drops that we saw at that time, and that will continue to I think improve as time goes on. That's just the reality of how things have been.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll move over to the independent member for her questions.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair, and through you . . .

The Chair: Let's just determine if it's going to be block time or shared time.

Mrs. Johnson: I would love shared time if the minister is willing.

Mr. Amery: Out of respect for all the members I'd like to keep it consistent with everyone. Thank you.

The Chair: Block time? Okay.

Mrs. Johnson: Absolutely. Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, we've heard about some of the federal overreach, perhaps we could call it. We also know that federally we have seen with the current government more ethics violations than we've ever seen in history. Because of this and some overreach into our province, it has meant that there have been some significant legal costs to keep the federal government in their lane. Can the minister tell us: what specifically are the legal service costs now that are associated with this federal constitutional litigation and the court intervention? That is from page 97 on the ministerial business plan. Also, recognizing the rule of law, which is in the first line of the business plan for the Justice ministry: I think that's really important to note, that we are rule of law, and without that we're a society of chaos.

To go on to the next question, on page 97 of the ministerial business plan it says, "The ministry is exploring opportunities to streamline existing processes and improve service delivery to make the justice system easier and more accessible to Albertans." To the minister through the chair: what does this look like for our rural Albertans and our smaller, more limited systems?

And then on to the next question, from page 99 of the ministerial business plan under 1(a), the performance measure percentage of possession and acquisition licences, otherwise known as PAL. For Albertans that are processed within the target timeline, the 2022 and '23 actual result was 52 per cent, yet the target metrics going forward are significantly higher. How does the minister plan on meeting these targets?

And on the same note regarding PAL, the performance measures of possession and acquisition licenses for Albertans, this measures

the service delivery effectiveness of the Canadian firearms program to Albertans through the provincial firearms office in reviewing, investigating, and completing these applications. The measure accounts for client court-scheduling issues and capacity issues from unpredictability of extraordinary federal changes to legislation and associated regulations. The actual result for 2022-23 was 52 per cent, and targets for the upcoming years are upwards of 70 to 90 per cent. Can the minister explain how PAL, as part of the Canadian firearms program, relates to the Alberta provincial firearms office and how these percentages referred to are related to this? If that made sense.

Next question. What is the average time from application to receive legal aid in Alberta? That is from page 97, that I referred to earlier.

Next question. On page 102 – and all these next questions are from page 102 of the ministerial business plan. Ministry support services increases about 30 per cent as an expense. What does this increase reflect? These are all line items from the business plan there. Why has the expense “strategy, support and integrated initiatives” decreased this fiscal budget? Why have court and justice services expenses increased so much? Can you go into more detail on capital line item “strategy, support and integrated initiatives”? Why is this decreasing this fiscal year? In the same capital projects, Alberta Crown prosecution services: why do we see such an increase this fiscal year?

The next question. On page 100, 2(a), in the ministerial business plan the Alberta Court of Justice’s lead time to trial for serious and violent matters was 25 weeks for 2022-23. Targets for the next three years are 24 weeks each. Is this a reasonable amount of time, and how does it compare to other provinces? When we consider the impact on victims and the consequences to violent crime, is there a plan to reduce this number? What would be reasonable?

Next question, from page 101, the number of family matters resolved by Alberta Justice dispute resolutions programs, which are under development. To the minister: is this a program currently running? If so, can the minister explain how often it is used and its effectiveness? If not running, can the minister explain plans for the implementation?

We’re almost there. Under operating expenses the deputy minister’s office rises over 18 per cent and corporate services nearly 37 per cent. Can the minister explain the increase in these line items?

We heard about some online traffic ticketing. Can the minister provide a number for how much money was saved in this budget by this move? Is there a plan to go to 100 per cent for online services?

Finally, when it comes to domestic violence, four to six weeks is a very long time for processing and waiting. There have been issues with turnaround time when it comes to Clare’s law. Does this budget reflect a commitment for speeding up this application process?

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: All right. Minister, let’s move over to you for the remaining block; 10 minutes is max.

And, then, Member, if you have more questions, we’ll go back to you.

Please, proceed.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for those questions. I’ll do my best to answer all of those. The first question involved the legal costs attributable to the legal services division. I want to start by saying that one of the most important things that the legal services division does is that it leads in the participation and development and advancement of

constitutional litigation and interventions to make sure that this province’s, Alberta’s, interests are heard. The Attorney General is represented by civil Crown counsel within the legal services department, and the vast majority of all civil constitution, litigation, and interventions are performed in-house by the civil Crown counsel and are absorbed within the budget of the legal services division. The intervention by Alberta in the federal plastics-manufactured items challenge, for example, was one such matter that was very successfully advanced by the legal services division of this ministry and this department.

8:35

There are a number of cases and scenarios where we might look to outside counsel as well, and that happens in certain scenarios where there may be a conflict or a perceived conflict with using one of the civil Crown counsel or one of the members of Alberta Justice. There are also situations where external counsel may be specialized in particular areas, and I think it’s important that we put our best foot forward every time we go forward with something that has such an incredibly important role to play in defending Alberta’s interests, especially when it comes to a constitutional challenge like the ones that you mentioned earlier. This is important to note. Of course, we will continue to assess the best way to proceed in every one of these matters, and we’ll certainly make sure that our interests, Alberta’s interests, are always represented with the best counsel available at any given time. I think that’s important to start off with.

I think that having that in mind is probably fundamental to the justification for utilizing the budget that we have for the legal services division and the increase as well, because part of that increase was also recognizing the important work that our civil Crown counsel perform on an everyday basis. What we wanted to do was to create parity with the Crown prosecution service as well, so just recently the civil Crown counsel in this province received an increase in their salaries and wages in order to maintain that parity with the Alberta Crown prosecution service. The message that we really want to deliver is that all of these are equally important to the economic prosperity of Alberta, and we value our civil Crown counsel just as much as we value our Alberta Crown prosecution service, so achieving parity was important. I know that the ADM of the legal services division did some tremendous work in making sure that we were able to get there. I think I wanted to highlight that.

You spoke a little bit about the work and the challenges, the work of Justice and the challenges with rural Alberta, and I wanted to highlight some of the key things that we’re doing to help address and connect rural Albertans with their courts. One of those is \$5.5 million allocated in Budget 2024 to help modernize the court and justice systems through our justice digital program. This funding will help increase and strengthen our justice system through our continued work on digital court services to make it easier and faster for Albertans, the legal community, police officers, and others to be able to access the court system anywhere, any time.

One thing that rung true at the very beginning, once I was appointed to this role, is that I had an opportunity to speak with somebody who had mentioned something that I think really had a profound impact on me, and that was that if an Albertan couldn’t access their courthouse, their local courthouse, whether it was five miles away or 500 miles away, it wouldn’t make any difference. That is why from the very beginning I’ve been working very much, very hard on making sure that our justice digital system connects Albertans from rural and urban settings alike in their ability to connect with and obtain results from our justice system, whether it be in the family realm or in the criminal justice system or wherever. That is important, but it’s equally important to recognize that some

people simply do not have the means or the desire to access their courts through their telephone or laptops, and that's why we'll continue to maintain a strong network of courthouses throughout this province at both the provincial and the superior court level.

We're also working hard on the development of a Court of Appeal as well here in Calgary, which I hope to see in the coming months and years take shape and become another point of access to our courts as well. So there are a number of different things that we're doing to help connect rural and urban Albertans alike to their court system, including a very innovative, probably the best in Canada when it comes to our justice digital strategy as well as the ability to access the courthouses physically.

There was a question that the member asked, Madam Chair, in relation to the minister's office increase. There are nominal increases year after year, inflationary increases that result over the course of time. That is reflected in the budget. In the deputy minister's office there is an allocation for anticipated collective bargaining wage increases as well, which we've included or incorporated into that budget increase.

There is a third line item which indicates an increase in the budget as well, and that is attributable to the separation of the Justice and Public Safety and Emergency Services ministries. As the member might recall, some time ago this was a single ministry, and that was separated, and the two departments then had to separate as well. So that increase in costs was attributed to the separation of Public Safety from the Justice department, which required some additional work and some additional expenses as a result.

There was a question from the member about the lead time for an individual seeking legal aid services and how long that might take. There are, again, a variety of scenarios that impact the timing for when an application for legal aid is received and when that service is provided. One of those is, for example, the availability of counsel, court date timing, and other things. However, Legal Aid Alberta tracks the average time for a lawyer to accept an offer in days, and the average time, according to the Legal Aid Alberta annual report for 2022-23, was 4.1 days, again, a very short period of time in obtaining legal services from Legal Aid for those Albertans who need it.

There was a question about the 24 weeks to trial I think it was and whether or not that was reasonable. There are a number of different factors that the member should know about lead times to getting to trial in various matters. In civil matters that might include the willingness of the parties to negotiate outside of going straight to trial. That might include things like delays caused by either party that might be attributable to the availability of a court date.

When it comes to the criminal justice system, there are different procedures that happen throughout the course of those criminal matters that both the Crown and the defence need to complete. Some of those may have an impact on the lead time of getting to trial. The important thing, once again, to highlight here is that out of the more than 100,000 matters that fall within the criminal justice system, a very, very small number ever run risk of falling beyond the Jordan timelines. It is something that I think we're profoundly proud of. It's a very low number. Our Crown prosecution service is working very hard to make sure that all of these issues are dealt with in a timely manner and that those delays don't impact the viability of a case.

There was a question about online traffic ticketing, and I think that the member was talking about the digital service that we provide.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Back over to the independent member.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair and through you to the minister. I would like to know about what he was just referring to with the online traffic ticketing, so if the minister could expound upon that, that would be great.

The last question was in regard to PAL. I know personally that I have waited six months for my PAL to come, and I'm currently waiting two months for my renewal. Again, if the minister could just explain a little bit more about the PAL program and how it relates federally as it goes through the RCMP and how it relates to the Alberta provincial firearms office, I would appreciate that. If the minister could expound on that.

Thank you.

8:45

Mr. Amery: Okay. Thank you, Member, for that follow-up. We were talking, just briefly before my time ran out, about the services that we provide to Albertans when it comes to the online traffic ticket system. You know, I think what I'd like to first begin with is stating that our primary focus is always on accessibility to the courts. I think that Albertans deserve a court system that is accessible no matter where they are and however they choose to access it. So what we've done is that we've developed a number of online initiatives that we call Justice digital, and some of that includes the ability to access your core through a number of different portals and ways. Some of that includes the ability to file court documents to initiate a core process to appear to complete procedural applications and, certainly, also even to argue applications. I know that the courts have adopted full-blown trials, really, when it comes to the online services.

The online traffic ticket system is another way that Albertans can access their courts, by being able to deal with their matters through a strictly online system, if they choose to. Once again, I'll say that because I think it's important. I think that some Albertans value the ability to access their court systems without having to travel down to a courthouse, and some of them still prefer the brick and mortar type approach, and that's fine, too. Both of them are available.

The question about the PAL licensing and whatnot: we're certainly optimistic that the Alberta chief firearms office will be able to take the number of applications that are backlogged within that process and help process them in a quicker way. When the Alberta chief firearms office was created, they inherited a number of backlogged applications, and they've begun processing them. As they've shored up their staff and as they have improved their processes, they've been able to process applications in a much more efficient manner. I mean, there is always going to be some relationship with . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll move over to the government side for their questions.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister: first of all, Minister, I want to thank you for your work for Albertans, and thanks to your team at the table as well. You and your team in the room: the work you do for Albertans is very much appreciated.

I see on page 97 of the Justice ministry business plan the mention of work under way to protect Alberta's constitutional rights. It is also the first outcome in your business plan, on page 99, to stand up for Albertans and make Albertans' voices heard in Ottawa. The policies and regulations set by the federal government significantly impact our province's resources development and utilization, and it is much critical that Alberta's government continues to advocate for policies that represent the interests of Albertans against the federal government's overreach.

For example, we saw the Federal Court ruling on the federal plastics legislation or the unconstitutionality of the federal government's destructive Bill C-69 legislation. It is clear our government strongly supports reducing plastic waste and keeping it out of landfills. We are committed to effective plastic management such as through extended producer responsibility. And as for Bill 69, Alberta is already reducing emissions, investing massively in new technologies, and growing our economy. What we need from the federal government is to come to the table in good faith and work with Alberta to align our mutual efforts, whether on emissions reductions, developing of our electricity grid and world-class energy sector, or on reducing plastic waste and keeping it out of landfills.

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

The Chair: Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Sabir: It's on the point of relevance. I'm unable to follow the line item, which paragraph from the business plan because from energy development to all kinds of things are talked about. I think the member should point to the exact provision, section.

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

Mr. Long: Thank you, Chair. I thank the member for jumping in. I wish that he would have been a little more patient, though. I believe this is a matter of debate because I believe the member is about to get to his question here, and if we can all just be a little more patient as we all have respectfully been patient with members of the opposition in their questions.

The Chair: I don't find this to be a point of order.
Member, please proceed.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, one of the key objectives in outcome 1 of the business plan states: "Take actions to stand up for Albertans, including improving firearms licence processing time and preparing legislation to protect provincial jurisdiction with respect to the regulation of firearms." Can the minister please elaborate on how the Justice ministry is advocating for Albertans against Ottawa's overreach through Budget 2024?

And could you please, Minister, elaborate the importance of the legal services in the Ministry of Justice? What funding increases have been provided for the division, as captured on page 89 of the fiscal plan?

Also, I see on page 5 of the '24-27 capital plan forecast that \$12 million is being invested over three years for courthouse videoconferencing expansions, with a \$4 million investment in 2024 and 2025. Is the videoconferencing expansion having any impact on court backlogs? Is the expansion in partnership with other ministries such as Infrastructure? Which courthouses in particular will receive videoconferencing equipment?

With that, Madam Chair, I will cede my time to MLA Petrovic.

The Chair: Please proceed, Member.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Madam Chair. To the minister, I would just like to thank you for all the work that you're doing, especially in the rural areas of Alberta. Thank you for that. I know you've expanded a little bit on some digital services and how they're vital for improving access for justice for Albertans. I'm excited to see a significant investment in the budget for digital services to help increase the efficiency of our courtrooms. Digital services help

Albertans living in remote communities or people who simply cannot attend court in person to still have their day in court without leaving their homes. As well, upgrading courthouses will improve Albertans' access to the justice system by adding modern courtrooms that are easier for Albertans to navigate.

I see on page 89 of the 2024-2027 fiscal plan that operating expenses for court and justice services are increasing to \$282 million, which will address the growth in volume of court cases and increased demand for new judicial positions and enable conducting criminal matters in a timely manner. This includes over \$3 million for digital modernization, including the co-ordination of major capital projects, enhancement of data security, and other technological needs. Outcome 3 of your business plan, on page 100, also speaks to supporting Albertans in their interactions with the justice system. Through you, the chair, can the minister please give a brief overview of Justice digital and the role it plays to increasing court efficiency, thereby increasing access to justice for all Albertans? From the \$282 million in funding increase on page 89, how much money is going towards the modernization of the courts?

I also see on page 116 of the fiscal plan that the Justice digital program continues to receive funding, with a cumulative \$16.5 million budgeted over the next three years, and on page 99 of the business plan one of your key objectives is to make Alberta's justice system fair and accessible, to continue to implement digital transformation and streamline processes. Can you expand on what kind of court and justice services are available online now and what additional online services you are looking at implementing through this funding?

8:55

From there, I'm hoping we can move on to Alberta drug treatment courts. Through you, Chair, to the minister, I see on page 100 of the business plan under outcome 3 that one of your initiatives to support your key objectives is to make the justice system more responsive to the needs of Albertans and to invest in Alberta's seven drug treatment courts.

I know that Alberta's drug treatment courts are recognized as successful alternatives to traditional court processes for individuals struggling with substance abuse issues. They have been proven to be associated with lower rates compared to traditional court processes. By addressing the root cause of criminal behaviour, such as addiction, these programs can help break the cycle of crime and incarceration, which can lead to long-term positive outcomes for the individual, their families, and the community at large.

Each participant's journey through the DTC is individualized to that person's need. They are enrolled in courses related to criminal and addictive thinking, relapse prevention, as well as a host of addiction services courses offered through Alberta Health Services. Through the chair, can the minister please expand on what sort of successes the Justice ministry is seeing with Alberta's drug treatment courts? Minister, I'm glad to see that we've expanded the drug treatment courts over the last four years for a total of seven. It's good news, especially for vulnerable Albertans experiencing challenges with drug addiction. How much funding are you investing towards drug treatment courts and other specialized courts in this budget?

I know that there are many complex problems that can lead individuals down a path of crime. As stated on page 100 of the business plan, Alberta Justice "continues to support and grow targeted programs, such as drug treatment courts, that provide wrap-around supports, while holding offenders accountable." Additionally, page 20 of the strategic plan discusses implementing strategies to make the justice system more responsive to the needs of Albertans, including the use of restorative justice practices,

mental health courts, and drug treatment courts. In 2024-2025 your ministry will invest \$4 million into funding Alberta's seven drug treatment courts. How will this funding be utilized, and what steps are you taking to ensure that drug treatment courts serve as effectively as possible to help Albertans?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

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

Mr. Amery: Thank you once again, Madam Chair, and thank you to the members for those important questions. I'll begin with the first set of questions provided by MLA Singh. The legal services division of the Ministry of Justice is continuing its constitutional challenges against the federal government's decision to label plastics as toxic substances. As you may recall, last November the Federal Court ruled that it was both unreasonable and unconstitutional of the federal government to designate all plastics as toxic substances. Of course, we are disappointed that the federal government has chosen to appeal that case and continues to overreach in their jurisdiction and impair investor confidence in this province and in the petrochemical sector.

We intend to participate in the appeal and address these ongoing constitutional challenges as federal overreach. As I've already mentioned as well, we will continue to defend our constitutional jurisdiction and our economy by intervening in federal and provincial cases as we deem appropriate. We'll continue to do that in every way. As you may recall from any number of different cases and court challenges over the past, the federal government has time and again overstepped its jurisdiction here in this province and time and again has been advised and directed by the court not to do that. We'll continue to stand up for the rights of Albertans and defend its economic prosperity.

In addition to some of that – and the question, really, was: can we elaborate on Ottawa's overreach and what Budget 2024 is doing? We will be investing an additional \$6.6 million dollars to support the Alberta chief firearms office, and that is the goal of administrating federal firearms legislation, supporting Alberta's lawful and law-abiding gun owners, and addressing the backlog of possession and acquisition licence applications, which I think was a question that was put forward by MLA Johnson earlier as well.

The ACFO will also leverage partnerships with other provincial chief firearms offices to advocate for improvements to the Canadian firearms program. It will also conduct public engagements with Alberta's firearms community and firearms businesses, shooting ranges and clubs, and other stakeholders to make sure that the educational awareness is provided and also to gather insights to make sure that we are kept well apprised of what is happening in that area.

Alberta was granted intervenor status in six Federal Court challenges to the May 2020 order in council that categorized certain firearms as prohibited firearms. However, as you may recall, in October 2023 the Federal Court dismissed the challenges and upheld the constitutionality of the regulation. Five of the six litigants have appealed the Federal Court decision to the Federal Court of Appeal, with the matter before the courts. Alberta does intend, once again, to intervene on administrative law issues and intervene on constitutional issues as raised by the appeal.

There was a discussion by the hon. member about funding increases in legal services and the legal services division. I do want to highlight that the legal services division is, in fact, the legal adviser to the government of Alberta and supports work all across the government, including defending Alberta, once again, in those constitutional and Aboriginal law and nonconstitutional matters,

advising the Crown and heads of all departments on matters of law, supporting priority projects across government, responding to emergency situations, and drafting all government bills, regulations, and statutory instruments.

New initiatives require additional resources. The division is receiving a \$4.4 million, or 9 per cent, increase and seven new FTEs in Budget 2024, which will allow them to address various pressures that they're experiencing, including additional workload associated with the new mandated initiatives; the emerging complexities of files, which continue to become more and more complicated; recruitment and retention; and greater demands on the Legislative Counsel office, requiring additional resources: legal officers, legal assistants, paralegals, and just the general support network which lawyers need to do their work.

The hon. member talked a little bit about our capital investment in videoconferencing, and I thank you for that. I actually think that is one of the fundamentally most important things that we will be doing in this ministry as time goes on. Videoconferencing has a number of different benefits for Alberta courts. It eliminates the need to travel. It cuts travel time for both staff and for people accessing their courts, which saves taxpayer dollars and reduces wait time for court cases. I think that is a truly important thing that we're doing. It increases the efficiency of our courts because it is easier to schedule court dates, and it's easier to deal with matters if we can do so online as well. That gives another option to both the courts and Albertans in accessing their courts and having their legal matters addressed. Court proceedings themselves can be conducted more efficiently if the people attend remotely. It increases the number of court proceedings that can happen in a given day, and it reduces backlogs. All of those are really good things. Those are all good-news stories for Alberta Justice.

I also want to highlight something else, and that is that by using videoconferencing, it can also reduce the toll and the impact on people going through the court system such as children and protected persons, individuals who are uncomfortable with having to go into a courtroom setting, because that can be intimidating to some people, and allow, you know, some of our more vulnerable populations to testify from familiar environments rather than having to travel and do so in a courtroom. I think that's an important benefit to shoring up our videoconferencing system. It allows inmates to appear from the institution that they're in, eliminating, once again, the time and cost of transporting them to and from the courthouse.

The member mentioned a little bit about Alberta Infrastructure. Yes, Alberta Infrastructure is a key partner in rolling out these technology upgrades. Currently 169 courtrooms have installed videoconferencing capability, and 94 courtrooms remain to be upgraded. This year we will plan to upgrade 11 to 16 courtrooms, in addition to the ones that we already have, with videoconferencing capabilities.

9:05

MLA Petrovic, Madam Chair, spoke a little bit about justice digital services, and I wanted to talk a little bit about that in the remaining time that I have. Justice digital is a suite of interconnected digital services that are transforming legacy processes and modernizing court operations. It allows for better service to Albertans, improving workloads for staff, and cutting costs for the province.

We're using a number of teams to develop these services. We are modernizing our courtroom services through digital applications and improved technological infrastructure, and that will make court justice services both more user friendly and efficient for all users.

That includes the staff that we have within our courthouses as well as the Albertans who are accessing their courts.

The surrogate digital service provides, for example, lawyers who are representing family members with a user-friendly way to apply virtually online for an order called a grant of probate or a grant of administration. This used to be done through a stack of forms that you would have to physically carry to the courthouse. The benefit today is that you can do that by doing it online, and it saves in time and costs. The forms have been modernized in a way that cuts down the level of work that is required to apply for one of these grants. I think, again, that is important both from a cost-saving perspective as well as an efficiency perspective. I think that, once again, my preference is always to make things more accessible and easier for Albertans, but we can also save money doing that as well, and I think that when we achieve both of those, we all win in this. It's very important to see that happening.

In the remaining time, Madam Chair, I'll address the funding increase and what we're doing to improve access to the courts through justice digital. Once again, Budget 2024 will allocate an increased investment of \$5.5 million in this year alone to improve access to our courts through the digital transformation process. Services that have always been provided through traditional channels like paper-based filings and whatnot are being modernized now so that we can do so wholly online.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll move back over to the Official Opposition.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. In the last block most of my questions about estimates were not answered, so I would appreciate it if the minister will undertake to provide those answers in writing. I do understand that my questions are brief and that the answers can get longer. It's difficult to answer everything in those given 10 minutes.

I will move on to line item 4, operation and bail prosecutions. Through you, Madam Chair, there is a slight increase, but there are many issues with respect to bail. The law, as it stands now, gives Albertans the right to be brought before a justice of the peace or a judge for bail within 24 hours, but there are huge delays, and the accused are getting the runaround.

[Ms Goehring in the chair]

A simple question, through you, Madam Deputy Chair: have you heard about these concerns? If so, what are you doing to address those delays? Also, the bail office has two shifts currently. Can it be open, I guess, for 24 hours? Lately the UCP has talked about bail a fair bit, throwing everything on the federal government, so I did reach out to people to learn a little bit more about it.

A further question: in rural communities are these numbers higher compared to major cities, where the department is unable to bring people before a justice of the peace or a judge within 24 hours? What is the government doing to ensure that the accused in rural areas get the same service as they would in cities?

I guess I'm still staying on this topic. There was a 2023 Auditor General report that also talked about this bail process, that there are still Albertans who do not get the opportunity to get before a judge or a JP within 24 hours. Line item 4.2: again the question is about delays. You earlier mentioned that there were three Jordan applications granted. I still think there are far too many. But the question is: how many cases are there which are past the 18-month or 30-month time frame set by the Jordan decision and therefore may be eligible to make a Jordan application? I'm looking for the number of cases, not the Jordan applications.

Also, with respect to bail in particular, I think that for in-custody matters, practically speaking, Minister, it can take weeks to receive an early case resolution. For instance, if someone at Calgary Remand Centre wants to plead out, they would request the Crown's position, which may take considerable time. Once they know the Crown's position, scheduling in sentencing court can then take more than a week because sentencing courts are busy and there is no availability. In short, setting bail for an in-custody matter can take weeks. What about the rule of law and that requirement of 24 hours for a bail hearing? It seems like the ministry is just doing lip service to the accused's Charter rights.

Line item 4.3: there is a slight increase.

Mr. Boitchenko: Point of order.

The Deputy Chair: A point of order has been called.

Go ahead, Member.

Mr. Boitchenko: Yeah. I believe it's a point of order, 23(i). The member opposite is falsely implying lip service, particularly that the government's ministry office has ulterior motives. I'll probably just stop right there. I just want to make sure that we stick to the estimates and financial planning rather than implying certain services, including lip service.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

A member from the opposition?

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's not a point of order. Yes, my question is: is the government only paying lip service to the accused's Charter right? That's the question, and that's what I'm asking the minister.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

I don't find this to be a point of order. Thank you.

Continue.

Mr. Sabir: Line item 4.3: there is an increase. Are we seeing an increase in caseload? What's the reason for this increase?

Again, line 4.4: there is a slight increase. It will be helpful if you can describe what the reason is for that.

Line item 5.1 . . .

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much, hon. member. The time has ended.

I will now pass it over to the minister.

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair and once again to the hon. member for his insight and questions. The first I want to address are the questions involving the Jordan applications and the Jordan questions that the member has. I think it's important to note that, once again, we have over 100,000 cases that entered the criminal justice system in 2022-23, and of those, there were three successful Jordan applications. This is a remarkable improvement to the information that I was able to pull up, and that is the 2017, for example, successful Jordan applications, which were in the double digits. I think that is something to be concerned about.

But when we talk about whether or not Jordan applies or where and how Jordan applies and where the member asks about a specific count of what cases are currently past the Jordan thresholds, namely the 18- or 30-month timelines, I would have to say that the member knows full well, again, as a lawyer and as an experienced one that it is simply not the case that I can speculate on the number of cases that have passed the timeline and are within some concern of a

Jordan application, and that is because the vast majority of cases experience some delay that is not attributable to the Crown. To give you a number about which of those cases are past the 18- or 30-month timeline without going into further detail about the reasons for why a case may be past those timelines would be, I think, inappropriate and misleading, and I'm not prepared to do that.

9:15

I will say that there are many cases where a file may experience delay, including factors that are not attributable to the Crown. This includes things like the delay that is created by defence counsel or one that might be a delay created by the individual accused, or it could be the availability of a witness, and I think all of those things do not threaten the Jordan timelines but create delay.

But, you know, once again, in a rare case when a Jordan application is made, the court will assess the file and determine what portion of the delay is attributable to the Crown, if any at all, and whether it was reasonable. Based on the number of successful Jordan applications that we had in 2022-23, I would submit to you that we are doing remarkably well in prosecuting these cases in a timely manner.

The member made a comment earlier about the bail system in this country and my desire to throw everything on the feds. Well, the member knows and committee members should know that bail and bail reform is exclusively within the jurisdiction of the federal government. What is more concerning is that the members of the opposition have not joined in our repeated calls in advocating for changes to bail reform in this country, to improvement in the bail system, and to protecting law-abiding Albertans.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll move back over to the government side.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Chair, and through you, thank you to the minister and his staff and officials that are with us this evening to talk about this budget and the plan moving forward for this ministry. I'll get right into a few questions tonight. I had a bit of time, almost two years, that I sat on the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls working group. With that history and some of the things that members of that group shared with me, their personal stories, I see on page 97 of the minister's business plan that the ministry is collaborating with partners to develop alternatives to traditional judicial processes, including diversion and restorative justice programs.

I understand that these programs use a more holistic approach to justice to address the root causes of crime and repair harms caused by conflicts in our communities. It's clear. It literally captures one of the objectives under outcome 3 on page 100, to implement these strategies to make the justice system more responsive to the needs of Albertans, including the use of restorative justice practices to help victims, offenders, and communities affected by conflict or crime to reach reconciliation.

To be successful, restorative justice programs involve collaboration from the community, which has proven to be highly effective in addressing crime, repairing harm, and promoting healing. I was hoping the minister could explain to the committee how funding in Budget 2024 will support the development of alternatives to the traditional judicial process, including diversion and restorative justice programs. How many providers are currently funded to support restorative justice work across the province?

From there, I'd like to get into a little bit of the firearm discussion and the Alberta chief firearms office. You know, it's no secret – I

hope it's no secret – to Albertans that our federal Liberal government is more interested in targeting law-abiding Canadians rather than criminals who recklessly endanger public safety while ignoring all laws. I've yet to meet anyone in my riding that thinks that gang members are going to follow the gun laws that are being put on all Canadians, but inevitably that's where we're at. One thing that I do have constituents bring up is the need for more boots on the ground to ensure that only those fit to possess a firearm responsibly are licensed and to stop the flow of illegal guns at our border.

Starting on page 97 of the business plan, standing up for law-abiding firearms owners is a prevalent theme. There is mention of the work being done to challenge the lawfulness and constitutionality of the federal firearm prohibitions legislation while ensuring Alberta's firearms community is supported and public safety is addressed. Outcome 1 of the business plan on page 99 touches on the key objective to take actions to stand up for Albertans, including improving firearms licence processing time and preparing legislation to protect provincial jurisdiction with respect to the regulation of firearms. I'm just hoping the minister could share a little bit more about that plan.

Key objective 1.1 states that the ministry is taking action "to stand up for Albertans, including improving firearms licence processing times." In fact, in 2024-25 Alberta's government is investing over \$6.6 million to support the mandate of the Alberta chief firearms office, including advocating for federal legislation that supports law-abiding firearms owners. How is this funding going to help advocate for and protect the rights of law-abiding firearms owners in Alberta and in West Yellowhead? This is a very big conversation in my riding. Could you also elaborate on how the Alberta chief firearms office is supporting lawful firearms owners in Alberta while also securing public safety? As we've heard, public safety is a key point of interest for many members of this committee.

I'm not sure if I'll get all the way through this, Minister, but on page 99 of the ministry business plan performance metric 1(a) tracks the percentage of possession and acquisition licences, both new and renewal, for Albertans that are processed within a target timeline. Can the minister please explain what factors can delay approvals from happening within the target timeline?

I will pass it over to the minister.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to the minister for his response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. Like the member correctly identified, restorative justice is very important to me. It's a transformative approach that aims to repair the harms that are caused by conflict. The intention is to look to different ways than the traditional courtrooms and prosecutions and whatnot to bringing victims, offenders, and the community together to help discuss the impact of a conflict and ensure that offenders take accountability for their actions. This process fosters a more collaborative approach by putting the victim and offender together with the support of the community as they work together to resolve their differences.

The principles of restorative justice have been, I think, well proven to provide an effective alternative to the formal court process and provide individuals with a more holistic and inclusive approach to justice that has had and will continue, in my view, to have positive impacts for individuals and their communities. That is why I believe that this is such an important investment in this vital program.

Budget 2024 invests \$3.3 million towards the development of a new restorative justice strategy and program. In 2022 Alberta Justice approved the development of a provincial restorative justice strategy and program. The work is under way in this and will include and has included extensive consultation with Indigenous communities and service providers in the development of standards of practice, qualifications, administrative and funding structure oversight, referral mechanism and evaluation processes. I want to reiterate to the member, through you, Madam Chair, that our government is absolutely committed to delivering a responsive justice system that reflects both what I think is culturally appropriate and the beliefs and practices of Albertans.

9:25

Alberta currently funds 20 restorative justice service providers situated in diverse locations all across the province. They range from municipal to rural areas to Indigenous communities. This is really the importance of our restorative justice program. Having a number of different ways to address justice in this province is my vision for how I'd like this mandate to take place. I know that there are many different ways to deal with some of the issues that fall within this portfolio, and I want to make sure that Albertans have every possible option in dealing with their justice-related matters. This is one way of doing that.

You spoke a little bit about the Alberta chief firearms office, and I want to reiterate what you stressed time and again. The Alberta chief firearms office is there to support lawful and law-abiding Albertans in responsible gun ownership. I think that some of the discussion here has strayed away from that in terms of alleging or equating gun ownership with gun violence. Well, we know for a fact that those who are following the rules of the Alberta chief firearms office and working with that office and applying for gun ownership, legal gun ownership, are not the ones who are committing the gun-related crimes. Those guns are being obtained through illegal means, and they are being obtained from sources that are far beyond the legal venues that the Alberta chief firearms office and responsible gun owners and stores provide. I think that it's important to differentiate that on the record. We absolutely and unequivocally support responsible, law-abiding gun owners in this province and will continue to do that.

The Alberta chief firearms office provides a number of different services. Firstly, it has processed – as of January 2024 Alberta has 355,000 individuals licensed to use firearms. This office provides public safety services such as application reviews; background checks; inspections and licensing of firearms businesses, shooting ranges, and shooting clubs; approving the firearms purchases, sales; and assisting with police affidavit requests in support of prosecuting firearms crimes. It does a whole number of good things for this province, and we're very proud to have that office here.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will move over to the Official Opposition.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Chair. I do have one follow-up question about bail. As I understand, since the federal government is not doing anything about it, the question I have is – you have no desire to implement that 24-hour time frame that is stipulated in the law right now, which means that the accused will continue to not get bail hearings within 24 hours. You can comment on that in the next block.

Through you, Chair, about line item 5.1. What agencies are included in it, and where can I find information about all of them?

Line 5.2. There is an increase. You mentioned earlier that there will be six new employees there, so what will the rest of increase go for? Are there backlogs? What is the caseload like?

Line item 5.3. Can you provide the breakdown of expenses? What amount is going specifically to safety initiatives?

Moving on to line 5.4, through you, Madam Chair. That's the line item which cuts Legal Aid by \$33 million. It's a huge cut, so I will ask the question again. There was a 2018 governance agreement. Through the Chair, Minister, do you have any intention of paying up the arrears owed to Legal Aid pursuant to the 2018 governance agreement? Through you, Madam Chair, you also mentioned that there is \$70 million in reserve. Help us understand how that works and where that money is sitting in this budget. Will it be accessible to Legal Aid should they need it?

Madam Chair, another question. Earlier the minister mentioned that eligibility for legal aid changed after, I guess, the criminal defence lawyers walked out of the courtrooms and now this cut. Did you consult with lawyer organizations about these reductions? First question: did you consult with the Criminal Defence Lawyers Association (Calgary)? Did you consult with the Criminal Trial Lawyers Association in Edmonton? Through you, Madam Chair, the third question: did you consult with the Red Deer Criminal Defence Lawyers Association? Fourth question: did you consult with the Southern Alberta Defence Lawyers' Association? Have any of those organizations reached out to you in relation to the legal aid cuts?

Through you, Madam Chair, Legal Aid used to have an in-person office at the Calgary courthouse that was shut down during COVID, but it's not there anymore. Now the individuals applying for legal aid have to wait on the phone, sometimes for more than an hour, just to apply for legal aid or just to ask about the application, whether they are eligible or not, which, again, is hindering Albertans' access to legal aid and justice. The question I have is: Minister, what's your plan to address that? Will we see that office reopened any time soon?

Also, Madam Chair, the Legal Aid office doesn't have an in-person intake even at their office. If you go to the office, they again refer you to the phone, and there are huge delays, wait times, on phone lines, two to three hours sometimes, just to see if you qualify. The question I have is: Minister, do you see that as an issue? If so, do you plan to address that?

Another question, a related question. The minister was mentioning that justice should not be out of reach for anyone, but the fact is that there are many Albertans who cannot access justice. So, Minister, the question I have, through the chair: do you think cutting the budget helps us in facilitating access to justice for all Albertans in any way, shape, or manner? Also, according to the Legal Aid 2022-23 annual report 35,000 individuals were served in family cases and 47,000 in criminal cases. That number is going up. How will this cut impact those . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you once again to the member for those questions. I'll begin by talking a little bit about the bail question that the member has been focusing on. Once again, our bail offices are open 18 out of 24 hours a day, and the vast, vast majority of people who are charged will receive a bail hearing within 24 hours. There will be exceptions to that when somebody is unable to – for example, for medical reasons – attend a bail hearing. But for those who are able and willing, the bail office is processing those matters within the timelines in a vast, vast majority of cases. So I think that it is inaccurate to suggest that the

bail office is not addressing the number of matters that are coming before them in a timely manner.

The other thing that I want to highlight and note – and the member has made a great deal about the independence of the justice system and the fairness and equality and whatnot. Well, the member also will know and should know and all members should know that the bail hearing office forms part of the judiciary, and there is a certain level of independent that takes place as well. The judiciary is responsible for scheduling bail hearings, and we certainly would not interfere with judicial independence.

There are a number of different things that can happen when a matter comes before a justice of the peace for an initial bail review. Some of those are adjourned by the individual accused for whatever reason. Some of those are adjourned by consent. That is something that is not necessarily – that doesn't impact the speed or the efficiency of the bail hearing office. The vast majority of those who are looking to receive a bail hearing within 24 hours will in fact receive it. That is, once again, misinformation being spread by the member, Madam Chair, that the bail office . . .

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

The Chair: We've had a point of order called.

9:35

Mr. Sabir: Under 23(h), (i) and (j). I asked a specific question about the bail system, what's happening, and their own report says that not all people get an opportunity to go before a justice of the peace or judge in 24 hours. The minister is just throwing across allegations that I'm spreading misinformation. That should be beneath the minister. He should know his file. He should know what justice system is going through in terms of bail.

The Chair: Thank you, Member. Thank you so much. I don't find this to be a point of order. It's a matter of debate.

Please proceed, Minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. The question was why individuals are not receiving bail hearings within 24 hours, and we said that the vast majority are subject to some health issues and other related matters that might impede on someone's ability to have a bail hearing within 24 hours, that Albertans are receiving their bail hearings or bail reviews within the time limits that they are afforded. Once again, I am just correcting the misinformation that the member was alleging earlier, by saying that bail hearings in this province are being processed within the 24-hour time period subject to the exceptions that I spoke about earlier.

The member also spoke a great deal about legal aid. Once again, I want to talk a little bit about that. Budget 2024 allocates \$110 million to Legal Aid in this province, and the addition of an increase in the financial eligibility guidelines to the \$30,000 figure means that more Albertans, a vast number more than previous numbers would allow, will qualify or fall within the eligibility guidelines to get a lawyer and qualify for representation through legal aid. This is wonderful news, members of the committee. This is a substantial increase to the eligibility guidelines, which, again, improves access to legal aid and provides for more people who will now become eligible to receive legal services in this province, especially for lower income Albertans. The \$110 million that is allocated in Budget 2024 is once again in addition to the projection and the forecast of over \$70 million that Legal Aid currently holds in reserves. I think that's an important factor. The member has called it a cut and said that they may not have the funding that Legal Aid will require, but the fact of the matter is that Legal Aid will have access in this year alone to \$110 million from Budget 2024 along

with the forecasted \$70 million that they currently have in deferred revenue. That number far exceeds anything that Legal Aid might need this year based on past years.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll move over to the government side for their next questions. Go ahead.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister: first of all, thank you for all the great work that your ministry and your team is doing in Alberta. With that, I have a few questions I would like to ask through the chair.

The operating expense for Alberta Crown prosecution services for 2024 and 2025 is \$139 million. According to page 89 of the fiscal plan this allocation will help address safety in Alberta's major urban centres and elsewhere in the province. Additionally, the ministry is developing specialized prosecution services to detain and effectively process violent criminals and gang members. Given that public safety is a top issue for many Albertans, not just in our big cities but also in the small communities and rural areas as well, how will this funding specifically address safety in Alberta? Looking at the development of specialized prosecution services to detain and prosecute violent criminals and gang members, how will this process with specialized prosecution services work? How will it maintain due process while also expanding the process to keep violent criminals and gang members off our streets and out of our communities?

Further to that, what long-term action is being taken by Justice and other collaborating ministries to address gang violence and keep our streets and communities safe? The next question would be regarding online services, if I may, through the chair. The availability of the online services helps improve access to justice for Albertans and supports a fair justice system by eliminating in-person visits to courthouses, thereby freeing up court times for serious matters that require trial and sentencing.

The advanced projects and traffic office handles online traffic ticket matters by allowing Albertans to pay traffic tickets online rather than in person, as I mentioned. This is not only convenient for Albertans, but it also takes extra pressures off our court system. Performance measures in 2(b) shows the number of traffic ticket matters handled online by the advanced projects and traffic office, which in 2022 and 2023 handled over 91,000 traffic ticket matters. That's a truly impressive number.

What has been the impact in eliminating extra pressure on the court system by using online services like this, and are there other processes that you are working on digitalizing for Albertans? Your targets over the next three years show a 10 per cent increase in 2024 and 2025, followed by a 5 per cent increase in 2025 and 2026 and, furthermore, a 2 per cent increase in 2026 and 2027. How are these specific targets set, and what steps is the ministry taking to accomplish them? Okay.

I'll finish up with the triage practice protocol question, which I think is important right now because it's – I'll let you answer that, but I was going to share my opinion on it.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. The member highlights some important things that we're doing in Alberta Justice that I am tremendously proud of. The first question was about the increase to the Alberta Crown prosecution service. I think first and foremost it highlights this government's approach: tough-on-crime stance and making sure that we hold criminals accountable for the crimes that they commit here. The funding supports the operation

of the Alberta Crown prosecution service, which is responsible for prosecuting crimes under the Criminal Code and the Youth Criminal Justice Act and, of course, provincial regulatory offences.

Crown prosecutors prioritize the safety of Albertans and work to ensure that those who commit crimes are held accountable for their actions and face penalties and consequences for their actions. The work of these prosecutors is one part of the interconnected criminal justice system. Obviously, there's work that has to be done with the local police detachments, co-operation with the communities as well. Those are all important components of a strong and healthy criminal justice system.

9:45

When we talk a little bit about some of the things that led to the need and desire to look to different ways of approaching crime in some of the, you know, more prevalent areas, we saw that crime in the Edmonton and downtown Calgary cores was increasing at an alarming rate. To address these challenges with our communities that are facing these crimes, Alberta worked to create the specialized and targeted prosecution teams and revise the bail protocol to help protect Albertans from these violent crimes.

The creation of the targeted prosecution teams, as I mentioned earlier, was done to allow a unique set of prosecutors to focus on a particular area, and with that, the experience and the familiarity that comes with that type of work and the close co-operation with law enforcement has and will continue to yield good results for us.

It is a new program that has not been done before. We certainly do have prosecutors that specialize in other areas, but this is the first time that we've had targeted urban prosecution teams focusing on one particular area. I've always said that when you have a prosecutor who is familiar with the community, who is familiar with law enforcement patrolling these areas and with the actors who continue to target and prey on the vulnerable in these communities, those prosecutors will become really good at honing in on certain issues very quickly. With those efficiencies and improvements, we'll see better results. I'm proud of that, and I think it's working very well.

In addition to that, the Calgary and Edmonton Crown prosecution services are putting together teams with these various expertise to focus on crime in the two downtown cores. Again, that is beneficial for all.

Minister Ellis and I, as you referred to earlier, have a mandate to ensure that violent crime in this province is effectively dealt with, that criminals are detained and prosecuted, and Crown prosecutors, while they're already responsible for prosecuting violent crimes under the Criminal Code, are now working with a revised bail practice protocol to take a hard-line approach when they sense or identify individuals who have been charged with repeat or violent offences. You know, we're looking at the results of this. This work is, of course, in progress, having been announced in September 2023. I'm excited to see the benchmarks and the metrics that result from that.

The member talked a little bit about online services and the traffic ticket digital service. The number that was mentioned by the hon. member was 91,000 traffic ticket matters processed in 2022-23. The member is correct. This is a remarkable number, and it goes to show that this system is working and is working well. It provides people with a single portal where they can manage their traffic ticket matters, including making full or partial fine payments, requesting time to pay, entering a plea of not guilty, resolution discussions with the Crown, and requesting and reviewing disclosure. All of these

services are available to Albertans 24/7, and the traditional means of dealing with your ticket still exist as well.

Thank you.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll go back over to the Official Opposition.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. I will continue with legal aid because . . .

Mrs. Petrovic: Point of order. I understand that we're trying to get some social media clips here, but the member opposite is persistent in the needless repetition of the same question that the ministry has already provided an answer to three times.

Ms Goehring: He hasn't even asked the question yet. He just said that he's talking about legal aid, and I would argue that this is absolutely not a point of order but perhaps an attempt to delay the member's opportunity to speak.

The Chair: I'll just finish up by saying that I don't feel that this is a point of order at this moment.

Member, if you would please proceed, that would be great. If the minister chooses to answer, then he will or won't.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you. The minister said that a \$110 million budget is wonderful news even though it cuts funding by \$33 million. The minister continues to talk about \$70 million. That \$70 million is nowhere in these estimates. So just a clear description of what that \$70 million is, where that sits right now, and will legal aid have access to that fund when they need it?

A second question, relating to the justice system again, and it will also bring in cuts to legal aid funding. The Bar Association in one of their studies, dated October 29, 2021, say that the Alberta justice system is slow and inefficient. Can the minister share how this cut to legal aid will impact the already struggling system? When people don't have counsel, things get delayed in the court system.

There are many questions that I have already asked about, the consultation on this matter, and I have not received any answers. I would request, through the chair, that the minister undertake to provide those answers in writing for the question that he did not have the opportunity to address.

Line item 6, Alberta Human Rights. The question is: will there be any grants for human rights education? The UCP cut funding of the Human Rights Commission from \$1 million to exactly zero in 2020 and '19, and I don't see any increase in this budget. Through the chair, the rise in hate rhetoric has increased, and there is an increase in hate-related crimes, so why cut the education side of this budget?

The next question relates to the government of Alberta fiscal plan 2024-27. Under Keeping Albertans Safe and Secure, this talks about that the justice system is "accessible, affordable and efficient." Again, I will ask how cutting legal aid funding by \$33 million makes it efficient, affordable, or accessible.

Through you, Chair, while I was looking at the bail process, I also found out that in the bail courtroom in Calgary there is no duty counsel, meaning that legal aid doesn't fund that position, so the accused are expected to run their own bail hearings, I guess. The question I have, through the chair: are you aware that there is also no duty counsel in a sentencing court? Again, the accused are expected to be self-represented there. A question, through the chair: if legal aid had more funding, can they have duty counsel

in those courtrooms? That will help us avoid delays in those courtrooms.

Another question, through you, Chair: what's the wait time, like, the average wait time, for the appointment of counsel for an accused in a custody matter?

Moving on to page 162, schedule 23, it talks about full-time equivalents for Justice. The change is 245 FTEs. I believe the minister mentioned 110 will go to the courts for support staff and that six will go to the medical examiner's office. If you can provide details on where the other remaining FTEs will be allocated, that would be great.

There are some more questions, but I think that's all the time we have for this. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

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

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair, and once again thank you to the hon. member for the questioning. The issue of legal aid we've spoken about, I think, in great detail. Budget 2024 does in fact allocate \$110 million to legal aid.

9:55

In addition to that, Legal Aid has deferred reserves of \$70 million. Now the member asked, Madam Chair: when will that be available to Legal Aid? Well, that is, in fact, with Legal Aid, and that's the issue here. Legal Aid currently possesses the forecasted \$70 million, which will be visible as a deferred reserve in Legal Aid Alberta's 2023-24 annual report when it is published, and I anticipate that to come out here soon.

In addition to that, they are also receiving from the government of Alberta \$110 million through Budget 2024 with projected expenditures far less than those numbers combined. There will be no anticipation of any reduction in services, no impact to services, no impact to eligibility except for improved financial eligibility guidelines, which means that more Albertans – not fewer, as the member might be alleging – will qualify for legal aid and no reduction in the available funding that Legal Aid will have.

All of this is a good-news story that the member is seeking to spin into a negative one, but the fact of the matter is that Legal Aid Alberta is well funded and will . . .

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

The Chair: Hon. member, I'm sorry; I don't find this to be a point of order.

Minister, please proceed.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Sabir: Madam Chair . . .

The Chair: Member, I'm sorry. I've given my ruling, Member. Minister, please proceed.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate that the hon. member is not getting the answer that he wants, but it is the answer, in fact, and I think that's important as well to note for members of the committee.

Mr. Sabir: It's a point of order, false motives.

Mr. Amery: Well, I will continue to answer the question for you, Madam Chair. There will be no impact to the Legal Aid delivery service model.

The member asked about the average wait time for Legal Aid to connect individuals with lawyers. That is, as we mentioned earlier, approximately 4.1 days though there are some issues that may influence and impact that, but the average published by Legal Aid is 4.1 days.

The discussion that the member mentioned was in relation to the Human Rights Commission and the alleged reduction in funding to the Human Rights Commission. Once again, I'd like to clarify for members of the committee that the Human Rights Commission has the human rights education and multiculturalism fund, which is described in Budget 2024 as well. This is a fund that operates under the authority of the Human Rights Act. The purpose of the fund was to promote equality, increase understanding and acceptance of Alberta's diverse and cultural composition, and to inform Albertans about their rights and responsibilities under the Alberta Human Rights Act.

The Alberta Human Rights Commission proposes a five-year plan to draw down the human rights education and multiculturalism fund. There is approximately 4 and a half million dollars remaining in the fund that can only be used for human rights educational programs or support to the community. The drawdown plan is part of the ministry nonvoted request and will start on April 1, 2024, and complete on March 31, 2029. This plan includes developing an online learning management system, updating existing education resources to reflect legislative and other legal challenges, translating information and resources into languages other than English, developing a navigator program for community organizations, and offering a new grants program which will prioritize systemic issues and result in lasting change, improved access, and full equality for all Albertans. Four hundred thousand dollars will be drawn down in 2024-25, with the remaining to be drawn down over the next four years.

The member was talking about the role of the Alberta Human Rights Commission and what role it might play in some of the work that it is doing to help educate Albertans about some of the prevalent issues that we are dealing with right now, and the Alberta human rights multiculturalism fund is certainly well intended in intention to do that.

Finally, I'll try to answer the question about the Justice FTE increase. Budget 2024 reflects an increase of 245 FTEs for a total of 3,425 FTEs for the ministry; 230 of the increase in the FTEs will go to court and justice services and 15 in strategy, support, and integrated initiatives for the ministry.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll move over to the government side.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Madam Chair. I know that the constituents of Leduc-Beaumont will be very happy that more Albertans will be eligible for Legal Aid under this budget. I'd like to thank the minister for his time.

The Chair: Thank you, everyone.

Some committee members may recall that during consideration of the 2023-24 main estimates we attempted to secure ASL interpretation services for the committee's meeting with the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services. Unfortunately, due to short notice we were unable to secure this service. However, I'm pleased to advise that if it is the will of the committee, we'll anticipate that we can have ASL interpretation services available for at least a portion of our two-part meeting with

the minister this year on March 20. We need to wrap things up quickly here, so I'll simply ask if any committee members object to the provision of an ASL translator should it be available for our meetings on Wednesday with Seniors, Community and Social Services.

All right. I'd like to remind committee members that we're scheduled to meet tomorrow, March 19, at 9 a.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Health.

Thank you, everyone, and have a good night.

[The committee adjourned at 10:01 p.m.]

