



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Children and Family Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

Thursday, March 21, 2024
9 a.m.

Transcript No. 31-1-13

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

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC), Chair
Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP), Deputy Chair
Irwin, Janis, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood (NDP), * Acting Deputy Chair

Batten, Diana M.B., Calgary-Acadia (NDP)
Boitchenko, Andrew, Drayton Valley-Devon (UC)
Long, Martin M., West Yellowhead (UC)
Lunty, Brandon G., Leduc-Beaumont (UC)
Metz, Luanne, Calgary-Varsity (NDP)
Petrovic, Chelsae, Livingstone-Macleod (UC)
Singh, Peter, Calgary-East (UC)
Tejada, Lizette, Calgary-Klein (NDP)
Wiebe, Ron, Grande Prairie-Wapiti (UC)**
Wright, Justin, Cypress-Medicine Hat (UC)***

* substitution for Nicole Goehring

** substitution for Martin Long

*** substitution for Chelsae Petrovic

Also in Attendance

Arcand-Paul, Brooks, Edmonton-West Henday (NDP)
Hayter, Julia K.U., Calgary-Edgemont (NDP)

Support Staff

Shannon Dean, KC	Clerk
Teri Cherkewich	Law Clerk
Trafton Koenig	Senior Parliamentary Counsel
Philip Massolin	Clerk Assistant and Director of House Services
Nancy Robert	Clerk of <i>Journals</i> and Committees
Abdul Bhurgri	Research Officer
Christina Williamson	Research Officer
Warren Huffman	Committee Clerk
Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
Aaron Roth	Committee Clerk
Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications
Christina Steenbergen	Supervisor of Communications Services
Shannon Parke	Communications Consultant
Tracey Sales	Communications Consultant
Janet Schweigel	Director of Parliamentary Programs
Amanda LeBlanc	Deputy Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Children and Family Services

Hon. Searle Turton, Minister

Leann Wagner, Assistant Deputy Minister, Child Intervention

9 a.m.

Thursday, March 21, 2024

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

Ministry of Children and Family Services
Consideration of Main Estimates

The Chair: I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, when we come to you, if you would kindly introduce the folks with you at the table, that would be great. We'll start to my right.

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

Mr. Wiebe: Ron Wiebe, MLA, Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

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

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

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

Mr. Turton: Yes. Good morning, everyone. My name is Searle Turton, Minister of Children and Family Services. To my right I have Deputy Minister Lisa Sadownik and senior financial officer Darren Baptista. To my left I have ADM Leann Wagner and, to her left, ADM Joni Brodziak.

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

Ms Hayter: Julia Hayter, MLA for Calgary-Edgemont.

Member Irwin: Good morning. Janis Irwin, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

The Chair: My name is Jackie Lovely. I'm the MLA for the Camrose constituency and the chair of this committee.

I don't see that we have any members participating remotely, so we'll head to the substitutions. Member Irwin is substituting as deputy chair for Nicole Goehring, Mr. Wright will be substituting for Mrs. Petrovic later this morning, at 10:30, and Mr. Wiebe is substituting for Mr. Long.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business. Microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed 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. A final reminder: please put your cellphones or other devices on silent.

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Children and Family Services 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 the minister and the member agree. If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are

deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee I'll call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting. Does anyone object to having a break today? Fantastic.

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 the microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Pages are available to deliver notes or other material between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table.

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

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

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

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

I'd now like to invite the Minister of Children and Family Services to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes, sir.

Mr. Turton: Excellent. Well, thank you so much, Madam Chair. I'm pleased this morning to present the Budget 2024 estimates and the 2024-27 business plan for Children and Family Services. Joining me this morning, I have Deputy Minister Lisa Sadownik; former assistant deputy minister for the child intervention delivery, Leann Wagner; assistant deputy minister for preventive family services, Joni Brodziak; and senior financial officer Darren Baptista. In the gallery: our assistant deputy minister for Indigenous partnerships and strategic services, Cynthia Dunnigan; assistant deputy minister for child intervention delivery, David Wheeler; and acting assistant deputy minister of regulatory compliance, quality assurance, and business supports, Shauna Mancini.

Madam Chair and committee members, Budget 2024 is a responsible plan for a growing province that puts Alberta families first. It builds on Alberta's competitive advantage and keeps life affordable. This budget invests nearly \$1.5 billion in high-quality services to improve the lives and livelihoods of Albertans and supports some of our most vulnerable residents. We're making investments in women's shelters and sexual assault centres so anyone facing family or sexual violence has a safe place to turn.

We're continuing to provide the services that help keep kids safe and help families stay healthy, strong, and connected. One way we're doing that is by increasing financial supports for foster, kinship, and adoptive parents. While our first priority is always to support parents to care for their kids at home, caregivers provide children and youth in government care a safe, temporary home when needed. We know that in most cases young people in care do best when they are placed in nurturing, family-based environments, especially when connected to their community and culture.

That's why we're indexing caregiver basic maintenance rates, the respite per diem, and skill fees to address inflation. This aligns with

our mandate commitment to strengthen the foster system and provide more stability for children and youth in care. It will also lead to long-term, much-needed relief for caregivers and families providing kinship care who have been impacted by affordability challenges. To that end, we are also increasing funding for the tax-free Alberta child and family benefit by \$31 million from last year's forecast, offering about 200,000 lower and middle-income families direct financial assistance.

Another way we're helping connect vulnerable kids with safe, nurturing families is through our ongoing commitment to a more efficient, affordable, and effective adoption process. Budget 2024 maintains the \$4 million per year commitment to support the adoptions initiative, which launched just last year. It includes a tax credit, supplemental health benefits for adopted children, and a subsidy for licensed agency adoption.

There are also investments to help keep Albertans safe and support anyone dealing with family or sexual violence. We've increased total funding by \$4.5 million from budget 2023-24 to reach \$84.6 million. This includes funding to meet our mandate commitment of increasing funding by \$10 million over four years for women's shelters and sexual assault centres each. Budget 2024 includes an increase of \$1.5 million for women's shelters in 2024 and 2025. This follows the initial new investments of over \$5 million being made in 2023 and 2024. Future mandate funding will include a further \$1.5 million for women's shelters in 2025-26 and \$2 million in 2026 and 2027.

This week I was pleased to announce funding for more beds at 15 shelters across the province and support existing innovative programming in two programs. These investments are a first step to stabilize and support the capacity currently in place. We are working closely with our valued shelter partners to support long-term, positive, transformative, and sustainable service delivery.

Sexual assault centres will see an additional \$3 million in 2024-25, then \$3 million in 2025-26, and \$4 million in 2026-27. As we've been doing with women's shelters, we're engaging sector partners to implement a plan to better support this vitally important work. We'll continue to invest in prevention, promote healthy relationships, and support and empower survivors through other initiatives. Budget 2024 also dedicates more than \$152 million, a \$3.5 million increase from last year's forecast, into early intervention services.

In 2022 we launched our transition to adulthood program, or TAP, to better serve in-care youth to transition successfully to adulthood. Beyond financial assistance TAP gives participants access to mentorship, tailored life skills development, employment and apprenticeship supports, and specific supports for those pursuing postsecondary education through advancing futures. Budget 2024 is adding to our previous investments with \$3 million more to respond to growing demand for TAP and advancing futures, supporting youth previously in care to help them prepare to live independently, study, and build careers. We anticipate growth will continue into 2025.

Budget 2024 also dedicates \$66.7 million for 70 family resource networks across the province, 18 of which serve specific cultural and linguistic communities. Family resource networks provide a co-ordinated approach to early intervention and prevention services for families, reducing the need for more intensive services later on. These networks have connected thousands of Albertans to services that help them build resilience and reach their full potential. We're proud to extend these grants for two more years and provide \$3.3 million more to enhance services and address wait-lists and cost pressures. This increase built on investments made last year to

strengthen each network's ability to address the needs of Indigenous children, youth, and family and gender-diverse youth.

9:10

In addition to FRN services, we also support other prevention and early intervention initiatives such as youth suicide prevention, mentoring supports, and youth emergency shelter services. My ministry is committed to the safety and well-being in care. That's why this budget also increases funding for child intervention, so vulnerable children, youth, and young adults receiving supports and services are looked after. Budget 2024 adds \$14.2 million, for a total of \$895.7 million. This builds on last year's increases, that recognize rising case complexity.

This budget increases our capacity to serve children and youth with multiple health diagnoses and behavioural challenges resulting from trauma. In partnership with Alberta Health Services and Mental Health and Addiction we're working to put specialized services in place for young Albertans with high mental health needs and addictions in community settings, and CFS will continue finding ways to improve our system to meet the complex needs of those we serve. We'll also be gathering insight from our new Youth Advisory Task Force. After all, we know one of the best ways to continue to improve service delivery is to ask recipients about their experiences.

My ministry is also dedicated to addressing the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth in child intervention by focusing on connections to family, culture, and community, which we know is important. Budget 2024 commits \$10.4 million to this extremely important work. We're engaging in First Nations led discussions when Indigenous communities wish to assume authority over child and family services under the federal act representing First Nations, Inuit, Métis children, youth, and families. We are focused on helping Indigenous families stay together whenever possible, providing culturally appropriate prevention and early intervention and working with delegated First Nations agencies. Reconciliation is a key priority for Alberta's government and to myself personally. We'll keep doing all we can to strengthen relationships and centre the best interests of Indigenous children and families.

Madam Chair and the rest of the committee members, as you know, our province continues to grow. Growth is positive, but it also presents challenges, particularly when it comes to making sure that supports and services for vulnerable Albertans remain sustainable and can be looked after long term. Budget 2024 sets us up for success by keeping us on track while providing flexibility to meet the demands ahead. I'm confident that Alberta's government is well positioned to help children, youth, young adults, and families receiving postintervention supports to succeed as part of resilient and healthy communities, and I'm incredibly proud to lead a ministry that will help ensure that Albertans remain in the best place to live, work, and raise a family.

I would also just like to thank the incredible vital work that this committee has, to ask important questions about how this ministry continues to keep children safe, ensure that they're supported, and we can make sure that all Albertans can continue to call Alberta an amazing place to call home.

With that, Madam Chair, that ends my remarks.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We've had two members join us. I'd like Member Wright to please introduce himself.

Mr. Wright: Thank you. My name is Justin Wright. I'm the MLA for the charming constituency of Cypress-Medicine Hat.

The Chair: Over to Member Arcand-Paul.

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

The Chair: Thank you so much, gentlemen.

Thank you, Minister.

We'll now begin the question-and-answer portion of the meeting. For the first 60 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room – and I don't see that anyone has joined us online, but it is on Microsoft Teams as well.

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

Ms Hayter: I'd like to do block time, please.

The Chair: Block. Okay.

Minister, you're okay with block?

Mr. Turton: I prefer block time as it prefers more comprehensive answers.

The Chair: Awesome.

The block of shared time is 20 minutes, during which time you may go back and forth with questions, comments, and responses – no. That's the other one. You have up to 10 minutes to ask questions and make comments to the minister. Once you've done so, the minister will have up to 10 minutes to respond.

Please proceed.

Ms Hayter: Thank you so much. Thank you so much, Madam Chair, for having us here today, and thank you to all the ministry staff for the work that you do for children and women. I'm going to jump right into this. Page 29 of the ministry business plan states that the ministry funds programs and services so Albertans can live safely and succeed in Alberta. Broadly speaking, this ministry is tasked with supporting vulnerable individuals. It is these vulnerable individuals that I'd like to start with, women experiencing domestic violence. We do not have enough shelters or proper resources to support women. When survivors have access to the supports and resources they need, there is no end to what they can do and achieve in their life. Their value in this province is infinite, and it's up to us, I think, as electeds to speak up and ensure that they have everything that they need so that they can shine.

For the past number of years the industry has been very clear: the need far exceeds the availability. I know that this week the minister announced funding, but it falls short of what the sector needs, which is a permanent increase of \$10 million per year to ensure availability and proper staffing and compensation. The minister announced \$10 million over four years, with the largest amount in the current year and only a \$1.5 million increase in Budget 2024, which will actually be \$3 million less than the current fiscal this announcement actually only covers, which was reported in estimates section 4. So I have a number of questions around that.

Over the tenure of the government funding for women's shelters has gone from \$51.3 million to \$55.8 million. Accounting for population and inflation, that should be closer to \$69 million. I would like to know: what metrics is the minister using to determine what women's shelters don't require the funding that they're asking for? Do all women's shelters in the province receive funding under line item 4.3? Which shelters receive this funding, and how much are they receiving per bed? Can the minister provide that information in writing for us?

We know that there are many unfunded beds throughout the province. How many remain unfunded, and where are they located? Why is the ministry not providing the funding for them?

We know all too well that when women cannot access supports to leave dangerous situations, the results can be deadly. Where in the budget do we see the funding and the supports to ensure that every woman in Alberta has a place to go with her children? I'd like to know how many shelters are funded in Edmonton. How many in Calgary? How many in Red Deer, Lethbridge, and rural? How many women and families are turned away every month, and do we have any statistics that we can see for these or metrics?

Where are the metrics to show how many women are being supported and successfully staying and transitioning into appropriate housing from a shelter? How is the minister working with the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services? Why is the minister providing less funding in Budget 2024 than in the previous year? Is there an expectation that the need will drop drastically April 1, and where in this budget do we see the metrics to support that drop? If not in the budget, can the minister provide these metrics in writing?

I'd like to move on to gender-based violence and developing our 10-year strategic plan to end gender-based violence. Currently we have the fourth-highest rate of police-reported sexual assault and the fifth-highest rate of police-reported intimate partner violence causing bodily harm or death. How far into this plan development are we, and when can we expect to see this strategy? What is the minister doing to advocate for more funding within his own ministry to address gender-based violence?

The Alberta government is to receive \$54 million in federal funding to develop and deploy a 10-year plan to end gender-based violence here in Alberta. How is the funding reflected in the budget? I'm looking for specific line items and amounts. Alberta has seen an influx of newcomers and immigrants. Is there any funding to support immigrants, and how much of your budget is there within shelters and for education?

I'd like to go, actually, back to women's shelters now. I'm wondering. I'd like to talk about the workers in the women's shelters. I'd also like to take a moment to thank the workers in the shelters who support families in a time of trauma and the emotional burden that they must carry. I appreciate how much compassion and love they put into their workspaces on it. It's a daily workday. As we know, women's shelters are essentially a space preventing the revictimization of women and stopping domestic violence in its tracks. These shelters need staff to run, yet staff who are predominantly women are not making the wages that allow them to live in Alberta.

9:20

Most women's shelters are staffed by women whose wages in some areas of our province are below living wage. When meeting with shelters, I've heard the phrase "wife wages," meaning that you need to have a shared house with a partner making a higher wage to survive or work a second job. Unfortunately, this is now creating a high turnover in staffing from burnout. Does ensuring women's shelters are adequately staffed play into point 4.1, and how does providing less ensure adequate staffing?

Operating costs keep going up with inflation, but with the population growth and need shelters' food budgets have taken a cut because of inflation. We know as of yesterday shelters and heating alone were up 12 to 22 per cent respectively. Albertans' inflation is out of place in other jurisdictions in terms of rising costs. Basic needs are not being met and funding adjustments with inflation. How is the minister allocating funds to keep up with inflation? What is your plan?

The ministry provides grant funding to community-based organizations for prevention of family and sexual abuse. Training people is key to ending gender-based violence, as is building allies with men and boys. How is the budget allocated in overall training? What type of training? How much is earmarked to work with men and boys?

Line 4.2 of the estimates is a new line previously housed under family and community safety. Can the minister tell us what programs are covered under this line? Which ministry is responsible for sexual assault services? I was hoping to see some metrics about how many callers seeking admissions are turned away due to lack of space and capacity within shelters. Do you know how many women were turned away in the past year? What funding is earmarked to track something like this, to see a decrease of callers turned away?

I'd like to cede my time to Member Arcand-Paul.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you.

Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister for taking questions today. I would ask that if any questions remain unanswered today, through you, Madam Chair, for any follow-up to be provided in writing.

My questions are focused on Indigenous programming within the ministry. To you and through you, Madam Chair, my first question is related to page 29 of the business plan, which highlights that this ministry will deliver "services that honor and respect Indigenous cultural identities, traditions and histories to strengthen and improve outcomes for Indigenous children and youth receiving care." Further, on page 32 of the same business plan it states, "In 2022-23, 86 per cent of Indigenous children and 84 per cent of non-Indigenous children were placed in family-based care." My question is: where in this budget do the 86 per cent of Indigenous children in family-based care receive supports to strengthen and improve outcomes for Indigenous children and youth receiving care?

I've heard from countless Indigenous peoples in Alberta that in our traditional and cultural way we must take care of our own. I've also seen it first-hand, Madam Chair, in my family when my late cousin Amber passed away after a lifetime of being in the government's care, tragically took her own life, and left behind three children. I've also seen it by numerous aunts and uncles, cousins, and friends who are called to this duty because our culture requires it. I can tell you right now that the reality is that those Indigenous families that take in those children and youth are feeling pretty slighted by this government, especially this oversight given that there's no committed funding identified to extend this support equitably for kinship care. This is especially for those families that take on the cultural responsibility to take family into their homes.

Madam Chair – thank you – to you and through you I'd like to now raise the questions related to key objective 1.2 and performance indicator 1(d) on page 32, particularly around this government's plans related to An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families and very specifically why there was no separate line item in this budget or last year's budget, for that matter, to prepare for this truly revolutionary legal paradigm that is coming to Alberta. My question on this point is: why was there no specific line item in this budget for this work despite it being highlighted as a key objective for this government? Is it just going to be thoughts and prayers from this government, or is there going to be something tangible from this budget?

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

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

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and thank you very much for the heartfelt questions from the members opposite. You know, as I've alluded to, there are a lot of families that are depending upon the good work of this ministry to keep them safe and supported, so I appreciate the questions and the tone of those questions.

Alberta's government is committed to supporting women's shelters and the valuable work that they do to keep residents safe. Women's shelters across Alberta: they offer a comprehensive range of shelter and outreach services, and this includes a safety risk assessment and safety planning, system navigation, parenting supports, life skills programming, community education and awareness programming, and culturally responsive supports and referrals to access counselling. Budget 2024 invests \$55.8 million annually for women's shelters to help individuals and families to get the support that they need. We continue to work with our shelter partners to ensure that those fleeing family violence are safe and they can get the help that they need.

You know, something that has struck me since being appointed as minister in this very important ministry in June was that as I have been travelling the province and talking with the women's shelters and listening to their stories, I was at one women's shelter – I think it pertains to the discussion that we're having here today – where I was visiting, and they said, "Well, Minister, you missed the activity from last night." And I said, "Well, tell me what happened."

They told me a case of a young mom that was fleeing a domestic abuse situation with her couple of kids. Somehow this young mom: she got her hands on a tent and was in a park trying to find shelter for her family. As many of us will recall, this summer there were a number of rainstorms and heavy storms that came through Alberta, and the tent was flattened by the wind. The police came over to obviously look after the mom, and this mom was trying to make up a temporary shelter with her kids, literally hiding under a tree under the pouring rain trying to stay safe. The police took this amazing survivor and those children and took them to this women's shelter.

I looked across the room, and there was this young mom. It was early in the morning, and she was just simply having a cup of coffee, a cup of coffee trying to just stabilize herself so she could decide what the next steps of her life were actually going to be and how she was going to look after her kids when she was in the middle of one of the worst episodes of her entire life. I think of stories like that mom and the stories of the women's shelter, that were offering her support, every single day when I'm at the Legislature, when we're dealing with the issues and the scourge which I think is domestic violence and how we are making sure that women that need help the most continue to receive the supports that they have in an appropriate fashion and we can ensure that we help transition them to move on to the next stages of their entire life.

To answer some of the questions I know that Member Hayter had, one of the questions she asked was: where in the budget is about the women's shelters? I think most of the information she should be looking for would be under program number 4, 4.3 to be exact. I'll touch base on a couple of those aspects as well.

To tell a little bit in terms of answering some of the additional questions about the actual system and how we are supporting it, to support Albertans, Children and Family Services supports 31 women's emergency shelters around the province: 17 second-stage shelters, three agencies who provide outreach and counselling, and five fee-for-service shelters in First Nations communities. To me, that's important because, as the member said, it's important that we provide the appropriate number of services for residents in First Nations communities. Moving towards that spirit of reconciliation, making sure that we can respect those cultural and family

connections and make sure that Indigenous families are looked after and protected is a key priority for me. The funding covers, from Children and Family Services, 756 beds in women's emergency shelters and 186 units in second-stage shelters. As some of the members may know, women's shelters provide short-term emergency accommodation while second-stage shelters provide longer term shelter, six months to two years.

9:30

In terms of some of the numbers as well that the member was asking about: how many people and families actually came through the doors of women's shelters? As of December 31, 2023, approximately 3,539 adults and 2,754 children were admitted, and out of all the admitted adults, 96 per cent of these Albertans were identified as women, and 58 per cent of clients identified as Indigenous.

Again, I just want to echo the comments I think Member Hayter said about the amazing work that our women's shelter providers do to keep women safe. I would just, you know, urge everyone watching this either online or else even in the room here: for many of the individuals that are entering these women's shelters, these are not faceless Albertans; these are sisters and family members, neighbours. You don't have to go very far before you come across a story about someone that needed help when they were leaving a case of domestic violence or a child that needed a little bit of extra help. So I find that this sector, as members alluded to, is extremely important because it touches base on almost every family here in the province where all of a sudden individuals need help.

One of the other questions that the member asked was about the shelter funding regarding the announcement that we just did this week. So 12 shelters across the province are receiving a total of \$3.9 million to address 81 existing unfunded beds. These shelters would be: the Brooks & district women's safe shelter; the Camrose women's shelter; the Capella Centre in St. Paul; Catholic Social Services; Fairview and District Women's Centre Association; Grande Prairie Women's Residence Association; Fear is Not Love, right in Calgary; Lloydminster Interval Home Society; Mountain Rose Women's Shelter Association in Rocky Mountain House; Stepping Stones Crisis Society in Cold Lake; Strathcona Shelter Society in Sherwood Park; and waypoints community association in Fort McMurray. The two new projects receiving \$1.1 million would be the Banff YWCA, approximately \$537,000 to fund eight emergency shelter beds and one second-stage shelter unit, and Wellspring Family Resource & Crisis Centre in Whitecourt. That's approximately \$563,000 to add 11 women's shelter beds.

One of the questions was: how did this funding come about? From my conversations as I've been travelling around the province and especially stemming from the round-table, which I will be referencing quite a few times over the next couple of hours, that we had here at the Legislature about a month or so ago, it came out resoundingly clear from women's shelter providers across the province in their message to me that this sector needed immediate funds to help stabilize the system, to help look after women in need. I think the announcement we did this week when we talked about the \$5 million from this fiscal year addresses that question. It addresses that request, that clearly articulated need from women's shelters at that round-table.

They were requesting and begging for funds, and I know from the messages that I've received since the announcement from women's shelters right across the entire province that it has been resoundingly received. Many of the comments, you know, have come to me and said that, actually, the announcement we did this week is the largest commitment of new funds to women's shelters in over 10 years. It's important to make sure that we continuously

support this sector because we know, as I stated before, there are women and children on the other end of those stories, that we want to make sure that we continually look after.

As part of the commitment as well, there are a couple of new innovative programs that we also invested in because we are anxious to continue to work with our shelter providers to look for new and innovative ways that we can continue to help support women in need. Two of the innovative programs were Big Hill Haven in Cochrane and Rowan House Society in High River, as well as Eileen's Place, which is a new second-stage shelter in Morinville, operated by the Jessica Martel Memorial Foundation. These innovative programs were supported through approximately \$675,000 in 2023 and 2024. These programs look for ways to keep rural families in their home communities, or the homeless when they're fleeing abuse to prevent further trauma. I've heard loud and clear that rural shelters have unique circumstances compared to Edmonton and Calgary. We wanted to make sure that they have adequate resources to address some of the challenges that women may have by travelling large geographic distances to be able to access a safe place.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the Official Opposition.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you, Madam Chair. To you and through you, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld Bill C-92, which means co-ordination agreements are needed and the province has a responsibility to play a role. I'm going to ask this question again because I didn't hear an answer. From this budget the province is not ready, and the only people that will suffer are Indigenous children and youth in care, on which I must also note there are an alarming number of my people in care.

Madam Chair, I also note that this government is anticipating a reduction of children and youth under DFNAs in anticipation of IGBs. Is there a corresponding budget item for those nations to prepare to become an IGB? The current, quote, services to First Nations reserves, end quote, which I understand to be direct transfers from the federal government: this number appears to be relatively unchanged from the '23-24 budget to this year's estimate. Why is this?

Through you, Madam Chair, there is clearly nothing built in here to deal with inflation when it comes to helping Indigenous nations to develop IGBs. I recognize that these agreements are negotiated directly with the feds between First Nations, but Jordan's principle is clearly applicable in these circumstances. Would the minister clarify whether the \$10.3 million for Indigenous partnerships will close this gap, and if not, why?

Even though the Act is expected to accelerate certain aspects of the process of reconciliation, it is still important to recognize that reconciliation is a long-term project. It will not be accomplished in a single sacred moment, but rather through a continuous transformation of relationships and a braiding together of distinct legal traditions and sources of power that exist.

This was line 90 of the Reference re An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families, 2024. I just want to remind this ministry and indeed this government of this important quote to continue the important work to ensure Indigenous children and youth and Indigenous nations are supported in this transition. Clearly, the government has a responsibility here, and we need to see dollars flowing to assist this important work. I would hope that the minister and certainly those in the room today, including the members opposite, take this to heart.

I would now like to cede the balance of my time to the hon. Member for Calgary-Acadia.

Member Batten: Thank you, and to the chair, thank you so much for this opportunity, of course, to speak to these estimates. Just to start off, Madam Chair, to the minister, I just wanted to respond. He had mentioned in response: the biggest funding increase in the last 10 years. I'd just like to remind the minister that in 2015-2016 the NDP were actually funding shelters at \$15 million per year.

Now I'd like to move on to child intervention. This is outcome 1: the well-being, "resiliency, and cultural connections of children, youth, and families are supported and children and youth are protected," so page 31 of the Children and Family Services business report 2024-27 and under budget line 2, which is indicated as child intervention. It explains in 2.2, which is the delivery of child intervention: "complies with legislative mandate to assess child safety and provide critical services to families and children."

Madam Chair, what I'd like to do now, of course, is discuss the different activities which I believe fall into this budget line, on which, of course, I would love confirmation, through the chair, from the minister. Looking specifically at intakes and assessments, child intervention practitioners are required to assess every referral. To the minister through the chair: what are the credentials required for such a complex and vital decision-making position? As the ministry is aware, family and children do not receive supports until this intake starts, so it is not only a vital position, but it's also timely and really high pressure.

Through the chair to the minister, I would love to know what criteria is made, what this criteria was based on, and how similar is this process across the provinces? I'm also curious, Madam Chair, what education and experience are required to perform this duty? Are there mentorship programs able to support these different workers as they start this new job? What metrics does the ministry use to ensure that we're not turning away children who really need our support?

Madam Chair, doing some fast math, just comparing the total intakes from April to December 2019-2020 relative to April to December 2022-23, page 1 of the child intervention information and statistics summary for each year, where there was a total of 4,258 intakes in 2019 and only 1,738 in 2022-23, so a difference of 2,520 intakes. Through the chair: can the minister account for the dramatic change in intakes and how these were deemed unnecessary?

9:40

The last number of years have been really hard for most, especially given, you know, the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living prices, the fact that domestic violence, as has been mentioned, is increasing steadily over the years all the while having potentially limited access to our health care system and to mental health supports, yet the intakes are fewer. "Since 2019, the number of referrals with reasonable and probable grounds for intervention have decreased." That is a quote from the 2022-23 annual report, page 22. Through the chair, I'd love the minister to provide a definition of what reasonable and probable grounds means so that we can better understand, of course, the purpose of this budget.

Something that I noted: even though the intakes are decreasing, Madam Chair, what we're noticing is that the intakes are more severe, where more intakes are moving from that initial intake into investigation. Through the chair: can the minister provide clarity on the changes that were made in the assessment and intake process? Why were these taken, what evidence was followed, and how is the ministry showing accountability for this change? And where is that information provided publicly?

Madam Chair, if there is no change in the process, can the minister explain how, again, given all the hardships of the last number of years in particular, how we would see this decrease in

intakes as a win? Regardless as to why we're seeing the fewer intakes, I am concerned that the threshold for intakes appears to have been bumped so that it now excludes Albertans previously supported. Can the minister explain how the government is addressing this new gap in services to Alberta families and which budget line it corresponds to?

Page 22 of that same annual report indicates that a refinement was made in response to reports of child abuse and neglect and that these steps are expected to result in severe abuse and neglect cases being addressed more quickly. Madam Chair, can the minister provide examples of the refinement they are doing? Is this contained in budget line 2.2 of this current budget? What experts are being consulted? Where can I find the evidence-based research that supports this refinement? Can the minister provide, through the chair, the metrics indicating that this refined process has enabled families to have faster access to the supports they need?

Which supports are in highest demand? What plans does the minister have to proactively provide these supports to families before it escalates to an intake, let alone to a serious case? What additional supports are being provided to the workforce to balance this increased workload of severe cases? Are the severe cases weighted differently from other cases to balance the burden, for instance? Are there mental health supports available in addition to the standard supports for these workers? Madam Chair, to the minister: in which budget line do I find the funding for such supports?

Again from the annual report, page 22: it indicates consolidation of work sites moved from 72 to five sites with the goal of providing a more consistent experience for vulnerable Albertans, reducing duplication of work and ensuring more time can be spent supporting children and families. Madam Chair, can the minister point us to the savings that have been realized by this? What areas of the province were impacted through local lost employment? How much is expected to be spent on travel for social workers now for their visits compared to previous years? How did this affect accessibility and inclusivity for families and children? What metrics are being monitored to ensure families and children don't fall through these new cracks?

Madam Chair, can you imagine having to take a child who has been abused to an assessment site but having to drive miles upon miles? You can imagine this would be best as a short trip, but moving from 72 centres to only five, my question, through the chair, to the minister is how far these families now have to travel for assessment. What additional resources are being provided while these families travel?

What metrics is the minister tracking to ensure this consolidation of sites was truly best for the vulnerable population that they serve? When the 67 sites were closed, where did the workforce go? As the minister and all of us are aware, there is a workforce shortage, so I'm really excited to hear how we leveraged this newly available workforce, and I would love to hear from the minister, through the chair, how we've integrated them into the system and how we determined that was the best place for them to go.

I will very quickly start moving on to the caseloads of children's services. What I'm hearing from stakeholders is that caseloads continue to be a problem. There were news articles earlier this week sharing my concerns, and I'm hearing about regions of the province where a third of the workforce is out on long-term disability or stress leave.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

Over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the members for the many questions. I'll do my best to try to answer. I know there were a number of topics that were mentioned, you know, between Bill C-92 and gender-based violence prevention as well as child intervention. I'll do my best to hopefully answer out the questions. We have a couple more hours to answer the rest of them.

Regarding Bill C-92, Member, I know that was one of your main questions, to talk about the role that the government of Alberta has in ensuring that Indigenous children are looked after. Alberta supports working with IGBs to develop agreements and transition to their legislative authority over child and family services. Our government will continue to support First Nations as they work toward or assume authority under the federal act.

Children and Family Services participates in trilateral discussions with First Nations, who set the timelines and approach for discussions, including the pace of work. On March 31, 2023, Alberta signed the first trilateral co-ordination agreement in Alberta with three First Nations and Indigenous Services Canada. We are currently working with another First Nation in preparation for transfer of authority. We believe that Indigenous children and youth benefit from Indigenous cultural and family connections, and we look forward to continuing those discussions and signing agreements in the future with any First Nations community that is willing to begin the subject with us.

I know as minister one of my very first tours around Alberta was actually through Treaty 8 territory, meeting with First Nations leaders specifically there and listening to their concerns about how Indigenous children are looked after. I know it's been very public. We also had a discussion about a month or so ago with Treaty 6, and the role of Children and Family Services was a key point that was brought up. I take those conversations extremely seriously because, as you mentioned, there are children on the other end that are depending upon us to make the right decisions.

I remember that when I was passing through one community, a kokum came up to me, and it was a heartfelt conversation as she explained to me the challenges she faced as she was looking after her grandkids. I'll never forget her line to me where she said: Minister, help us look after our children. I remember that conversation because I know it's being echoed from First Nations families right around Alberta. It's a common question, I know, that is held throughout Canada. Like I said, it's something that I take extremely, extremely seriously.

I know your question as well was a little bit about the supports that are provided after co-ordination agreements have been signed. Alberta remains committed to the ongoing work with Indigenous communities towards reconciliation and meaningful change. When an Indigenous governing body enacts their law over child and family services for their own children and youth, Children and Family Services works collaboratively with the Indigenous governing body to support a smooth transition to their law. Alberta's government continues to provide services to families until the transfer of authority of First Nations is complete and works closely with First Nations for the safety and well-being of their children and families.

Examples of some in-kind supports are information sharing to assist with Indigenous governing bodies' needs assessment, continuation of access to provincial after-hours crisis lines, and continuation of child intervention off-reserve costs while under provincial legislation until transfer of authority is complete.

Regardless of whose jurisdiction or who is providing services, the safety and well-being of those children is one of our key priorities. It's also important for all members to know as well that we have already signed agreements with three First Nations

communities in Treaty 8 regarding child intervention services because we realize that Indigenous communities have a hunger for looking after their own children, and I appreciate and I respect that decision. We know that children do better when they are connected to their culture, their families and communities, and that's come out loud and clear to me as the minister as I've been travelling around the province.

Regarding your question about the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth within our system, we are looking at addressing those issues. Alberta's government continues to prioritize work towards reconciliation, strengthening our relationships with Indigenous peoples here in Alberta. When children and youth are unable to live with their families, we prioritize placement with trained and supported kinship caregivers, who can keep them connected to their community and culture. Placement with kinship caregivers minimizes the additional trauma a child or youth experiences from being removed from their parents and guardians, and Children and Family Services works closely with First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and urban Indigenous communities to support the healthy development of Indigenous children and youth by providing culturally appropriate opportunities to maintain and enhance connections to their families.

9:50

One of the questions you asked was about how many Indigenous children are actually receiving services. Of the 7,186 children and youth receiving services from a region or off-reserve, approximately 4,652, or 65 per cent, were Indigenous. Within the regions and off-reserve there has been a 2 per cent increase in the proportion of Indigenous children and youth receiving intervention services, and the number of Indigenous youth receiving intervention services has actually decreased by 2 per cent.

In terms of the caseload, it's a good question regarding just in terms of the actual files that we have. One of the questions I know you asked pertained to the children receiving care. In December of 2023 there were approximately 9,080 children and youth receiving child intervention services, and 79 per cent were receiving services through one of the ministry's service delivery regions or through the off-reserve service arrangement. Of the 7,186 children and youth receiving services from a region or off-reserve, 6,044 were receiving services in care and 1,142 children and youth were receiving services at home.

Since 2019 to '20 child intervention caseloads have decreased year over year, with a 22 per cent decrease over the last five years. Now, this is due in part to the pandemic, followed by the reduction of intakes and fewer cases opening, which has cascading impacts on the not-in-care caseload followed by temporary care and permanent care. This reduction combined with a greater number of children and youth ending involvement compared to opening involvement has resulted in an overall caseload decrease. As well, from 2019-20 to '22-23 the number of referrals with reasonable and probable grounds for intervention has actually decreased; however, from 2022 to '23 to '23-24 intake reports have actually increased by 16 per cent within the regions off-reserve. It's, obviously, a very busy workload and part of the department in terms of making sure that the children continue to be safe.

Another one of the questions you asked was regarding the actual intakes and about some concerns that have been raised about child intervention not opening files that they probably would have. I know this is a major aspect that I've looked at because we want to make sure that any child that requires assistance or needs support: that they will be looked after, that they will be safe. I know at child intervention we've implemented changes to intake and assessment to ensure that we are serving those that we are mandated to assist.

Children and Family Services' response to reports of child abuse and neglect has been refined to better understand why a child needs intervention and to identify safety concerns through an improved intake model launched in 2022 and 2023. The intent is that severe abuse and neglect cases are addressed more quickly and to ensure that Children and Family Services is only involved with families who meet its legislative mandate. This approach is in the best interests of the child and potentially less traumatic for the family.

The ministry has been implementing practice changes in line with the signs of safety, and signs of safety is an approach to child protection that continuously and comprehensively assesses danger, strength, and safety at every point of a child intervention interaction. It is also designed to work in partnership with families through safety networks and involving the child in service planning.

Again, as I've talked over the last couple of minutes, ensuring that families are connected to their children is a key priority for this ministry. It's a key priority for myself because everyone in this room knows that children do best when they have those family connections. When they know where they come from, they have a firm grasp of their cultural connections. I want to do everything as a minister to make sure that we can continue to help promote those connections both to family as well as to culture.

I know that one of the other questions that was mentioned is: how is the government focused on family preservation for children in care? As I've stated, we're constantly looking at ways to prioritize those family connections, and we'll probably be speaking to that more here in my next segment.

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

We will head back to the Official Opposition.

Member Batten: Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister through you. Thank you for those answers; not quite the detail I was hoping, but I do appreciate them.

Continuing from where I was, again, looking at outcome 1: the well-being, resiliency, and cultural connections of children, youth, and families are supported, and children and youth are protected. This is from the 2024-27 business report, page 31. So I'll just restart a little bit on the caseloads. What I'm hearing from stakeholders, Madam Chair, is that the caseloads continue to be a problem. There are even news articles earlier this week that were sharing my concerns. What I'm hearing is that we actually have regions of the province . . .

Mr. Singh: Point of order.

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

Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. The point of order is under Standing Order 23(b), the member "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion." The committee has convened for the purpose of considering the ministry's 2024 budget, including estimates, fiscal plan, and business plan. The matter about the stakeholders which has been raised by the member is not within the boundaries of these said topics.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: We'll hear from the . . .

Member Irwin: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's unfortunate that that member is continuing to call erroneous points of order as he was yesterday, too.

The member literally just referred to the business plan and gave a page reference as well. This is not a point of order. I would ask that member to stop interrupting our time.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: All right. I actually did not hear that part, so let's give you a bit more time to tie it to the estimates, and we'll proceed.

Thank you so much.

Member Batten: Thank you so much, Madam Chair. Again, this is outcome 1 of the business report, page 31, of child and family services that reads: the well-being, "resiliency, and cultural connections of children, youth, and families are supported and children and youth are protected."

Speaking to that point, what I'm hearing is that we have regions in the province where one-third of the workforce is out on long-term disability or stress leave, and therefore all of those cases would be shifted to the other workers. This doesn't sound like a particularly good strategy to me. Vulnerable populations such as the ones we are discussing now, of course, truly need their caseworkers to be focused on them. Through the chair to the minister: can you provide clear examples of how you've engaged with children service workers, their union, and what current evidence-based research is being used to actively improve the situation? Can the minister, through the chair, explain where in this budget we can find funding that came from the reduced caseloads and how much is earmarked to address the caseloads, please?

With fewer children services staff and a larger caseload for each worker, I worry, Madam Chair, that some of our children who have complex needs are being left out. So my question, through the chair to the minister, is: how exactly are we ensuring that these children and youth are not being missed in the shuffle?

Again, still on outcome 1, page 31 of the business plan, another thing that I think we can all agree on is that, of course, when you start a new job or you're looking to move up in your position, it really matters the people that are around you, Madam Chair. What I've heard from stakeholders is that the mix of registered social workers plays a huge role in their stress levels, in their contribution, you know, wanting to contribute more to the job, and, honestly, their desire to stay.

Page 85 of the fiscal plan '24-27 shares that "Child Intervention agencies are facing growing recruitment challenges." So through the chair to the minister: can the minister disclose which initiatives he has planned or is currently doing to nurture and grow the children services workers? What retention strategies are being employed? What number of the children service workers does the ministry hope to recruit to fill the gaps and robustify the workforce? Madam Chair, to the minister: what are the current vacancy numbers for children services? How does this compare to prior years? Why aren't we seeing these very essential workers part of the Alberta Is Calling attraction tax credit bonus? Further to the minister: has the minister advocated for them to potentially be included? How much funding is then earmarked to increase staff retention, and is this found still under budget item 2.2?

10:00

Before I move on to the next section, which is when I'll move to the next process, where some children, if they are assessed and they're taken in, they have to be placed in care, I do want to share some thoughts that I've received from some child service workers. I quote: we are leaving kids in horrible situations; we've done so much damage.

With that in mind, I would like to move on to children in care. This is looking at pages 62 and 63 of the government estimates

2024-25, Madam Chair. There are different options for children who are deemed not safe to return home. Line 2.3 of the budget, supports for permanency, “provides financial support to families who adopt or obtain private guardianship of children in permanent government care.” Line 2.4, kinship and foster care support, “provides culturally-appropriate and diverse supports to children temporarily unable to live in their family home.”

Madam Chair, the government, of course, has been running an advertisement campaign trying to encourage more adults to consider becoming foster parents. The government has also recently indexed these funds to foster parents. The funds they receive for the children are now indexed, and that’s fantastic. Through the chair to the minister, can you report how many foster parents have been attracted by this ad campaign? Through the chair, like, what number of foster parents are we needing, what number are we at now, what has the ministry done to change how foster parents are supported in addition to what I just mentioned, and do you support needing to, again, increase incentives to attract more foster parents?

There is a performance metric, 1(c), associated on page 32 of the business plan ’24-25 that looks at the percentage of children placed in family-based care, which includes kinship, relatives, foster care, and permanent placements. Of course, this is to demonstrate how the government is prioritizing family-based care, which the minister earlier indicated is a key priority. When looking at the ’21-22 numbers relative to this year, the targets for both Indigenous and non Indigenous children placed in homes were missed. Through the chair to the minister, can the minister provide clarity as to what investigations have been completed to determine why this target was missed? More children were placed, then, in secure services or group homes instead of with families. Madam Chair, to the minister, what actions are being taken to meet this target this coming year? Further, is the government planning to complete a similar outreach for additional kinship placements? Can the minister share what incentives are being planned for kinship caretakers? Specifically, if there are funds earmarked to support these initiatives, what proportion of funds would be then used for foster care versus kinship care?

Page 23 of the annual report ’22-23 says:

Children’s Services is seeing an increasing number of children with mental health addiction, emotional and behavioural difficulties. These children require intensive supports and exceed the level of care and supports provided by foster and kinship caregivers.

Again, looking at outcome 1, page 31 of the business plan, the well-being and “resiliency, and cultural connections of children, youth, and families are supported and children and youth are protected,” through the chair to the minister, what additional supports are being provided in Budget ’24 to our foster and kinship caregivers to best support them and the children they care for? Do these resources include respite and other health services such as counselling, therapy, and other mental health supports? Madam Chair, how does the ministry determine that these resources are sufficient? What metrics are being tracked? How do Alberta’s efforts compare to other provinces? Further, Madam Chair to the minister, are the costs for these resources captured, then, in budget line 2.4, and if not, then where might I find them?

There’s another performance metric, page 32 of the business plan ’24-25. It’s specific to First Nation children and youth served by delegated First Nation agencies, or DFNAs, predominantly on-reserve. The goal of this metric is to demonstrate a shift towards providing culturally appropriate care. What, obviously, we’d want to see is more children going into the DFNAs and fewer going into child intervention. Historically 30 per cent of First Nation children and youth have been served by DFNAs, but in the last two years we

see an upward trajectory, where in 2022-23 it was 32 per cent, and now in ’23-24 it’s 33 per cent. Through the chair to the minister, can we account at all for this trajectory? What has caused this?

Moving on to, again, speaking to our First Nation children, which still falls under outcome 1, the well-being, resiliency, and cultural connections of children in the business plan, page 31, as of January 2020 the federal Bill C-92, An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families, came into effect. This provides a path for nations to exercise authority over their children and family. This is a massive initiative – and my colleague has spoken to it before – that requires steady commitment and collaboration between the federal government, the provincial government, and First Nations. Through the chair to the minister, can the minister explain the role of the province in this transfer of care? As I understand it, it is – and I quote – the province’s role to ensure no service gaps. Through the chair to the minister, what gaps have been identified, what solutions have been brought forth, and which budget line addresses the important provincial funding to ensure no service gaps?

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

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

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for so many great questions. I’ll do my best, as I just did last time, to touch base on some of the other questions that have had recurring mentions. I would say that our mutual friend MLA Clay Serby would be quite impressed, I know, with his mentorship for yourself. I always like to have my old MLA from Saskatchewan put into *Hansard*.

Regarding your first question, regarding caseloads, it’s obviously a great question. Changes to the child abuse and neglect reporting processes are helping to prioritize services and support for children at risk of abuse and ensuring urgent cases are addressed as quickly as possible. The new reporting process has in part led to lower caseloads of children and youth receiving child intervention services. Children and Family Services is working towards a clearer understanding of our clients so that we can serve them better. This includes working to improve our understanding of caseload diversity.

I know that one of the questions has been raised about what was contributing to declining cases and how much caseloads have declined over the last couple of years. In December 2023 there were 9,080 children and youth receiving child intervention services in Alberta, of which 79 per cent were receiving services through one of the ministry’s service delivery regions or through off-reserve service arrangements. Of the 7,186 children and youth receiving services from a region or off-reserve, 6,044 were receiving services in care, and 1,142 children and youth received services at home. Since 2019 and 2020 child intervention caseloads have decreased year over year, with a 22 per cent decrease over the last five years. Again, this is due in part to the pandemic, followed by the reduction of intakes and fewer cases opening, which has cascading impacts on the not-in-care caseload, followed by temporary care and permanent care.

As well, you talked quite a bit about workforce, so I want to take some time to be able to answer a couple of those questions and about some of the challenges that our amazing CFS workers have to be able to go through as they look after those children that need care the most. Something I prioritize for myself as I’ve been travelling around the province is to go out of my way to visit CFS offices and talk with the staff directly. Something I’ve said to many of the offices and the staff as we’ve had those conversations: I want to see the world through your eyes. I want to see the world and

understand the challenges that they are going through as they look after kids that need help the most. It's been enlightening for me just to understand the challenges and the differing arrays of challenges that CFS workers do face, depending upon where I go in the province.

I know that I was at one office here in Edmonton – it's actually just a couple of blocks away from here – and talking with the staff there. It was interesting. One of the senior managers there made a comment. She said: you know, Minister, I've been in this office for decades, and you're the first minister that I've seen come through the doors and ask us questions about what we need to do our job better. It was just interesting, again, to hear the concerns that she had in inner-city Edmonton, which are quite different, for example, if you're in, you know, Peace River or Fort McMurray or Claresholm. For me, it was understanding those different nuances about the challenges for staff, who just do an amazing job looking after those kids.

10:10

I know one of the questions you put forth was about: how are we addressing some of these workforce challenges? Children and Family Services has introduced a new workforce model to better attract, recruit, retain, and support child intervention employees, with a greater focus on career growth and advancement as well as competency development for these employees, because, as the member alluded to, it's always nice knowing that there's a clear-cut career path, that people can advance within their field. To me, that's important.

Work within the child intervention division is no longer functionally split across numerous specialized roles. Instead, the work has been streamlined into two job categories, child intervention and career support. This new approach allows employees to gain knowledge and expertise in all areas of work within their assigned job category. By shifting away from numerous specialized roles, it enhances the agility in the workforce and the development of resources. This is something that clearly has come to me in my conversations with child and family services officials: realizing that there is a higher level of complexity in the world. Kids are complex on the best of days, so we want to make sure that our staff have the wide-ranging experience that they need to be able to look after those kids in need.

This approach supports equitable distribution of workloads among staff and operational efficiency as it provides greater flexibility in assignments given common expectations, competencies, and experience. This flexibility also allows the system to adapt to surges in workload in different parts of the system as staff have common expectations and competencies to mitigate workload fluctuations.

I also realize that the member asked a number of questions that are much more operational in nature. I would like to turn it over to ADM Leann Wagner to answer a couple of her questions.

Ms Wagner: Good morning. I'll speak to a few of the questions you asked both in this block and the previous block. With regard to the intake teams consolidating into five teams, these individuals remained in their original offices. They were reorganized into a team for each region which has team members within all of the variety of offices. So in, say, the north, they remain in their home office, whether it's St. Paul, Grande Prairie, or Fort McMurray, but they're attached to the single intake team.

Your question with regard to: when we reduce the teams, does that reduce access? Whenever we do an assessment, we go to the family's home, or we go to a mutually agreed-to place in the community to conduct the assessment.

You had some questions with regard to how we measure caseload and the acuity. We completely recognize that caseloads are increasing. Just like all employers, we face challenges in recruiting people to this work, and we have implemented a number of initiatives. The minister spoke about the growth model. We have also implemented a new education grant for existing staff who wish to pursue higher education to upgrade their skills in exchange for a longer service term with the ministry. That program is proving to be very popular with staff, and we've just opened it up for applications.

We've also implemented a number of tools to better support the psychological health of staff. This includes in-depth hazard assessments, recognizing that many of them are exposed to trauma and violence and sometimes very difficult situations that can weigh on their psychological health. In some instances we are doing specific hazard assessments for specific roles and making adjustments to assignments to better protect and to mitigate any risk to employees.

You asked some questions about intake or about hiring and how we measure acuity. Our benchmark system for caseloads does have a complexity indicator in it, so it's not just the raw number; there's also a complexity indicator. Those benchmarks are developed in consultation with the union. We are engaging with our union. We meet with our local union reps at least monthly, both at the work site and provincially.

With regard to LTDI numbers, the numbers that were shared with you were not the numbers that we have. Our workforce is 2,300, so for 30 per cent of our workforce to be on LTDI would be 700 people. As of September 1, 2023, we had 159 individuals on LTDI, which is still too high. But we're grateful that we can offer our employees that benefit, and we encourage them, if they are feeling stressed or if they have burden, to . . .

The Chair: Let us pause for our five-minute break. Thanks, everyone.

[The committee adjourned from 10:15 a.m. to 10:22 a.m.]

The Chair: All right, everyone. Let's resume here.

Thank you, Minister, for your responses.

We're going to move over now to the government side for their questions. Please proceed, Member. Do you want to share your time or go back and forth?

Mr. Lundy: I think we can do block if that's okay with the minister.

The Chair: Block time? Minister?

Mr. Turton: Block time is fine.

The Chair: Okay. Sure. Proceed, please.

Mr. Lundy: All right. Well, thank you, Madam Chair. Of course, thank you to the minister and, you know, just as importantly, to your support staff with you today. I certainly know how hard they work and the amount of effort that goes in not only to preparing you for today but also on an ongoing basis, so of course I extend my thanks and appreciation for their hard work.

Minister, if I may, through the chair, just thank you for your compassion earlier. This is obviously – you have a file that can be very sensitive, and it's critical to our province and to our families and children in the province. You know, I certainly appreciate your tone and tenor and compassion on this issue. Of course, some of my colleagues, fellow members, were bringing forward some very important concerns and demonstrating a lot of compassion and care

as well. I think that's really important for these discussions. I would like to dive into a couple of really important topics here.

I would like to start my questions on adoption. You know, I will say that I've had the privilege of speaking to a few of my constituents in my office who have been a part of this process. I'm happy to sort of ask a little bit on their behalf on this important subject. Through the chair, I'd like to reference your business plan. It shows in your mandate and structure that Children and Family Services' programs and services include "overseeing adoption in Alberta . . . and providing guardianship services to provide a stable, loving and permanent home to a child or youth" in need. This is on page 29 of the business plan.

We know that many Albertan families are finding it difficult to start a family for many different reasons such as affordability, inability to conceive, or the decline of the rate of adoption, which is, again, the topic I would like to discuss. Now, Minister, as you're aware, adoption can be a costly, time-consuming, and rather intense process for many prospective families in all our communities. I know that you've always been a fierce advocate of reducing these barriers to adoption. Specifically, through the chair, can you please tell us what the government has done to reduce barriers to adoption and make it more affordable for Albertans? Then I would also like to ask a second question. What impact will this have on Albertans seeking to adopt a child?

We know reducing barriers is important. You know, adoption is, obviously, a complex and intensive process, so I would also like to dig in a little more broadly, I guess, on the adoption. Of course, it's certainly a beautiful thing to see families become whole with the addition of children and create a nurturing home for children and parents alike. Unfortunately, the adoption process itself tends to be prohibitive for Albertans looking to grow or maybe even start their family. Minister, through the chair, can you please elaborate on the adoption process? I would be interested in a more comprehensive understanding of that. And can you please elaborate on what else the government has done to make the adoption process less difficult and less challenging for Albertans? I would certainly look forward to hearing a little bit more from the minister on this topic. Again, I've expressed how important it is, and a couple of my constituents have been able to speak to me about this.

You know, I've also had the opportunity to meet with several families in my riding on the issue of foster care. If I may, I'd like to ask a couple of questions on foster care. It's an important part of our system, and I have had constituents reach out to express some concerns, so I certainly am looking forward to hearing from the minister on this topic. A fulsome and healthy foster care system is essential in ensuring the safety of youth in care and to provide them with a welcoming, temporary, and loving home that will give them every opportunity to thrive and grow.

Minister, as part of your mandate you've been tasked with ensuring the stability of the foster care system and reducing the number of moves that these youth face at a moment's notice. I'd like to just jump in. This specifically was an issue that my constituents have raised. If there's a lot of movement through this process, it can often be disruptive, so I do think this is an important subject to dig into a bit. There are also a number of stressors that can impact this work.

According to line item 2.4 of the government estimates foster care and kinship supports will account for \$250 million of the ministry's expenses. Through the chair, what is the government doing to address foster caregiver shortages and ensure children are able to find stability during what must be a challenging and difficult time for them? Also, how is the government helping foster caregivers keep up with rising costs associated with caring for children or youth placed with them? I certainly look forward to

hearing from the minister. Both adoption and foster care are critical issues that are under his portfolio. Excited to hear those responses.

Now, through the chair, I would like to cede the rest of my time to MLA Wiebe.

Mr. Wiebe: Well, thank you. Thank you, MLA Lundy. Through the chair to the minister: I'll continue with some of my questions around caregiving, and this is specific to the rates that caregivers receive. I'm really glad to hear that the government is listening to the foster caregivers and providing them with the essential boost in their caregiving rates to ensure that they have the financial support to effectively care for children in government care. I think I've seen a graphic on social media from the Alberta Foster and Kinship Association saying the same thing. Their rates have not gone up since 2018, and recent inflationary pressures significantly impact the ability to appropriately portion these funds to care for society's most vulnerable youth. These rate increases will represent a significant increase in the foster care budget for your ministry.

10:30

With that, I'm wondering if you could detail for us how much foster caregiver rates will increase by, and with how expensive groceries and clothing and everything else is, will these rates be indexed to inflation? To ensure dollars are being spent wisely, can you explain: what is the purpose of the caregiver rate, and what all can those funds be used for?

The next question is – I understand also that Children and Family Services collaborates with other Alberta government ministries as well as agencies, organizations, First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and urban Indigenous communities. Minister, given that your ministry interacts with many other groups to ensure that children and families and youth have access to supports, resources, and protection and intervention from harmful and sometimes violent situations, as noted on page 85 of the fiscal plan, what steps is the ministry taking to create safe communities by combatting human trafficking and domestic violence? Given the overlap and collaboration between your ministry and other government ministries, how do you ensure that nothing gets missed or lost between your ministry and others, especially when it comes to matters of individual or family safety?

Page 85 of the fiscal plan mentions \$15 million over the next three years [a cellphone rang] to support the implementation of Alberta's safe streets action plan, which holds . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll head to the minister now for his response.

Mr. Turton: Thank you so much, hon. members. I would say that I would actually personally be in favour if Bill Hader's soundtrack came on as the kickoff for new speaking arrangements, but we'll have to wait for another time for that.

You know, I thank the members for the questions. I would say that in my time as an elected official I clearly understand that there's always a passion reason why individuals decide to put their name in for public service. It's interesting, as I've met with elected officials, including many of the members here, that there are always one or two items that are a passion project for them, that cause them to spend so much time away from their families or their cats to be able to really try to make a difference, and for myself as the minister adoption would be that reason why I entered public service on the provincial side.

I know I've been very up front over many years about my support for trying to make adoption an easier place, an easier path forward for families to follow, for families that just simply want to have a child, to be able to provide forever homes for children. You know,

in this room I've mentioned in past years that, for myself, I've gone through the adoption process. My wife and I many years ago: we wanted to have another child and medically we couldn't, so we went down that path. I went and experienced first-hand many of the challenges that so many families across Alberta have faced when all they want to do is simply add to their family, when they want to be able to answer their kids' prayers at night when they get asked those questions: why can't I have a brother or sister like everybody else? That's the experience that we had to go through at the Turton household. That's why years ago, when I had the very first opportunity, in 2019 – and I'm very thankful that MLAs Singh and Lovely and Irwin were able to support my motion at that point, Motion 501, which really talked about urging the Alberta government to make adoption easier and more timely for families.

Very thankful that as part of my mandate adoption is part of that, because I get to be part of the solution to help make it so that families don't have to maybe go through the same onerous trek that I had to go through or so many other families that have reached out to me and told me their stories about the challenges that they had to face when they were simply trying to adopt. Nothing more breaks my heart when I hear a story about a family that started that process, years in and then just simply had to give up, had to lose hope because of financial reasons, just, you know, the process for home studies. That absolutely breaks my heart because I realize it's just not a mom or dad that is not able to experience a young child in their lives, but there's also a young child that may not be able to experience a truly loving home.

You know, in terms of the question from Member Lundy – and I appreciate his passion for families. I know the riding he represents is very similar to mine, a lot of young families, and I know that this is an issue along with Member Wiebe as well. We're talking about family issues, about moms and dads simply wanting to add a child to their home for providing a safe place. That is universally respected right over the entire province. It doesn't matter if you're from La Crête to Medicine Hat to Claresholm all the way to Lloydminster.

In terms of some of the reducing or how we as a government have been able to reduce those barriers in the system, you know, we have shown actually great leadership when it comes to reducing the barriers to adoption for Albertan families, and we're continuing to build on that good work. That has really stemmed on not just my Motion 501 a couple of years ago but so many MLAs that have had a passion for this individual project.

So far we've taken important steps to make this process more efficient. We've actually reduced the time it takes to complete a government home-study report by a month and a half, from five months down to three months. That's significant. As someone that has gone through these home-study programs, personally, for multiple years – I think I had mentioned it in this room before, in past years – from the time I did my first home study to the time when we were actually able to enter an amazing little boy into our home was almost three years; three years for families. So knowing that we can continuously move the bar to make it easier for families to be able to get the home studies taken care of, to me, is significant. That's one step of many.

I know that there are three licensed adoption agencies here in Alberta, and they receive one-time grants to assist with the cost of posting adoptive parents' profiles online. We've streamlined the information sessions on government adoption and private guardianship, making them more accessible for Albertans interested in learning more about these processes. Again, we want to be able to ensure that Albertans know that adoption is a viable option if you're either looking to expand your family or if you're willing to be able to put your child up for adoption.

I just appreciate the courageous decision by those moms and dads when they decide to make that decision, and I appreciate each and every one of them. I know how hard it is because I had long conversations with the adoptee mom and dad when I adopted a child, listening to their heart and hearing about how they just simply wanted their child to have a good home. I just wanted to commend those parents for those courageous decisions about putting up their child for adoption.

On the affordability side I know we're working hard to make sure financial barriers don't stand in the way of a child finding a permanent, loving home. We've introduced enhanced adoption supports, including an increased adoption expense tax credit as well as subsidies to help families with licensed agency adoption costs. I heard clearly from families that have gone down this process about the financial burdens that they have to go through just to simply add to their family. No family should have to worry about if they should remortgage their house two or three times to be able to generate enough funds to be able to go through the adoption process. As a government we've taken enormous steps to make sure that families have the additional financial tools that they need to be able to go down that path and not be so concerned about those onerous financial ramifications.

I'm incredibly proud that Alberta will also be one of the only provinces to support a supplemental health benefits coverage for children and youth who were adopted within Alberta through adoption or private guardianship in the government program and for adoptions through licensed adoption agencies. Again, this is another key metric in how as a government we are moving the bar forward to help support parents.

10:40

I know first-hand, again, and from the conversations with many families there eventually becomes a point after you adopt a child where you start wondering about your new child's medical background: if there were issues of heart disease or cancer or some other type of medical malady that you should be aware of. With natural-born children, obviously, we just have to look at our own respective family trees to be able to see what the family medical history is, but for an adopted family this creates an extra stress that they have to be able to deal with.

Having the decisions made to provide those supplemental health benefits for adopted children takes into consideration those added mental concerns that parents have when they're dealing with: what are the potential medical ramifications that they may have to go through as a family? The messages and correspondence that I've received from all corners of this province show appreciation and the acknowledgement that this is a step that can reduce significantly the mental health issues for many adoptive parents.

I know Children and Family Services has made also in other aspects in terms of in Budget 2024 about helping the adoption process. In last year's budget we introduced adoption tax credit and subsidies with licensed agencies as well as the supplemental health benefits, but we have also increased the number of supports through improving affordability through an indexed increase to the caregiver rate schedule. This helps out foster care parents as well because this was, again, one of the largest concerns that we heard when it came to hindrances to foster care parents.

Foster care parents and adoptive parents: I know at the AFKA conference that we had there in Jasper just last year, you really see these two worlds coming together, sharing their stories about families that are willing to open up their hearts and their homes and look after some absolutely amazing kids. Again, hearing those concerns about how we can help support foster care parents, to MLA Wiebe's comment, was actually the largest ask by foster care

parents that we have received as a ministry over the last year. Again, another example of a promise made and a promise kept. I know it makes a difference to those amazing foster care parents, and we know it's going to make a difference for so many children right around the entire province.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now we will move over to the NDP side. Thank you.

Member Batten: Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister, through the chair, for his answers. I want to pick back up with child intervention. Again, I'm looking at outcome 1, the well-being, resiliency, and cultural connections of children, youth, and families are supported, and children and youth are protected, page 31 of the business report.

I would like to move into one of the, I guess – well, I shouldn't guess – sadder areas where sometimes, unfortunately, when our children and youth are taken in care, the unfortunate thing is that they pass away while they are still in care. I would like to discuss that a little bit today. Twenty twenty-three was the deadliest year on record. We lost 50 – that's five zero – children and youth who were in care at the time or within two years of being in care.

Mr. Singh: Point of order.

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

Member, please proceed.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. The point of order is under Standing Order 23(b), the member "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion." The committee has convened for the purpose of considering the ministry's 2024 budget, including estimates, fiscal plan, and business plan. The matter that has been raised by the member is not within the boundaries of this said topic. The matter of deaths of children in care that was mentioned by the hon. member is outside of the topic at hand of the committee today, thereby making it a point of order under Standing Order 23.

The Chair: Proceed, Member.

Member Irwin: Thanks. I'm going to try to keep my cool. This is incredibly frustrating, and that member should be ashamed and embarrassed.

Mr. Singh: Point of order.

Member Irwin: My colleague from Calgary-Acadia is doing incredible work, and she literally just referred to outcome 1 in the business plan. You know, we've been incredibly lenient with the members opposite. There have been multiple times where they've not made business plan references or budget line references, and we're fine with that because we know it comes back to the work at hand. Again, I would please urge that member to stop with the ridiculous points of order so that we can continue and that we can discuss these critically important issues for Albertans.

The Chair: Thank you to both sides for bringing this forward. I know this is a very sensitive topic, and if we could please avoid talking about the number of deaths, I think that's causing the sensitivity for everyone.

Member Irwin: Absolutely not, Madam Chair.

The Chair: I think that's what the point is.

Member Irwin: The number of deaths is something referred to multiple times in the business plan. This is a key issue. Even the minister himself has talked about that, and I respect him enough to know that he would likely disagree with your point as well. This is a critical issue for Children and Family Services.

The Chair: Well, then I'll say this: please, if you could get to your question, and if the minister chooses to answer it, then we'll leave it with him.

Member Batten: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Wright: Madam Chair, if I may, there was a second point of order called by the same member.

The Chair: A point of order actually cannot be called during a point of order.

Mr. Wright: I apologize and withdraw.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Singh: The second point of order was towards the other member who was defending the point of order. Madam Chair, the point of order is under Standing Order 23(j). The member has used abusive . . .

Some Hon. Members: You're out of order.

Mr. Singh: . . . or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder. Madam Chair, the hon. member has used abusing and insulting language towards me, and that is not appropriate to good parliamentary practice and which is trying to create an uncomfortable position on the part of me.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

To the opposition.

Member Irwin: I mean, I believe that's out of order, right? So there's no point in arguing this. I think we can all just agree to move on and stop with the points of order.

The Chair: Well, I'll say this: please let us keep decorum here in the room and allow the minister to answer the questions. If we could just be respectful on both sides of the table, I would appreciate that.

Let's resume.

Member Batten: Thank you, Madam Chair. Again, outcome 1 from the business report, page 31, referring to child intervention, and part of that, unfortunately, is deaths in care. I will repeat that last year was the deadliest year on record. The numbers for this year, however, are incomplete in that we have one more month to capture, so the month of March has not been captured. However, we do know that we've lost 32 children and youth with a whole month left. Suffice to say that the government's not doing enough. Through the chair to the minister: can he provide concrete actions, plans, and strategies to help support these youths and be able to intervene in time to prevent this loss?

Madam Chair, the Deaths of Children, Youth and Young Adults Receiving Intervention Services report, page 2 indicates the methods by which these lives were lost. As of February of the 32 reported deaths, 20 of them are listed as pending. Through the chair to the minister: can the minister provide details as to the actions and plans that he has made to support medical examiners or forensic pathologists so that they can learn – well, so that they can complete

their job, and we can learn the cause of death for these children and youth and then we can implement new interventions to save others? Has he discussed these concerns with the Minister of Health? The same report shares that almost 50 per cent of these deaths occurred within two years of exiting government care.

I will eventually go back and discuss the TAP program, or the transition into adulthood program, but we'll discuss that when I get back. Apologies for that.

We, of course, have a Child and Youth Advocate who is an independent body from the government who provides recommendations to the government based on the investigations that the deaths reveal. I'll mention again that we have 20 cases pending; 20 cases where children and youth have died for which we do not know the cause and we cannot protect other children and youth from. The OCYA annual report page 34, still in relevance to outcome 1 on page 31 of the business report, indicates that the OCYA received 88 notices of serious injury or death. Of these young people, 31 people had received child intervention services within the last two years. Through the chair to the minister: can the minister provide clear details as to what the ministry is doing, planning, and strategizing to prevent these specific tragedies? How closely is the minister working with the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction in collaboration to support these lives?

10:50

Madam Chair, the same report, page 5 shows the deaths distribution by age. In addition to transitioning from care, there are two other age groups that are highly concerning. Ages zero to five represent 22 per cent of the deaths. Ages 13 to 15 represent 25 per cent of the deaths. My question to the minister is: can he provide concrete actions that he has taken so that interventions can happen before death? Ages zero to five are particularly vulnerable. Which supports and interventions are being provided for caregivers of these younger children? Ages 13 to 15 come with a completely different set of complexities. Can the minister, through the chair, provide insight into the actions already in progress, what he has planned for future interventions? Can we expect there to be legislation introduced to protect these children? What experts are being consulted, and what evidence-based resources is he using?

I'm also curious, Madam Chair, what upstream metrics the minister is using to predict outcomes, and is the ministry consulting with the families of these children to gather their input?

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

We'll move over to the minister.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the members for the questions. We are taking notes in terms of the questions being asked. I know that Member Batten and Member Wiebe asked a number of questions about foster care, but I didn't have a chance, really, to go into that. So I'll answer those questions, and then we'll make sure we get to the child intervention questions that Member Batten has asked.

Foster care, I'm very thankful, is another key aspect of my ministry. Children and Family Services' first priority is always to support parents to keep a child or youth safe while they are living in a family home. If a child cannot remain safely in parental care, family-based placements like foster care are the preferred option. As part of my July 2023 ministry mandate letter Children and Family Services has been tasked with developing and implementing improvements to the foster care system to reduce the number of moves and minimize disruption during a child's time in care and supporting kinship and foster families where appropriate to provide permanent homes and continuity of care for children.

Children and Family Services is very thankful to the caregivers who offer their hearts and their homes to look after so many children. I'd like to give a shout-out to Larry, who happens to live in – I'm slightly biased – the greatest riding in the province, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain, who was just recently celebrated with an award from the Alberta Foster and Kinship Association for being a foster care parent for over 50 years. Over 100 children have entered his home over those 50 years, and we were happy to acknowledge him. I was happy to bring him out to the budget here at the Legislature. He said it was the first time in his entire life that he had ever been to the Legislature. To listen to his stories about the demands that come across a foster care parent as well as the other conversations I had with foster care parents right around the entire province – I know last fall I had the privilege, and I do consider it a privilege, to attend the AFKA conference in Jasper, where foster and kinship care providers and families from all over the province were able to attend, share their stories, best practices, share some laughs, but also share some tears about the experiences that they had to go through as foster care parents. I appreciated the opportunity to be able to listen to their stories and to take into consideration their input about how we can make the system a better place.

My ministry is committed to reducing the number of moves and minimizing disruption during a child's time in care. Children and Family Services' foster care program provides temporary care for children and youth in care in a healthy, nurturing family environment. Children and Family Services is focused and will remain focused on fostering caregiving enhancements to retain and recruit caregivers, promote placement stability, improve caregiver recognition, just like Larry, and enhance the foster care system. In addition to the enhancements made in 2023 and 2024, we will be increasing financial supports to foster families by indexing rates annually to address inflation.

As Member Batten said, this was a key ask by foster care parents right around the entire province. It was their number one ask to the ministry over the last year. Many foster care parents have lovingly and eloquently told me that in my visits, as I've travelled around the province, in terms of the financial burden that so many foster care parents face when they're trying to just simply look after a child.

Foster caregivers can express interest in adopting or providing private guardianship of a child in their care as part of the permanency plan. They may also apply directly to the court to become the private guardian of a child in care of the ministry.

In terms of some of the other questions that have been brought up by some of the previous members, in terms of the number of foster care parents that we've had, as of December 31, 2023, there were 1,504 approved and licensed foster care homes, of which 1,397 foster care homes were managed by a region or off-reserve. In terms of additional breakdowns, as of December 2023 for foster homes, you had 860; for agency foster homes, you had 511; and for therapeutic foster homes, you had 26, and that's how we got to that 1,397.

This is a robust system that we have here in the province of Alberta. I've been very thankful to meet with associations such as AFKA to constantly get their feedback as well as from the individual foster care parents about their challenges that they face as they continue to look after children.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll head back to Peter now on the government side.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister here, I commend your dedication and commitment in your work in the ministry that supports child intervention, early childhood

development, foster and kinship care, adoption, improvements for children and youth, and prevention of family violence.

Minister, according to page 84 of the fiscal plan in 2024-2025 your operating expenses will be \$1.5 billion, excluding \$198 million in one-time payments in 2023-2024 under Alberta's affordability action plan. The increase in 2024-25 ministry operating expenses is \$61 million, or 4.3 per cent. I see that the increase is due mainly to measures to address the complexity of child intervention services as well as increased outlays of the Alberta child and family benefit. Can you please specify how this extra funding will be used in your ministry and why this increase in funding is essential to your ministry's operation?

Also, looking now at page 85 of the fiscal plan, especially the section on the Alberta child and family benefit, the ACFB provides low- and moderate-income Alberta families with a nontaxable benefit, and under the ACFB low-income families with two children are eligible for payments of up to \$3,641 for the 2024-2025 benefit year. Minister, how do the payments in the '24-25 benefit year compare with previous years? Also, is the ACFB indexed to inflation, and what is the total '24-25 ACFB spend or the total amount allotted for payments this year?

Is this an increase in funding? How does your ministry ensure that families who are eligible for the ACFB know about it and apply? In other words, what educational support do you provide to Albertans about the ACFB?

The Chair: Hon. member, if you would kindly direct the comments through the chair.

Mr. Singh: Madam Chair, through you to the minister, I know adoption is something that is very near and dear to your heart. I am incredibly grateful for the work you do to improve the system. Page 29 of the business plan talks about your role overseeing adoption in Alberta. And, Minister . . .

11:00

Member Arcand-Paul: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order has been called.

Member Arcand-Paul: Under 23(a). We've talked quite at length about adoption. I would just like to refrain and ask the chair to guide the discussion. I think we've had a lot of talk about adoption. We understand the minister's point, and we appreciate that the members are very passionate about this, but we've talked at length about adoption.

Thank you.

The Chair: Hon. member.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's not a point of order here. It's a matter of discussion. The question is put forward to the minister. If the minister wants to answer, it will be up to his discretion.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Sure. What I'll say about this is that if the member wants to ask more questions about adoption, we'll hear it.

Go ahead.

Mr. Singh: Madam Chair, through you to the minister: what supports or programs does your ministry provide to children in the adoption system and for families going through the adoption process? What burdens or obstacles are hindering the process, and how is your ministry working to address them? How do you balance

efficiency? And how is Budget 2024 helping families and children navigate the adoption process?

Madam Chair, through you to the minister, my next set of questions is on women's shelters. Minister, protecting vulnerable women and children is a key priority for the ministry as well as the government. The women who are arriving at these shelters are often going through the most challenging, difficult, and dark times of their lives. Ensuring the right supports are there for them when they arrive with their children and whatever belongings they are able to take with them while making sure they feel safe are the building blocks of giving them the control over their own lives that they deserve.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll hear from the minister now.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and thank you to Member Singh for your passion when it comes to families and ensuring that women and families are looked after. I will start off by answering your first question regarding page 84 of the fiscal plan and just some of your questions about how the extra funding can be used in my ministry and why this increase is just so essential to my ministry. Children and Family Services has a working relationship with Alberta Health Services and Alberta Mental Health and Addiction to offer the virtual opioid dependency program to youth in Alberta with a focus on those involved with child intervention services. This is another key reason and answer to some of the members opposite, who were asking about collaboration with other ministries. As a minister a key part of my role is to ensure that we continuously break down those silos, break down those barriers between ministries and look for areas of crossministerial co-operation. I will say that I have had many meetings with Minister Williams in Mental Health and Addiction to look for collaborative ways that we can continue to help youth here in the province.

The initial expansion started in March of 2023 with three Children and Family Services suboperated campus-based treatment centres and one community agency where a streamlined process was piloted to support timely enrolment in this program. In December of 2023 this piloted streamlined process was expanded to other facilities, with a plan for further expansion to facilities and settings serving in-care youth. Again, we want to be able to create a wide spectrum of programs and services to be able to help out children no matter where they are. I appreciate, again, the amazing team at Children and Family Services for their ability to be able to help children where they are.

Mental Health and Addiction, I'll put forth, has provided \$1.5 million in 2022-23 to cover the initial expansion costs, and Children and Family Services provided \$1.5 million in 2023-24 and will provide funding for another \$1.5 million in 2024 and 2025 to support ongoing operating costs. Again, a tangible way that as the Ministry of Children and Family Services we are working with other ministries to find proactive ways to be able to help youth in our province.

Additionally, this funding will be strategically allocated to support increasing case complexity, which I know is a concern for many members here, in child intervention through focused procurement activities, ensuring high-quality and evidence-informed services for vulnerable children, youth, and families. These procurement initiatives, which include the ongoing tendering of community group care services and the upcoming tendering of foster care services and family preservation and intervention services, are designed to ensure that the right services and supports, focused on optimal outcome achievement, are readily available for children, youth, and families. This funding is also being allocated towards

ensuring safe environments, and the commitment of Children and Family Services to ensuring safe environments extends to an increase in funding for our contracted therapeutic campus-based treatment centres. Again, just part of the spectrum of care that we help provide for families right across Alberta.

Regarding ACFB, as you know, Member, the Alberta child and family benefit is now indexed to inflation. The increase to the budget is to support the annual indexation of eligibility and benefits and support population growth, another firm example about how our government has been able to address some of the affordability concerns that we have heard from families right around the entire province.

I know that there were a couple of last questions that you did have about adoption, so I'll spend the last couple of seconds just kind of talking about that. Regarding the actual adoption process, there are four types of adoption in Alberta, and they all have separate processes and timelines. First of all, we have government adoptions, and these are children that are adopted through this process, through the permanent guardianship order or permanent guardianship agreement. We also have adoption that comes through a licensed private agency within Alberta. I'm very thankful for the feedback we've been able to get from the various agencies. I've met with each and every one of them numerous times, and I know that they are always a passionate group and always quick to tell me about suggestions that we can do to make the adoption process easier. The third option for families to be able to adopt is from another country, and that is an approach that I took for my family, along with other Albertans. And the fourth is direct placement for adoption, or step-parent adoption.

Thank you again for your amazing questions there, MLA Singh.

The Chair: All right. Over to the other side.

Member Batten: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister for his answers. To continue where I had stopped, I'm still discussing child intervention, outcome 1, the well-being, resiliency, culture connections of children, youth, and families are supported and children and youth are protected, page 31 of the business report from '24-27. I had just finished presenting the stats, the terrible stats, unfortunately, on the number of young children who had passed, and my question, that I hadn't had a chance to ask, through the chair to the minister, is: honestly, where are the funds allocated in this budget?

The same report on page 4 shows the ratio of Indigenous and non-Indigenous deaths. Madam Chair, 63 per cent of all children and youth in care of government or within two years of care of government in the last 11 months have been Indigenous. Of note, Indigenous people only represent 6 to 11 per cent of our entire Albertan population. Through the chair to the minister: can the minister provide concrete actions and strategies to address this disproportionality? Which elders were consulted? Were caregivers of the children and youth consulted?

Madam Chair, given the unique cultural connection specifically to children of First Nation and cultural heritage, that connection is so very important and can honestly be life-saving. Through the chair to the minister: where in the budget is the minister addressing this?

The strategic plan from '24-27, page 23, priority 2 is "forming lasting and meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities." Through the chair to the minister: can the minister explain why children in care are not mentioned in this goal? Given the disproportion of Indigenous children and youth who are dying in care of the government, why is this not listed there? Through the chair to the minister: will the minister commit to championing the

inclusion and consideration of children and youth in the next strategic plan? Through the chair, what are the minister's plans to facilitate Indigenous children and youth to learn their language and to participate in ceremony?

11:10

Continuing on, Madam Chair, again in the business plan 2024-27, page 31, outcome 1. The safety, resiliency, and cultural connections of children, youth, and families are supported and children and youth are protected. This is clearly an important consideration for priority 2 of the strategic plan, page 23, yet I cannot see any funds allocated to connect with culture and Indigenous children who are not served directly by the DFNAs.

In 2023, Madam Chair, the ministry reported that only 33 per cent of First Nations children were actually being served by the DFNAs. So that leaves about 67 per cent who are not. Given the disproportionality of Indigenous children and youth in care of the government, my question to the minister is: what performance metric is being used to determine adequate ongoing tailored connection to culture and family? Who is evaluating this? Is it the government of Alberta or the nation to which the child belongs? Through the chair, can the minister confirm that this budget does not contain additional funds for this outcome?

Further, Madam Chair, recommendation 2 from the OCYA states:

The Ministry of Children's Services should examine the connections for each Indigenous child in care of the Director, and identify tailored actions that build and strengthen connections with their families, community, and culture.

This, again, is clearly an important consideration for priority 2. Through the chair, can the minister provide examples where he has continued this work? What resources are being used, who is being consulted, and what metric will be used to demonstrate success? And where in the budget can I find funds earmarked to support these initiatives?

Recommendation 3 is:

The Ministry of Children's Services should publicly report on summary findings from their examination of all Indigenous children and their unique connections to their families, communities, and cultures within 12 months and provide ongoing annual updates.

Again, vital for the success for outcome 1. So my question, through the chair to the minister is: can the minister provide examples of where he's considered this work? What resources are being used? Who is being consulted? What metrics are being used to demonstrate success? When should Albertans expect this report? And, again, which budget line is this work being funded under?

The OCYA has made more than 30 recommendations, only four of which have been deemed complete by the advocate. Through the chair to the minister: can the minister commit right now to demonstrating concrete actions and strategies to meet the remaining recommendations?

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Turton: Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for that question. You know, just before I begin, again I just want to highlight that there is no greater tragedy than the death of a child and my heart absolutely goes out and grieves alongside any of the families that are grieving the loss of a loved one. It's never easy.

Children and Family Services, I just want to also stress, has a legislated accountability to review the deaths and serious injuries of children, youth, and young adults receiving intervention services.

When a child receiving intervention services dies or is seriously injured, my ministry reports it publicly and conducts a rigorous, transparent examination about what happened, to determine if improvements to the services we deliver are needed to prevent a similar tragedy and affect another family. There have been notable and concerning increases in the number of deaths of children in previous years, and the increase of deaths has largely been due to accidental deaths caused by illicit substance abuse. Our government remains committed to addressing the opioid crisis right across the province.

To start, we have made significant improvements to training, policy, and practice to better assist practitioners who serve children and youth with mental health and addiction challenges. This includes mandatory suicide prevention training as well as mandatory opioid and substance use training for child intervention practitioners, enhanced safety planning policy and substance use policy, and technology improvements to the child intervention database that allow for early identification of youth for individuals between 16 and 17 who need a little extra attention due to risk.

In addition, my ministry has implemented a partnership, as I mentioned previously, with Mental Health and Addiction and Alberta Health Services to expand the virtual opioid dependency program to youth struggling with opioid dependency, with a focus on children and youth receiving child intervention services.

We recognize that a child's involvement in and a connection to their culture, again, cultivates a strong sense of identity and leads to better outcomes. One of the questions that the member asked was specifically about: what progress has been made regarding the review of deaths in youth receiving intervention services? Several mandatory reviews are automatically triggered whenever there is a case involving the death of a child receiving child intervention services. In addition to those mandatory reviews, an internal review was conducted to address the increase in deaths between the years 2021 and '22. The review of deaths of children and youth receiving child intervention services looks closely at the circumstances, and the most common causes of death were accidental and medical natural deaths, with many of the accidental classified cases involving drug overdoses.

We recognize that drug addiction in Alberta and across Canada is a real problem. In response, my ministry has introduced a system for early identification of youth who may need extra attention and supports, expanded access to addictions programming for vulnerable children and youth, provided Narcan and training for its use to Children and Family Services staff working with children and youth who may be at risk of overdose – Children and Family Services will also be procuring further Narcan, for the members' information, for distribution to the Children and Family Services staff in 2024 to bolster supply and ensure that it is available when it is needed – and then increased placement options for children and youth in care with significant addiction, mental health, and behavioural needs. These are all clear-cut ways that we've been able to address the issues when it comes to children that die. Again, my heart absolutely goes out to those families.

The members also talked extensively about the OCYA recommendations that are put forth. I appreciate the work that the OCYA does because I know that those recommendations come from a good place in terms of trying to make an improvement to the system. I look forward to getting those recommendations each and every year because I also have a shared, vested interest in making sure that Alberta is a safer place for children. Children and Family Services will take all OCYA recommendations issued to CFS and ensure that they have been actioned in a way that will make a positive difference for children and families.

Five recommendations are actively being implemented, and we are proud of the tremendous work that we have done to date in response to the advocate's recommendations. CFS shares with the advocate the priority of continuous improvement through the review process. This is seen through the high value we place on the advocate's recommendations, which I alluded to, as well as our own internal comprehensive review of every serious injury or death of a child and the subsequent policy and programming changes in response, again, key ways that we've been able to improve the system to make it safer for children.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the government side.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Minister, to you through the chair, what a heartfelt story we've heard about the survival lady trying to pitch her own tent in the middle of the storm. I had an opportunity to do a survival drill with my kids, going out in the wilderness for three days trying to teach them survival. I tell you that it gets really scary when you're out there in an environment you don't control and where you don't have, you know, a roof over your head and you have to make something up. As you were telling the story, I could feel it, because until you experience that wilderness, it's very hard to imagine that.

The Chair: Sorry. I don't mean to – there seems to be some conversation happening between the two sides. If we could kindly listen to the member who is speaking. I'm having trouble hearing him.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate that.

Today I'll be talking about a couple of topics, and my question would be specifically to the \$10 million in the line items and to the Indigenous file as well, that is dear to me.

Finishing up my preamble on how important the women's shelters are in Alberta, I have a personal friend who, because of a women's shelter, is with her family, with her kids today. You know, some of the situations in our life are outcomes of our own actions we're taking. But when it comes to the most vulnerable women in our life, sometimes it starts from a simple fight, a family fight in the morning, and it can escalate into something drastic. Having, you know, that \$10 million added to women's shelters is a big item in the question here. Again, we're thankful to the minister for the amount of work you're putting in. This file is one of the hardest files to deal with because you're dealing with the tragedies of every day.

11:20

Pertaining to the \$10 million, protecting the most vulnerable and children is a key priority for the ministry as well as the government. The women who are arriving at these shelters are often going through the most challenging times in their lives. It's probably the darkest time of their lives. Ensuring the right supports are there for them when they are arriving with their children and whatever they have on them at that moment – it's probably the only items they have in their life – is very important and to make them feel safe. These are the building blocks for this government and this specific portfolio for women's shelters.

My specific question. This government was elected with a commitment to provide an additional \$10 million for women's emergency shelters over the next four years. Can you please speak to the progress of this commitment and the recent announcement of this? I am sure that you have had many opportunities, besides what you've told us already, to meet and engage with women's shelters

across the province during your time as minister. What have you heard from the staff? How will this funding make a difference in this essential work that you are doing as the minister?

With the remaining minute of time I have, I would like to switch to the Indigenous portfolio. As the parliamentary secretary for Indigenous Relations my next question is also very dear to me, because the work that our government is doing with Indigenous kids is super important. Key objective 1.2 of the business plan outlines the work your ministry is doing with the First Nations and the government of Canada as well to implement An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families, which enables transfer of authority over the child and family service delivery. Working with the First Nations is a key commitment of this government, and it is great to see that your ministry is collaborating and prioritizing your work with the First Nations as well. Can you explain the process of transferring authority over child and family service delivery? How are you supporting this transfer, and how are you ensuring consistency and thoroughness?

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

To the minister.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you again, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for the question. Again, I'll touch base a little bit about women's shelters, and then I will talk a little bit about some of your last questions, which I know were mentioned by some other members as well, about how we are ensuring that Indigenous children remain safe.

As you mentioned, there was the key announcement regarding the funding for women's shelters earlier this week. From the round-table discussions that we had over a month ago, this was pretty clear in terms of the need and desire by operators and staff right around the entire province to have that initial stimulus to help stabilize the system, as they said. Again, I think this announcement of the \$5 million from this year's fiscal was a clear-cut way that as a ministry we were able to meet that promise. We were able to meet that need and be able to provide that \$5 million for women's shelters right across the province.

Something that I didn't mention in my earlier comments as well, that was widely received and supported and asked for at the round-table and my visits around the province, was actually the loosening of reporting requirements for women's shelters. It came across loud and clear as well when I was travelling around the province, meeting with women's shelters about the demands that they have to be able to do in terms of the paperwork, the red tape, that they have to be able to work with the government of Alberta in order to receive the funding. By loosening up the requirements, giving them more flexibility – this was another key requirement that they were asking for at a round-table, again, another example of how we are listening to their needs so that they can continue to do the amazing work that they need to do to keep women safe.

In terms of the actual budget itself, I know that with the \$5 million that was announced just earlier this week from this fiscal, it also talks about in Budget 2024 an additional \$1.5 million in this upcoming year, an additional \$1.5 million in operational funding, and \$2 million as well to add to the budget over three years. Again, these are significant investments. For example and for context, 10 years ago the annual funding for women's shelters was approximately \$48 million. Budget 2024, if passed, will have increased that to \$55.8 million, with the additional \$5 million in one-time funding that will be used to fund unfunded beds.

I mean, again, these are significant investments to make sure, as you put it, Member, that for those women that need help the most, that are truly experiencing one of the worst days of their lives, they

will continue to have support. It is part of an ongoing conversation. I look forward to having those conversations, both with ACWS as well as other women's shelters, about looking for additional ways that we can continue to help support these women.

I know there were some other questions that you had as well regarding about where in the budget lines were the connections to help support the relationships that we had with First Nations communities. Budget line item 5.2 consists of the Indigenous and community connections branch, and that is the fine, outstanding group of individuals that are used, really, to do the great work of working with our First Nations partners.

I know another one of the questions that you did put forth was about the process of transferring authority over to child and family services, you know, regarding First Nations communities. When an Indigenous governing body, an IGB, enacts their law over child and family services for their members, children, and youth, my ministry will work collaboratively with the IGB to support a smooth transition to their law. Alberta supports transition by meeting with the IGB on a regular basis, from the time they enact the law until transfer authority is complete, to ensure operational co-ordination, consistency, and thoroughness throughout the transfer process.

Again, we want to make sure that the relationship works, that it continues to be strengthened. We want to make sure that First Nations communities receive support to be able to begin down that path where they can start looking after their own child intervention services. The Alberta government continues to provide services to families until the transfer of authority to First Nations is complete, and it works closely with First Nations for the safety and well-being of the children and their families. My ministry has assisted with the transition of authority by providing different supports to support transition planning and ensure the continuity of services for vulnerable children and youth.

Again, there are numerous examples of positive relationships between my ministry and First Nations communities as we transfer over child intervention services, so I'm thankful for the amazing leadership of First Nations leaders.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Over to the Official Opposition.

Member Batten: Thank you, Madam Chair and again to the ministry for the answers. Just before I start up again, I would like to of course offer the – I know I'm asking a number of questions that, of course, we can't quite answer in this time, so I would happily accept the answers in writing. I'd be happy to provide the questions if that would make everything easier.

Just picking up again where I had left off so, again, still child intervention, we were specifically discussing the different recommendations from the OCYA, so just continuing on that. Through the chair to the minister, when can Albertans expect the recommendations that are pending to be done? What resources are being used? Who is being consulted? What metric is being used to demonstrate success? And, through the chair to the minister, can you explain why the government has ruled some successful where the advocate has not agreed? Also, where is this work inside the budget?

On page 23 of the strategic plan priority 2 is "forming lasting and meaningful partnership with Indigenous communities." Madam Chair, this is the government of Alberta's continued partnership with Indigenous communities in Alberta to pursue reconciliation, inclusion, opportunity, and community well-being, including safety. The page goes on to describe supporting communities: that the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation allocates funds to part of the First Nations development fund; training opportunities; et

cetera. It ends with the commitment of the government to implement the Alberta Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls roadmap. But you know what's not mentioned here, Madam Chair? Again, there's no mention of the disproportionate number of Indigenous children and youth. As of December '23, 75 per cent of children in care identified as Indigenous, and this number is increasing. That comes from page 2 of the child intervention information stats.

11:30

There is also no mention of the disproportionate number of Indigenous children dying in care. As of February 29 63 per cent of those children who have died in the last 11 months identified as Indigenous. So my question to the minister, through the chair, is: why wouldn't child interventions be part of forming lasting and meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities? What would the minister like me to tell my stakeholders who are very aware of this oversight? What is the ministry doing having been confronted with overwhelming evidence that there is a major problem in child intervention, specifically concerning those who identify as Indigenous? Can the minister provide concrete actions, plans, and long-term strategies that this ministry is championing? And, Madam Chair, to the minister: does everything I've been talking about still fit in budget line 2.2? That's a lot of things that we've promised with not a lot of funding, so I'm really hoping for those answers from the minister.

I'm just going to pop back over to when children are assessed and they're transitioning out of care, so I am moving to, actually, budget item 3.2 on page 63 of the estimates. The program is a transition to adulthood program, or TAP. It's meant to support youth in care as they transition into independent living and adulthood. It corresponds, again, like I said, to budget line 3.2. In the strategic plan it indicates that the government is focused on improving supports, focusing on mentoring, educational attainment, employment readiness, and connection to other supports.

Now, this is a newer program. It did replace the support and financial assistance agreement, or SFAA, and I believe the minister had said that it came into effect in 2022. This program has received mixed reviews from stakeholders and the children themselves. In addition to the chaos of changing the system and the major change to the eligibility, where services, financial and other vital supports, start at age 18 and end at 22 the prior program, the SFAA, supported youth right to the age of 24 whereas now ages 22 to 24 no longer receive financial support, through the chair to the minister: can we explain why we are leaving these youths in a bind when they turn 22? Does it really save the government sufficient funds to justify the continued removal of financial care for these youths transitioning, and which budget line indicates the savings from the unnecessary and devastating cut?

I've also heard, Madam Chair, concerns that TAP is more suited for youths in foster care than for high-risk populations. Can the minister, through the chair, provide insight on how the SFAA and TAP compare when looking through the lens of a highly vulnerable...

The Chair: Thank you.

Now over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Turton: Yes, thank you again so much, Madam Chair, for the question. For the next couple of minutes I'm just going to talk about some of the questions that have been recurring and about overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth with child intervention. In terms of just a couple of the questions to answer: the funding for child intervention is nearly \$895 million. It is easily

the biggest part of my budget, and a large part of that continues to be to look after and ensure that Indigenous children are looked after.

In terms of the budget line 5.2, which consists of the Indigenous and community connections branch, just to provide a little bit of additional clarification, this budget item consists primarily of staffing to support the ministry's work with Indigenous communities, leaders, and partners to strengthen relationships and develop collaborative strategies to support Indigenous children, youth, and families. It also implements the Children and Family Services subtables that are part of the larger formal agreements between the government of Alberta and Indigenous communities, again, another key reason and way that we've been able to have those conversations with First Nations leaders right around the entire province. I don't want to understate the incredible work and the suggestions and the collaboration that we've been able to have at those subtables. It also leads public and stakeholder engagements for the ministry.

This budget also includes contracts for the implementation of Indigenous cultural understanding and training across the department. The branch works with several Indigenous learning institutions, organizations, and communities to develop and deliver Indigenous cultural understanding learning opportunities to CFS staff, again, to clearly answer your questions regarding concrete steps that we've been able to do to move down the path towards reconciliation and ensure that our kids and Indigenous children are looked after.

One of the other questions that the member asked was about the measurement of success and: how have we been improving these processes? Child intervention practitioners are guided by the child intervention practice framework, which includes six core principles: Indigenous experience, preserve family, strengths based, connection, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Now, connection is where children and youth are supported to maintain relationships that are important to them, be connected to their own culture, and practise their religious or spiritual beliefs and, for those with involvement, have a plan for their care where they're included in the decision-making progress. The CIP principles are woven through the enhancement policy manual. Again, concrete ways that as a ministry they work towards reconciliation. Ensuring that we have those close cultural connections with our Indigenous partners and nations here in Alberta interwoven and involved with every aspect of how we do business at Children and Family Services. This is an extremely important aspect of how we continuously look after children.

All children and youth in care are required to have a culturally appropriate service plan. We really want to make sure that they have those connections with their families. To answer the member's question, section 2.1.3 of the manual: it speaks to cultural connections planning that is required from the first point of contact for Indigenous children and/or youth and requires ongoing consultations with a First Nation designate, Inuit, and/or Métis resource person. Section 2.1.1: it speaks of the requirements under An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families as well as the guiding principles and matters to be considered under the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act that are to be met when working with a child, youth, or family who is Indigenous or who identifies as being Indigenous.

I know that there are questions. I know, as well, that you mentioned about the ongoing relationship. A key part, like I mentioned earlier, was about the subtables that we have with First Nations leaders right around the entire province. Again, I just don't want to understate the importance about: this is a primary way that First Nations leaders and communities can provide input directly into Children and Family Services about looking for ways to

improve the system. At Children and Family Services we remain committed to the successful work that these tables are doing.

Under three government of Alberta agreements with Indigenous organizations Children and Family Services have established subtables with Blackfoot Confederacy, Stoney Nakoda-Tsuut'ina Tribal Council, and the Métis nations of Alberta to collaborate on mutual priorities. Again, ways that we've been able to showcase and to really highlight the important work that Indigenous leaders have when it comes to receiving their input for the safety and well-being of all of their children.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now over to the government side.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Madam Chair. If the minister would like, I'd like to go block time.

Mr. Turton: Yes, please.

Mr. Wright: Perfect.

Through you, Madam Chair to the minister, Minister, I'd like to take a couple of minutes to share a bit of a story with you. Growing up, I had a really close friend of mine who actually grew up in the system, and to hear his struggles, it was very important for me to be able to ask some questions. Now, in his time, his biggest struggle was, honestly, the transition from the programs and supports that were in place to when he struck out on his own as an independent adult. Now, I know and I think many of us around the table here could really speak to the fact that as youth are transitioning to young adults, they're balancing social lives, learning how to pay bills, learning in school, finding work, and then trying to balance the healing process that is going on through this.

Now, page 31 of the ministry's business plan outlines a key support initiative specifically around the safety, resilience, cultural connection of children, families, and youth and families are supported and children and youth are protected. It shows that there's \$981.3 million allocated to support youth with child intervention involvement, transition to adulthood, mentoring supports, and advancing futures bursary program. I was wondering if you could, (a), break down specifically what that \$981.3 million is going towards and how it will support children and youth around Alberta, especially like my friend in southeast Alberta. What type of post intervention supports and services are provided to young adults to help them transition out of care into adulthood, and how many young adults does the transition to adulthood program serve at this point in time? What would you say to some of the critics who indicate that the transition to adulthood program is not meeting the needs or properly supporting youth transition out of government care?

11:40

Then if we could transition – I've got a couple of minutes left – also to the mentorship grants. I think the mentorship of youth and even into our young adults is absolutely vital for us to be able to continue to grow as a society and really push forward as a province. Minister through the chair to you, I think that we've heard here a lot about how children and youth and families in this province are looking for a better future, much like my friend Dayna. Whether they've been involved in child intervention, foster care, or folks that have been at our women's shelters or sexual assault centres, people that interact with your ministry do so because they're looking for an opportunity and a chance to create a better life for themselves, to leave absolutely harmful situations. I think that one of the best

ways we can do that, especially for children, is through early intervention.

Now, line item 3 and the mentorship program: what supports do you have across the province for early intervention that may help children and youth across the province? Can you provide us, Minister, some details on some of the different types of mentoring that are out there? Do a lot of these programs overlap with their supports? Again, Madam Chair through you to the minister: I'm sure it's difficult to track but can you try to give us a sense of how many young people are in a better place or on a better path now because of interventions into mentoring programs in this province?

The last set of questions, Minister. Key objective 1.4 of your ministry's business plan states that you are committed to providing accessible and culturally relevant programs and services to Albertans impacted by family and sexual violence. Through working with community-based organizations, you are supporting a continuum of programs that prevent and address family violence and sexual violence. Can you explain the importance of enabling a wide range of accessibility to this type of programming for everyday Albertans?

In '24-25, \$84.6 million is allocated to support the continuum of programs through funded community-based organizations that provide family violence and sexual violence support. How will this funding support organizations and also support an awareness of family violence and sexual violence in Alberta? I ask because we've got a great program in Medicine Hat known as the Sanare Centre, and I'm sure they would love to hear some of the answers to some of these questions.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

To the minister.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for the question. I always appreciate the opportunity to talk about some of the additional supports that we offer young children and youth that are aging out of care. The TAP program is certainly one of the programs that receives a lot of my attention in terms of making sure that it meets the needs of Albertans. Our government is making it easier, as you alluded to, for children and youth in government care and young adults who were previously in care to transition successfully into adulthood. As I stated with so many of the other topics that we've talked about here tonight, being a kid or youth today is hard, and we want to make sure that for those children and youth that are aging out of the system, they continue to receive support, so that we can continue to empower them and enable them to have the appropriate levels of support so that they can transition into adulthood. That's why we have the TAP program, or the transition to adulthood program.

Government supports for young adults were previously provided through mostly a financially focused program, but the transition to adult program, or TAP, provides much more than financial assistance. It provides a consistent wholistic program that offers pathways to customized support that will help young adults transitioning to adulthood find mentors, employment, and life skills development, transitioning also on pathways to get postsecondary education and maintaining connections to people in their lives who can give them ongoing emotional support.

As I've travelled around the province, I've been amazed by the stories that have come to me from individuals that have gone through the TAP program. There was one young Indigenous woman. I'll never forget the conversation. She talked about coming through foster care, entering the TAP program, and all of a sudden now she's looking at going for a medical degree and becoming a doctor. She wouldn't have been able to utilize those educational

opportunities if it wasn't for the TAP program. To know that we have pathways here in Alberta that are unique to our province – we truly are national leaders when it comes to offering supports for youth that are aging out of care. Seeing those success stories, where this amazing young woman is now actually able to seriously think about a successful lifetime in medicine: to me, that absolutely warms my heart. Or else you hear about the other young gentleman I was chatting with who was so excited to tell me about his ongoing future as a welder and being able to work up in Fort McMurray, again, tangible benefits about how we are able to provide appropriate supports for these amazing young kids.

In terms of some of the supports and how we've been able to offer these supports for children, they come through a number of programs through CFS. We have the transition to adulthood program, which is TAP. We have advancing futures. We have youth employment and youth apprenticeship connection programs. We have mentoring for youth and young adults from care – it's something that you alluded to, Member – the foster caregivers caring for young adults initiative, the Connections app, the RESP for child and youth care program, and our Youth Advisory Task Force.

Again, these are all key ways that as a ministry we've been able to continuously support these young youth as they progress into adulthood. The total program is approximately \$85.6 million. You know, it's a key investment I know that we've been able to make, again, as well as with our mentorship grants. I know that's something that the member talked about.

The mentorship grant: it does make a significant difference in a young person's life. Mentoring helps young people develop confidence, self-esteem, and social skills, and it helps them learn practical job skills to meet the demands of the labour market, again, enabling and empowering these young adults so that they can be better prepared for the future.

The ministry funds a wide range of mentoring supports for children and youth, including Indigenous youth, youth transitioning out of government care, and members of the LGBTQ2S-plus. An annual budget of approximately \$1.5 million is maintained. As well, CFS also provides approximately \$4.9 million to youth shelters around the province, another key aspect of my ministry. I'm hoping that we might have an opportunity to perhaps maybe talk a little bit about that in future blocks, again, just ensuring that whenever a child is requiring help, there's somewhere like a youth shelter that can also look after them.

Thank you very much for the questions, Member Wright.

The Chair: To the Official Opposition.

Member Batten: Thank you so much, Madam Chair and to the minister. A couple of things. We had just talked about the importance of Indigenous Relations, and all my questions that had been asked before my time ended last were about that. In your answer that you provided, you indicated that it's budget line 5.2 on page 63, Indigenous connections, that is facilitating that. However, there is next to no investment in it. We are seeing only a \$40,000 increase, which is nothing, especially since the minister has already pointed out that this is a huge portfolio. It has money to spend. We have shown or demonstrated today – and I know the minister is aware, Madam Chair – that this needs to be a priority and this needs to be addressed, and I do not see that in the budget at all.

However, moving on to early intervention services for children and youth, again in the budget, looking at pages 62 and 63, budget line 3.1, early intervention and early childhood development, the idea, of course, Madam Chair, is that we provide the necessary supports and resources so that we save everyone kind of the burden

of the problems that might arise if left unchecked and allowed to fester. By saying that, you know, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. What this 3.1 indicates is that it'll mitigate the need of child intervention services and enhance child, youth, and family resiliency through a variety of supports: mentoring, parenting resources, home visitation, and supports for healthy development.

My question to the minister, through the chair, is that there doesn't seem to be a performance metric for budget number 3.1. Can the minister provide insight into the programs used to monitor the effectiveness of these resources? Does the minister feel that this metric is sufficient? Will these metrics be made public? Madam Chair, to the minister: given that we know the positive impact of upstream preventative care, can the minister explain the lack of attention to this very real crisis?

11:50

Now, Madam Chair, stakeholders who practise inside the early intervention space have shared mixed responses to family resource networks, which I believe are covered in budget item 3.1. Through the chair to the minister: can the minister share if there are plans to extend the program to open up more hubs? Has the minister discussed changes to the program with stakeholders? Are these FRNs, or family resource networks, worth their cost? Where are the metrics that are confirming that this investment is worth while, and where are the outcomes being tracked?

Through the chair to the minister, families have asked whether Alberta will be investing more into the Alberta mentoring project. I would love to hear that. Also, where would I find this in the budget?

I'm now just going to pop over to some questions that are adjacent to what I've been talking about. Just focusing again, Madam Chair, on shelters, can the minister, through the chair, confirm that the \$10 million funding announcement for women's shelters will see approximately \$59 million this year, which is a decrease to the \$55.8 million in '24-25 and '25-26 and another slight increase to \$56.2 million in '26-27? The available funding envelope for these shelters is going to decrease in 10 days. Again, the question to the minister through the chair: will the increase to \$56.2 million in '26-27 be permanent? Can the minister, through the chair, tell us how many shelter beds in the province are unfunded and where these unfunded beds are and why the ministry is not funding these beds?

Madam Chair, can the minister explain why Budget 2024 states that the budget for 2023 was \$54.3 million when the documents from last year estimate \$55.1 million? Where is that extra \$800,000? Where in the budget would we see funding for maintenance of infrastructure for women's shelters, and how much is earmarked in the budget for that? We know this has been a major issue. There was black mould found in a women's shelter. This is not acceptable.

In my last 35 seconds I would like to bounce back to the affordability payments. Madam Chair, to the minister, the estimate that this ministry shows is that approximately \$73 million of affordability payments did not go out to families. That's approximately 25 per cent of payments. Through the chair to the minister: why is this? Did the government or ministry miscalculate? I note that all of the payments were, in fact, short. Or, through the chair to the minister, does it have to do with how the program itself was developed?

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Over to the minister for his response.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the member for those questions. You know, FRNs and the

ability to be able to invest in preventative services to ensure that children and families have the supports that they need to be amazing and awesome is one of my higher priorities. I agree with the member that an ounce of prevention is worth its weight in gold, and that's why I love working with our family resource networks. I've seen first-hand the positive experiences that families have had as they have entered family resource networks around the province.

As has been shown in the budget, in 2024-25 we're increasing the FRN budget to \$66.7 million. This is primarily due to the reallocation to enhance the FRN program because we realize the benefits that this program has to Albertan families.

You know, it was just a short time ago that I decided to experience first-hand the FRN in my local community, in Stony Plain, at Alberta Parenting for the Future, an absolutely amazing program. It was *Finding Nemo* night, so I was happy to go there with my two boys. It was an underwater theme. It was amazing.

But while we were having a great time bonding as a family, I remember watching a young father come in, and he had a daughter. You could tell he was a little bit out of sorts because it wasn't his normal type of cup of tea to be hanging out, you know, and helping his daughter find the appropriate mermaid costume. But one of the amazing things about the FRN program is that while I was off to the side, I was watching the staff talk with that young dad. Also, I could see an exchange of some information about how he could receive some supports to get some additional help that he needed to move forward as, as I found out later, a single parent.

One of the coolest things was that after a great night, where he was able to spend some quality time with his daughter, he was able to leave with a box full of food because they had a shared fridge there. So the amazing staff at APFA were able to recognize his food security issues and provide him, you know, some food for the next couple of days. These are some of the positive, tangible benefits I know that FRNs have right around the province, and FRNs touch every square inch of Alberta. There are thousands and thousands of families that have been able to enter an FRN program to utilize the services, to receive help when they may not know exactly where to go.

In terms of the upcoming budget, which I mentioned was \$66.7 million, \$3.3 million is being used to address wait-lists and identify cost pressures and enhance services, again, just an acknowledgement from the government that we need to be able to support this program to ensure that families are looked after. Eighteen of the 70 FRNs specialize their services to unique cultural and linguistic communities, and this includes five networks to support urban Indigenous families, because, again, we want to be able to make sure that those families, especially Indigenous families, are looked after and have the appropriate and culturally appropriate supports that they need to be successful. We have eight FRNs in Métis settlements, one to support francophone families, which I was very thankful to continue to support, and two to support newcomer, immigrant, and cultural minority families, again, just the positive ways that as a government we've been able to showcase and use these programs to really reach out in a positive way to so many families.

FRNs ensure that children are supported to help build the best possible foundation in their early years, again, to really touch base

on what the members were saying about prevention services. This is a key part of my ministry, one that I know that every time we can invest in an FRN, in some other types of early intervention, support, and service, we can maybe turn the path of a child or a family down a more positive way versus maybe some of the other aspects of my ministry.

I know as well that the members were asking questions about other early intervention supports. My ministry administers funding to approximately 50 base organizations for mentoring, youth suicide prevention, youth emergency shelters, early intervention supports for First Nations communities, and other initiatives focused on well-being and resiliency. The budget for community-based prevention and early intervention initiatives is maintained at \$6.3 million annually, and this includes youth suicide prevention, \$2.2 million; mentoring of \$1.5 million; EI, \$1.3 million; and mental health, \$1.5 million. Also, the youth shelter budget is \$4.9 million annually, and this supports seven new shelters around the province.

Again, it's just been an absolute honour to be able to talk about the CFS budget for this year. Thank you.

The Chair: And for the last minute-plus we'll go to the government side.

Mr. Lundy: All right. Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, I have a question on performance metric 1(a) of the business plan, which shows the percentage of youth receiving supports from the advancing futures program who successfully complete their planned studies. Through the chair to the minister: does your ministry work with others such as the Ministry of Advanced Education to ensure these youth have the supports and resources they need to be successful? Again through the chair, can you please explain the advancing futures program, how it supports youth in care, and how your ministry is supporting the program? And a final question, through the chair, of course, to the minister, on this topic. Your targets over the next three years show 89 per cent of youth receiving supports from the advancing futures program successfully completing their planned studies. Can you explain what metric led you to choose these targets, and what steps your ministry is taking to achieve them?

Madam Chair, I'd like to close on page 64 of the estimates, where we see a \$31 million increase to the Alberta child and family benefit. Through the chair to the minister: is this increase to combat affordability concerns, specifically the NDP-Liberal carbon tax increase?

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Sorry. I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. This concludes the consideration of the 2024-25 main estimates by the Standing Committee on Families and Communities.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

