



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Legislative Offices

Friday, January 17, 2025
1:30 p.m.

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First Session**

Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

Getson, Shane C., Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland (UC), Chair
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Diane McLeod	Information and Privacy Commissioner
Shawn McLeod	Ethics Commissioner
Terri Pelton	Child and Youth Advocate
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Office of the Child and Youth Advocate Participant

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1:30 p.m.

Friday, January 17, 2025

[Mr. Getson in the chair]

The Chair: Well, thank you very much, everybody, for making it in. It's officially 1:30. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome all staff, members, and guests joining the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices. My name is Shane Getson, the MLA for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland and chair of this committee. I'd like to ask all members that are joining the committee at the table to introduce themselves for the record, and we'll hear those joining us remotely after we do that, so starting to my right.

Mr. Wright: Justin Wright, MLA for the charming constituency of Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Sinclair: Scott Sinclair, MLA for Lesser Slave Lake.

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

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

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

Mr. Bhurgri: Good afternoon. Abdul Aziz Bhurgri, research officer.

Mr. Koenig: Trafton Koenig with the Parliamentary Counsel office.

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

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

The Chair: And online.

Member Eremenko: Hello. MLA Janet Eremenko for Calgary-Currie.

Ms Chapman: MLA Amanda Chapman, Calgary-Beddington.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk, MLA, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Mr. Dyck: MLA Nolan Dyck for Grande Prairie.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you.

For the record I'd like to note the following substitutions. We have Mr. Wright substituting as deputy chair for MLA van Dijken. We have Hon. Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk subbing for MLA Lundy. We have MLA Rowswell substituting for MLA Lovely, and we have MLA Dach substituting for MLA Renaud.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Microphones, as we found out earlier, are operated by *Hansard*, so I won't mess him up anymore. We've been going back and forth. Please turn your cell phones to the least disturbing mode possible. Committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. Members participating remotely should ensure that you're prepared to speak or vote when called upon, and videoconference participants are encouraged to have their cameras on, if possible, when speaking.

We have a draft agenda. A draft meeting agenda has been distributed. Would a member like to move that agenda? MLA Wright. Do we have to put it on the screen? It doesn't matter. Perfect. All those in favour of the agenda, please say aye. Any

opposed? Online, all in favour, please say aye. Any opposed? Motion carried.

Approval of minutes from the previous meeting. We also have a set of meeting minutes from our last meeting. Would a member like to move a motion to approve those? MLA Sinclair. Do we have to read that one? No. This is good. Two for two. Okay. Welcome back, Kotter. With that, we'll call the question. All those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. Online, all in favour? Any opposed? In the famous words of Mr. Speaker: I believe the ayes have it. Motion carried.

Next is why we're here, the review of the OCYA annual report '23-24. The mandate that we have is under Government Motion 55. Our main item of business today is to review the office of the Child and Youth Advocate annual report. Our mandate is outlined in Government Motion 55, which was agreed upon by the Assembly December 3, 2024. We are required to report back to the Assembly within 90 days of this referral. The committee has been assigned the responsibility for several years now, but if there are any questions about the committee's mandates, please raise them now. Seeing none.

Representation of the office of the Child and Youth Advocate. At this point I would like to invite the Child and Youth Advocate to join us at the table and make a few introductory remarks. Ms Pelton is the Child and Youth Advocate and is joining us today to provide a briefing on her latest annual report. Typically it takes about 20 minutes, but if we go into a little bit of overtime, obviously we'll deal with that, and then we'll give you lots of time for questions and answers back and forth. Ms Pelton, when you're ready, the floor is yours. Introduce yourself, and if there's anybody else you need from your team at the table as well, you're welcome to bring them up.

Ms Pelton: Thank you. Good afternoon, Chairperson Getson and committee members. I'm Terri Pelton, Alberta's Child and Youth Advocate. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. As we begin I'd like to respectfully acknowledge that we're on Treaty 6 territory and that the work of my office extends throughout the province on the traditional territory of the many Indigenous peoples of treaties 6, 7, and 8 and the Métis peoples of Alberta.

When I last appeared before the committee on December 6, we presented our annual report, business plan, and budget estimates. Today I'd like to take the opportunity to speak more in depth about our strategic priorities, some of the critical issues affecting young people, and the recommendations we've made.

Our 2020 to 2025 strategic plan outlines three priorities that help guide our work. While each is distinct, the work to achieve them is integrated throughout our office. They are aligned with our mission and vision and reflected within our staff performance plans to ensure that we are working collectively to advance them.

Our first strategic priority is that we are guided by both individual and collective rights. This commitment is exemplified in our ongoing journey of reconciliation and our efforts to help Indigenous young people have their rights upheld and stay connected to their families, community, and culture. I'm proud to report that over 80 per cent of our staff have participated in Indigenous ceremonies and land-based learning opportunities, deepening their understanding and connection to Indigenous ways of knowing and being and strengthening our advocacy for the Indigenous young people we work with. Additionally, more than 20 per cent of our staff are Indigenous, and their voices and perspectives remain integral in our work.

Our second strategic priority is that we are a model of youth participation. Over the past several years we've worked hard to increase the involvement of young people across our office, from

participating on hiring panels to consulting on reports to helping shape our office policies. In addition to the benefit of having their perspectives in our work, it's been a pleasure to see these young people, all who have been previously involved with child intervention and/or youth justice, discover and build new skills and passions. They are gaining leadership experience, improving their problem-solving abilities, and building meaningful connections not only with supportive adults but also with one another as positive peers. As one youth council peer mentor and former council member shared: I was grateful to have a seat at the table that helped me save my life in my early 20s. As we continue to offer opportunities for meaningful youth engagement, young people are transforming their futures, gaining the confidence and the tools to lead and advocate for themselves and for others.

Our third strategic priority is that we are meaningfully involved with communities. The communities in which young people belong play a vital role in their lives. Through building meaningful relationships with these communities, we can advocate more effectively and enhance the capacity of others to do the same. Over the past year this work included participating in over 150 community engagement activities, which include presentations, workshops, booths, and events; engaging with school communities through classroom presentations, teachers conventions, and School at the Legislature; and, finally, connecting with diverse communities and groups across the province.

In our individual advocacy work we help young people involved with the child intervention and youth justice system understand and exercise their rights so that their voices are meaningfully considered in the decisions that affect them. This may include advocating for decisions about their placement, maintaining connections to significant people in their lives, and case planning that will determine what services and supports they receive.

Through our investigative reviews we identified broader systemic issues including those related to complex needs, mental health, transitioning to adulthood, and the devastating impact of opioid and substance use. In a report often the focus is on the numbers and statistics. However, I'd like to highlight the lived experiences of young people who have been affected by these issues. While the names and details have been changed to protect their confidentiality, these experiences reflect the real challenges and outcomes many children and youth face.

Placement is often one of the most critical issues young people involved with child intervention encounter, but it's about much more than just where they live. It's about ensuring their safety, stability, and access to the care and support they need. Mora, a young child with significant disabilities, was assigned an advocate through our office after she was neglected in a licensed group-care placement and hospitalized due to malnourishment. This placement, where she had lived for a year, was never meant to be long term, and Mora had been there much longer than expected. After her recovery her advocate remained involved, working to ensure caseworkers found her a home that could appropriately meet her needs, and I'm pleased to tell you that when Mora's advocacy file closed, she was reportedly doing well in her new foster home.

Next, I want to talk about connections. Being connected to family, culture, and community is vital for every young person's identity and well-being. Eleven-year-old Nathan, an Indigenous child, reached out to our office seeking support to connect with his family and his First Nation. Understanding how deeply important these ties were for Nathan, his advocate worked with him to express his needs to his caseworker and connect him to his band designate. Our OCYA knowledge keeper also met with Nathan and his advocate to share teachings about Indigenous culture and helped him by providing him with a smudge kit of his own. In addition to

having more regular contact with his family, he was also supported to attend ceremonies when he was on the nation, allowing him to strengthen his cultural and familial connections. Nathan's experience highlights the power of meaningful relationships in fostering a sense of belonging and resilience for young people.

1:40

Case planning is another area where advocacy can profoundly shape the outcomes for young people. Jerry, Keltie, and Trace, a group of three young siblings, were assigned an advocate during a crucial period of planning for their future living arrangements. The advocate engaged with the children, their kinship provider, service team, and their father, working to ensure the children's opinions were heard and considered. Through careful co-ordination and a focus on what was best for the children they were returned to their father. This was done in a thoughtful and supportive way, ensuring the move worked for the children and respected their needs. This example underscores the importance of child-centred planning in creating positive and sustainable outcomes for children and families.

While it is always encouraging to hear about young people whose circumstances improved through our advocacy work, we also have the difficult responsibility of conducting reviews in cases where young people have been seriously injured or have passed away. These situations are profoundly heartbreaking and tragic. The experiences of the next five young people I'll talk about reflect some of those circumstances. Investigative reviews are not about assigning blame; instead, reviews focus on examining the services and support young people received, identifying systemic issues, and making recommendations to improve outcomes for other young people.

Cheyenne's experience is a heartbreaking example of how gaps in transition supports can have devastating impacts for young people. Cheyenne was apprehended when she was two months old and placed in foster care, where she remained until her foster parent adopted her when she was 14 years old. Sadly, her adoption broke down 18 months later, leading to significant instability. She began living in group homes, struggled with her mental health, and started using substances. While she received post-18 supports, they were not enough to meet her complex needs. At 21 years old an assessment indicated that Cheyenne needed substantial support to manage her daily life. Despite this, she was not connected to adult services and had disrupted connections to her family and Indigenous community. Cheyenne's post-18 supports ended on her 22nd birthday, and, tragically, just one month later Cheyenne passed away following an accident.

Rowan's experience illustrates the critical importance of early access to mental health supports and maintaining meaningful connections. Rowan had significant loss early in life as his parents, cousins, and a sibling all passed away. He was apprehended and became the subject of a permanent guardianship order after his mother died when he was three years old. He spent most of his time in foster care and was separated from his siblings in several placements. At just 10 years old Rowan attempted suicide for the first time. Unfortunately, mental health services were not readily available, and he did not receive the grief and loss support he needed. Tragically, Rowan died by suicide when he was only 11 years old. He would have been in grade 5, maybe grade 6.

Farah's circumstance brings to light the challenges faced by young people with complex needs and the critical importance of tailored supports. Farah was a young Indigenous woman who was placed in foster care when she was 18 months old. She remained with the same foster family for about 11 years. She was diagnosed with a learning disability in grade 5 and prescribed medication for

anxiety in grade 6. At 13 Farah began using substances and engaging in high-risk behaviours, resulting in her long-term placement breaking down, followed by frequent moves. At 15 she was diagnosed with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and while specific supports were recommended to address her needs, they were not implemented. Farah's complex needs were not adequately considered in case planning, and adult disability services were not thoroughly explored as part of her transition to adulthood. She had periods of housing instability, and when she was 21 years old Farah tragically passed away from a suspected drug overdose.

Aleda's experience reflects the deep importance of maintaining cultural connections and the devastating effects of disconnection from family and community. Aleda was an Indigenous youth who was first apprehended at six months old and spent most of her life in foster care, moving between several placements. When she was 10 years old she moved with her non-Indigenous foster family to another province. Following this move connections to her extended family and Indigenous community were not maintained. At 13 years old Aleda and her siblings returned home to live with their mother. However, she struggled to fit in because she had been disconnected from her family, community, and culture for about three years. She left home and began using substances. At just 15 years old Aleda tragically passed away from suspected substance use.

Finally, Bree's experience underscores the profound impact of early trauma and the need for continuous support for young people struggling with mental health problems and substance use. Bree grew up in a chaotic environment, exposed to her parents' substance use and family violence. She was apprehended multiple times from infancy and became the subject of a permanent guardianship order when she was 12 years old. Bree began receiving specialized services and supports after suffering a traumatic brain injury when she was six years old. These services ended by the time she was 14. Without continued support Bree's mental health declined, and her substance use escalated. She often went to the hospital emergency room for these concerns and became involved with the youth justice system. As her struggles with mental health and substance use increased, she had periods of being unhoused. Tragically, Bree passed away from fentanyl toxicity at 19, leaving behind her infant daughter.

The experiences of the young people that I shared today are just a few of the thousands we work with every year. Their circumstances highlight the ongoing challenges and gaps within the systems intended to help them. To address these issues, we make recommendations to public bodies aimed at improving the services and supports available to young people. Recommendations are developed to be specific enough to evaluate progress yet not so prescriptive as to direct the practice of public bodies. Based on the information the public body provides, we determine whether the progress meets the intended outcome or whether further action is required.

Of the 27 recommendations that were evaluated this past year, six were met, six were closed, and 15 are ongoing. I'm pleased when our recommendations are accepted and implemented as they are intended to improve the experiences of young people in child-serving systems. I'd like to share examples of three recommendations evaluated this past year: one met, one ongoing, and one closed as unmet.

In 2019 we recommended that the young offender branch should monitor and publicly report all incidents of OC spray use, better known as pepper spray, and segregation annually. It's critically important that there is public accountability for how young people are cared for while detained in young offender centres. Strengthening the monitoring and reporting processes of OC spray

and segregation, we believed, would increase accountability and enhance fair treatment of young people in custody. I'm pleased that this public reporting is now occurring, and I'd like to thank the ministry for its work on this matter and for their commitment to the safety and well-being of young people who are in custody.

An example of an ongoing recommendation comes from our special report on youth opioid use in Alberta, which was released in June of 2021. We recommended that the government develop and support the implementation of a youth-specific opioid and substance use strategy. Since then, we've seen some promising steps taken to improve services and supports to young people, including expanded youth mental health services, the virtual opioid dependency program, and the announcement of a residential youth treatment facility in Edmonton. However, an alarming number of young people are still dying from opioid and substance use. Young people have distinct needs because of their developmental stage, and this must be considered when providing them services and supports. I will continue to call on government to implement a youth-specific strategy to address this crisis so that we can hopefully reduce the number of young lives lost.

Finally, I'll share an example of a recommendation that was closed as unmet. In September of 2022 we recommended that the ministries of Health, Education, children's services, community and social services, and Justice and Solicitor General should develop and publicly report on a co-ordinated action plan to address service gaps for young people with complex needs while longer term initiatives are under development. The plan should include targeted activities and milestones that meet the immediate needs of these young people.

1:50

Child-serving ministries have acknowledged that service provision for young people with complex needs requires a co-ordinated approach to be effective. They've identified several crossministry initiatives that when implemented may adequately support children and youth. However, these young people require immediate services to ensure their survival and well-being.

I remain extremely concerned that a co-ordinated and clear plan to address these service gaps has not been made publicly available. The availability of this short-term plan would help these young people, their families, and caregivers know where and how to access the services they need. There are longer term plans in progress; however, these young people and those who care about them need supports while those plans are in progress. Therefore, this recommendation was closed with no progress made.

As we move forward, the critical issues affecting young people, many of which I've shared today through their lived experiences, remain at the heart of our work. In April 2024 we began a special report about the experiences of unhoused young people in Alberta. It will take us about a year to get it done, so I expect that next January we will be talking about that report. We're also working on finalizing our new strategic plan, which will take effect on April 1 of this year.

We recognize that collaboration is essential to achieving better outcomes for children and youth. While differing perspectives are inevitable, it's critical that we ensure the voices of young people, often the quietest in the room, are not only heard but thoughtfully considered. They don't have to be the loudest voice in the room, but they have to be an equal voice. Finding solutions may not always be easy, but by keeping young people as our focus, we can work together to create meaningful and lasting change in their lives.

As we close, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the incredible work of my staff. Advocacy is more than just a job; it's a purpose. Their unwavering dedication continues to make a

meaningful difference in the lives of young people, families, and communities across Alberta. I feel truly fortunate to work alongside such a passionate and committed team.

I'd also like to acknowledge the young people we have the privilege of working with. Despite enduring challenging circumstances, many of them are advocates in their own lives, and when we amplify their voices, we help ensure their perspectives are heard and their needs are met.

Thank you for taking the time for meeting with me today. I'm now happy to answer any questions that you might have.

The Chair: Perfect. Thank you for the presentation. It's with a heavy heart, obviously, bringing that information forward and the work that you and your team have to do. You know, I've said a number of times: we really do appreciate that. I think most members, if not all members, around the table have kids of their own, so this rings pretty loud in our ears.

What I would ask of members here: when we get into the questions, I'll go back and forth as much as possible; make sure you catch the chair's attention. Given the potential charge for emotions on this one, too, I'm going to make sure that we really try to make sure our questions don't get out of line for respect for the commission, the report, and those kids. So with that, guys, just ask your questions, but make sure it's going to the right locations and areas.

With that, we will open up to the floor. MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and hello, Ms Pelton. Thank you for being here today. Allow me to start by saying thank you for the incredibly important work you do. It was heartbreaking to hear some more of those stories again today. Certainly, we truly value the work you're doing.

In your report you make a recommendation on page 31 regarding the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Services, that they should partner with external disability experts and young people, complete a review, and identify actions to improve supports for young people with disabilities involved in the youth justice system. That follows from your report *Beyond Barriers*, where you were looking at young people with disabilities, their experiences in the youth justice system.

In that report you note that you heard that when these young people are not sufficiently supported at home or in a placement that can meet their needs, they're more likely to get involved with the youth justice system. I also note that the research suggests there may be a concerning overlap between those youth in child intervention and youth justice systems and that neurodisability is a common factor for a lot of those youth.

The report also quotes a stakeholder that talks about an actual pipeline from young people who get in trouble with the law when they're in care. They struggle to attend and understand what's going on in school. They experience severe drug use, gang affiliation, and homelessness. Now, I know we're certainly seeing real issues with a lot of those concerns on a lot of fronts in our committee, certainly here in the communities I represent in Edmonton City Centre: drug use, gangs, homelessness. I'm just wondering: how high would you rank this as a priority in terms of it being a preventative measure? This work being done by these respective ministries: how big of a priority do you think this is in terms of it being a preventative measure to help support young people with disabilities and, I guess, address some of these issues in our communities?

Ms Pelton: I think it's critically important. I know there are a number of priorities on everybody's plate, but if we want to start

moving away from reacting and having healthier young people, these are the kinds of things that need to be in place.

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

Mr. Shepherd: Certainly. So in your view then, Ms Pelton, what would you want to see in terms of that from the ministry? How in depth should this go? What kind of resources do you think need to be deployed to sort of adequately investigate this and provide us with some of the answers we need?

Ms Pelton: It's a good question. The recommendations we make are intentionally written so that we don't tell them how to do it, that the ministry can figure out how they can best implement it. In our current processes we meet with the ministry representatives before the recommendation is made so that they can help us understand how we can frame it so that it's more manageable and doable, so I really need to leave that with the ministry.

We haven't evaluated these recommendations yet. We wait a year because these recommendations are big and they take a long time to implement. By the end of March the ministry will be sending me a letter telling me what they've done to do this, and then on our website by the end of June we'll have how we have graded what their progress is.

The Chair: I have MLA Eremenko and then MLA Dyck. MLA Eremenko, the floor is yours.

Member Eremenko: Thank you very much, Chair, and good afternoon, Ms Pelton. Thank you very much for being here today.

You did parse out one of those recommendations specific to the opioid and substance-use strategy, and I have a question just to dive a little bit deeper into that. As you mentioned, in 2021 that was a recommendation that the office had made, and in fact it was a renewal of some sorts of a report that had been submitted even earlier in 2018, talking about kind of seeing the storm brewing on the horizon as far as the fatal drug supply that was coming into Canada from the United States and elsewhere. Certainly, it's not a new challenge, but is it ever entrenched here in Alberta, and it's really tragic that it's particularly entrenched for youth.

In '21 your office released a follow-up report on youth opioid use, where the office under your predecessor called on government to develop and implement a provincial youth strategy to address opioid and substance use. The year the report was released and the call for a strategy was renewed, 29 people under the age of 19 passed away. The following year it was 31. The year after that it was 45. That's 45 Albertans under the age of 19.

You know, thankfully, investments are being made in mental health and addiction unlike any that have been made before, but it's a system in a great transition and in great flux, and I think that the benefit of a strategy is that it helps stakeholders row in the same direction. Right? We can all agree on the same set of goals and that both government within and organizations and public on the outside of government can also be contributing to the strategy. For that reason I'm a bit frustrated that it hasn't actually hit the ground and that it hasn't launched. Can you please give us your insights or what you've heard specifically from the Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction around why that strategy is not yet in play?

Ms Pelton: I'm not sure. I'm going to try and set up a meeting with the minister and maybe some of the senior staff when I get back from vacation. I'm not sure. I'm concerned that there is a belief that all of the resources that are being put into adult mental health and addiction services are adequate for young people, and so they're not being adapted for the brain development and the developmental

stage that young people are at. So while there's some really exciting news coming forward and I think government is putting lots of money into this area and I see where there's concern about it, I still feel that we need a real youth-specific strategy. The young people we see just don't have the same sense of consequences that adults do. When they're ready for treatment, they're ready for it now. I think adults are the same. But we're just seeing such a tragic number of young lives lost to this crisis that I feel more strongly than ever that we need a youth-specific lens on this problem.

2:00

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

Member Eremenko: Yeah. If I may, Chair. Thank you. How are you feeling the capacity exists within your organization to help youth navigate a new health organization, really a system that has been, again, in quite a bit of flux? I'm thinking about your roster lawyers. I'm thinking about the caseworkers who are needing to, you know, find sometimes that it feels like a bit of a needle in the haystack when you're looking for the right service for that particular youth. Are you feeling like you have the resources, that you're well equipped to navigate a system in great transition in some cases?

Ms Pelton: I actually don't have an answer for that.

Member Eremenko: Okay.

Ms Pelton: We help young people involved with child intervention and youth justice advocate for what they need, but we're not system navigators. We certainly work with caseworkers and others, but it's outside the realm of what we do.

Member Eremenko: Thank you very much.

The Chair: On the list I have MLA Dyck, Shepherd, and Chapman. I might ask MLA Shepherd if he's okay with switching with Chapman in the order so she can ask her first question, if that works.

Mr. Shepherd: Absolutely. Yes, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.
MLA Dyck, the floor is yours.

Mr. Dyck: Thank you so much, Chair, and thank you very much, Ms Pelton, for coming here today. I just want to talk a little bit on the living situations that you mention on page 30 of the report. There are just some stats on different living situations, the 33 young people who very unfortunately passed away when they were receiving child intervention services this last year. We have just over 50 per cent of these young people who were in independent living. It's a lot of kids who have passed away, to be the largest category. My question is: can you explain what independent living means and why you see that those living in this living situation seem to be at higher risk than other areas? I'm concerned when we see over 50 per cent in one category. So I just want your opinion and thoughts on that.

Ms Pelton: Sure. I am also deeply concerned about that. Independent living is – these include the young people who passed away while receiving child intervention services. They would have had an open file. There are agencies that have apartments for young people where they live independently and they pay room and board and still have some support. I think – well, no; I know – that the young people we work with don't have the natural supports that your children have or that my grandchildren have. So when they're

on their own, they have more struggles, and they don't always have somebody close at hand to mentor and nurture them and provide the support they need.

Mr. Dyck: Okay. Thank you for the response on that. As I said, I'm concerned on that. I guess my second question just goes down, so the second-largest category is those with parental care. I believe it was eight children that passed away in parental care. Can you expand on some of the main causes of death for those children, particularly just in response to, you know, the 17 that passed away? They were fully independent, it sounds like. They didn't have that parental care. But we still see almost half of that amount in parental care that sadly passed away. So can you expand and just give some more detail on the main causes of death for that second category?

Ms Pelton: I don't know if I can relate it directly to the ones who are in parental care. Often what we see with the young, the ones who are still with their parents is that sometimes they die from medical causes or an accident. I know that there were at least two last year who were victims of violence. I don't want people to believe that leaving children with their parents is going to cause them to die, but sometimes parents need more support to meet their young people's needs, and we need to do more in that area. In 2023-2024, not related necessarily to the placement type, we had three accidental deaths. Forty-two were suspected drug or alcohol related. We had nine medical deaths, four suicides, four undetermined, and six that we're still waiting for autopsy outcomes on. Does that help?

Mr. Dyck: Yes. Thank you very much. I appreciate the breakdown on that and getting into some of the details. Really appreciate that. That was my follow-up question, so I'll pass it back to the chair.

The Chair: Excellent. Thanks, MLA Dyck.
I have Chapman, Shepherd, Wright, and Dach.
MLA Chapman, your floor.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms Pelton, for being here. I'm wondering if I can just touch on children with disabilities quickly because I know that a number of the recommendations that the OCYA made were related to families with one or more persons living with a disability. It's at top of mind because I know there was an announcement this week from the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services to cut funding to some long-standing, really well-regarded advocacy organizations who serve the disability community.

Also, my constituency office: one of the top pieces of casework that we get is related to people on wait-lists for FSCD funding. I'm wondering if you can tell me if children who are in care or identified as at-risk are expedited in any way to access FSCD funding and supports. You know, if you could just help me understand sort of the presence of FSCD and disability considerations for the OCYA, if that looks the same now as it has in the past or if there's been any sort of change or difference.

Ms Pelton: Well, we released the Beyond Barriers report last January because we were concerned about young people with disabilities who had involvement with youth justice or children's services. What we heard when we did the consultations is that there is not an expedited process for child intervention young people to access FSCD. In fact, what can happen is that the ministries can get I don't want to say territorial, but it almost ends up that way. You know, it's children's services' job to help that child; it's FSCD's. So the child can kind of get stuck in a little bit of a limbo rather than

getting the services they need quicker than other children. But they all need the support.

The recommendations that we made in that report were really about: we learned that Seniors, Community and Social Services had done a review of disability services and had some recommendations. My recommendations from this report are really supporting that they go back and look at that review and see what people were telling them at that time. We certainly see that the complex needs of young people really seem to have increased over time, so it's hard to find placements. What we heard in the consultations with that report as well is that sometimes families who are functioning okay with their child with disabilities and then there's a crisis: they can't access immediate help, or it might just take a day or two to have the child out of the home or his supports in, and it's really hard to access that real, immediate support. I'm hopeful that we'll hear some progress on that.

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

Ms Chapman: Thank you. Yeah. Just a quick follow-up. Just wondering if you have figures on prevalence of FASD among the children you support.

Ms Pelton: FASD?

Ms Chapman: Yeah.

Ms Pelton: I don't. We are working with Dr. Pei and Dorothy Badry from the university to do some work on FASD and the prevalence. So we've started – not started, but we're really making a point when we're doing our investigative reviews of identifying those young people who have been diagnosed with FASD and what services and supports they have because we believe it's on the rise.

The Chair: MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Ms Pelton, again, referencing back to your recommendation to the ministries of Justice and Public Safety and Emergency Services. In your report you mentioned a need for more accommodations to support young people with disabilities at all stages of involvement in the justice system, whether from court through to custody. One of your stakeholders talks about this. They note that this isn't a question of these youth not having the intelligence, the skills, or the motivation to succeed but that these systems they're caught in don't account for the fact that, simply, their brains work differently when we're talking about neurodiverse youth and youth who may have some cognitive differences. That, unfortunately, then leads to a situation where they can be pushed deeper into criminalization or into some exposure to some of these things.

2:10

Accommodations that could help prevent that: I've got to think that's going to have a big benefit not only for those youth, but potentially it can help us lower some of our costs in the justice system and some of these other impacts in community. Do you have some examples of what some of those accommodations might look like? Like, from your conversations with youth, with some of these stakeholders, did they bring up examples of anything that they'd seen that was helpful in terms of an accommodation for youth?

Ms Pelton: Not that I recall, but if I think it through, I think what we're needing is accommodations that don't house too many young people all at the same time because the more young people that are in one space, they develop those negative peer relationships. So more individualized placement consideration. Perhaps Indigenous

young people need to – not perhaps, but that they have access to cultural supports when they're detained.

I'm really worried that young people when they don't have their basic needs met, a placement, food in their belly, and clothing, they then tend to get into trouble, because if you don't know where your next meal is coming from or you don't know where you're sleeping tonight, you can't get to school, you can't hold down a job. So those are the things that I think this recommendation and all of the work that we do: we really are encouraging all of the supports that need to be had for these young people so that they have their basic needs met and then can further, just like Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests.

The Chair: Do you have a follow-up?

Mr. Shepherd: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. You mentioned there, I guess in part, sort of where youth are housed or accommodated or the situations they're in when they're involved in the justice system. Indeed, one of your stakeholders mentioned that, I noticed in the report. They said that there used to be a unit for kids with disabilities, but now all the youth in jail are in two units, which is actually really dangerous. It sounds like youth with disabilities have been moved into the general population. Certainly I know that my colleague MLA Eremenko was talking about, you know, these youth supports. What we see now is that we're going to have a youth opioid treatment facility housed at the empty young offender centre, so potentially youth are getting treatment during the day but then potentially mingling with folks from the other side who are there on perhaps criminal charges and things in the evenings.

So this would be one of those accommodations, one of those concerns, then, where that's potentially problematic exposure or troubling. An accommodation might be trying to provide more space, I guess, where those youth are given supports and not exposed to some of these other things which could lead them in a bad direction.

Ms Pelton: I think so.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you.

The Chair: I have MLA Wright, Dach, Eremenko, Sinclair, Armstrong-Homeniuk, Rowswell, and Shepherd. You guys are really getting the hang of it now.

MLA Wright, you're on deck.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Chair and through you. On page 34 under key performance indicators it shows the percentage of young people involved with your office who are aware of their rights: 95 per cent being the targeted amount; 94 being the actual. How does your office measure a young person's awareness of their rights in regard to what tools or mechanisms of feedback are used, and how is that target ultimately determined in the case of 95 per cent, and what are the factors that feed into that?

Ms Pelton: Okay. We do youth surveys with all of the young people who've either had a lawyer or an individual advocate assigned to them. Also, after every presentation that we do, we have a survey that's done. So when we are at School at the Leg., young people are asked to complete a survey at the end of that. That session is primarily about their rights under the United Nations convention on the rights of children. So they are self-reporting that they are more aware of what those rights are. We also talk to them about their responsibilities when they have those rights. With rights

come responsibilities, and I think that's important for young people to learn as they move forward.

We just picked 95 per cent because it sounded like it would be reasonable that 95 per cent of young people should be aware of what they can expect. We talk in advocacy a lot about, you know, they have the right to, for example – I'm trying to think – an education. We might get a call that the young person wants to go to a specific school and be in a specific program, and really it's about the right to education and is that education being provided and what is it about that program that the young person found was important to them so that maybe we could help them find something similar. And so it's not about "I want this, so I get this"; it's about: what is the right that's related to that education, and how can we help support that for you?

Mr. Wright: One follow-up, if I would. On page 18 of the report it stated that approximately 65 per cent of young people who receive legal representation under the legal representation for child and youth program were under the age of 12. This is a similar number to last year. Could you share with the committee and those who may be watching the proceedings more information on that program and how it works, but also provide some information as to why a majority of these accessing the services are so young compared to those over the age of 12?

Ms Pelton: Sure. I'm happy to do that. I actually started in the program in its infancy.

The LRCY program is for young people who have applications before the court related to the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act or the Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act specifically. The job of the lawyer is to represent and take instruction from their client unless the child isn't able to provide instruction. Children as young as six can say what they want the judge to hear about. For the much younger ones who can't say what they want, then lawyers take rights and entitlements perspectives. They look at what are all of the rights this young person is entitled to, what are their entitlements, who are the important people in their lives, and then present that to the court.

The reason there's such a high number of younger children is that we always appoint when there's a permanent guardianship order application before the court. So the younger ones are more likely to be the subject of a permanent guardianship application. The reason for that is when you're terminating a parent's rights and you're making a child a permanent ward of the government, it is a very significant life event and children should have lawyers for that. The lawyer helps them understand what the court order means; it helps their voice be heard by the judge. And so that's why that number is so high: permanent guardianship order applications.

It's interesting because we also always appoint when young people are confined in secure services facilities because their freedoms are taken away, and those are generally the older children. But the temporary guardianship order applications: if the family is consenting, we may not appoint a lawyer for the child, but if it's a contested application, we make sure that the child has a lawyer.

The Chair: MLA Dach.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you very much, Ms Pelton, for your dedication to youth in care in this province. Your reports really reveal a very genuine sense of compassion for the youth that you serve and that we all are here to do what we can to improve services for them.

I had a question about serious injuries as you mentioned in your report, and previous reports also have talked about serious injuries

that require notification and review. Often they have been involving things as serious as assault and stabbing, but a lot of details around the actual incidents were not really there. I think it's important to know and for the public to know if these incidents take place between youth in care, or are they from caregivers? Are they from people unrelated to their interaction with CFS or government services? Just the circumstances surrounding some of these serious injuries and what actually qualifies for reporting requirements and review of serious injuries because this is something that I as an MLA am, and I am sure you are, concerned, and the public is certainly concerned to know: are children in government care safe? What are the threats?

Ms Pelton: Well, the serious injuries is an interesting challenge for us because the definition of serious injury for our purposes is that the child has long-lasting impairments to their health. We don't determine that. The caseworkers and the senior-level ministry officials determine that. Some years we've had as few as, like, two serious injuries reported to us, and I think last year we had 15. So sometimes it depends on who's assessing long-lasting impairment or life-lasting impairment to the child's well-being. These serious injuries can be anything from a suicide attempt where they ended up in the hospital and intubated and then they needed time to recover. We have had stabbings, generally not between children in care.

2:20

We have to be careful about the amount of detail in the reports, especially for those young people who are still alive because they might not want their details shared. We talk to them; whenever there's a serious injury, they're part of the investigation, and the investigators go out and talk to them about what their experiences are and what they're thinking. So we are very cautious about not sharing too much information.

Mr. Dach: Okay. As a quick follow-up I wanted to ask if you think maybe, just given your answer, that perhaps the threshold for reporting and review of serious injuries or the level of injury that is considered serious needs to be changed. I mean, I'm thinking, like, a punch in the face that gives a serious bruise or loses a tooth: that's pretty serious in most people's lives. It's not at the level of a stabbing or life-altering injury, but it's certainly serious. Do you think that that level of designation should be altered?

Ms Pelton: It's been an ongoing conversation because we also have young people, children perhaps, who are at the playground with their foster family and fall off a swing and break an arm. Should that be reported? We have young people who've been sexually assaulted – should that be reported? – and serious suicide attempts. So it's an ongoing conversation and I think it's something we need to pay attention to, but it's challenging. Every province has a different threshold for a serious injury, so that's also interesting.

The other thing is this critical incident. Like, sometimes we have children in care who have been the perpetrator of a serious incident. Should that be looked at? So should it be critical incident and serious injury, or should it just be serious injury? There are lots of nuances that we need to think about. Certainly, those critical incidents: the ministry does review those, but they are also something that I think about frequently.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much.

The Chair: On the list I have MLAs Eremenko and Sinclair.

MLA Eremenko, I'm wondering if you would switch positions with Sinclair to let him get his first question out.

Member Eremenko: Certainly. Yeah; not a problem.

The Chair: Thank you, MLA.

MLA Sinclair, the floor is yours.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, MLA Eremenko; I appreciate that. I just wanted to say thank you again for coming today. I'm sorry. You go through these individual stories about the kids, and it's incredibly difficult to even hear. Working in that environment every day is – I mean, I get to do a bunch of stuff in this position, but typically I don't see this every single day although I do experience some version of challenges in the Indigenous world quite frequently, but hearing about kids that we know are real is – there isn't even a word for it. Sad means – it doesn't do any justice. Thank you for the work you guys do.

I know that last time we were here, I repeated the question from the year before, but it wasn't, just so you know, intended in any way critical of your position; just to make light of how important lived experience is, in my opinion, and not just in this field but in so many others. The root causes of a lot of this are 10 things, probably, or 20. Not simple. I just wanted to ask a question. It's a little bit of a hypothetical, I think. I'm going to try and stay on scope here, Mr. Chair, so just bear with me.

We do see a real serious movement with the federal government and our government working with First Nations to bring their children home, and I believe this is something that Indigenous people have been asking for. I appreciate every chance that we have to positively make headway in these situations. I was just curious. I'm always, when I speak to people who aren't Indigenous, trying to make sure they understand the vast differences of individual communities and making sure that – you know, to me, there is no umbrella answer for this stuff. Working with First Nations communities directly, I think, is just an incredibly important thing that our government, federal government, and everyone has to do.

Given the direction that we're seeing this go and your position in government, I was just wondering if you could speak a little bit – and I know it's an ongoing process, so I don't want to put you in a position – just maybe what you view your role is going to be playing in some of the transition and what that might look like going forward, if that's possible. For as much excitement as I have about the sovereign, the idea of this whole thing being put back into the communities to take care of their own kids, I do have a lot of concerns about the complexities of that transition. I was just wondering if you could maybe speak to both myself and the committee on what your own opinion is of that transition and what your experience might look like, if that's okay.

Thank you.

Ms Pelton: Sure. Well, first of all, I appreciated your question about the number of our Indigenous staff because I believe that when Indigenous young people can see a role model who's Indigenous and they can see themselves in a service provider, it is more meaningful for them than anything else. I appreciate that question and absolutely believe that it's critically important. We're trying to bring on more Indigenous lawyers, and it's very important.

The federal legislation. I'm not sure what my role will look like. What I have done and what I will continue to do is offer to each nation that I'm happy to have me or my staff talk with them about what we've learned doing 35 years of advocacy. I appreciate that I will never tell them what to do. I'm hopeful that they ask me, and if they do, what it is that we can do to support their move as they take on bringing their children home. We certainly have some connections. It's slow, but I think the resourcing needs to be more defined from the federal government. Until nations have the

resources they need to proceed, it's going to be slow. Every opportunity I have to be at conferences or in nations to talk about what we do and how we do it and why it's important, I'm happy to do that. I've heard from a number of leaders that they will be writing advocacy into their legislation as it proceeds, so it's certainly seen that the child's voice is important in decisions.

I think it's going to take longer than we thought it would, but I think by taking the time, hopefully it will be more successful and it will be positive. I really believe that it has the potential to just be fantastic, but we need to take the time and provide the services, supports, resources.

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

Mr. Sinclair: No. Thank you for the answer. I understand we're talking about a hypothetical, and I appreciate your insight. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

MLA Eremenko, the floor is yours.

Member Eremenko: Thank you. I'd like to raise a question around the status check on a recommendation made in 2021, spring 2021, in regard to the youth suicide prevention plan. Just to bring everybody up to speed, a recommendation made in early '21 was that the ministries of Health and children's services should host a forum or other event to report on the first two years of the province's youth suicide prevention plan. That plan was a five-year plan, 2019 to 2024. Here we are three years later. That recommendation still stands; therefore I assume that a report two years into the five-year plan has not in fact been done, and we're actually at the end of the five-year plan. I was really struck and very saddened. You even highlighted one of the children in your report, Ms Pelton, who very sadly took their life at just kind of a mind-bogglingly young age. And so I wonder about how your office has been able to remain informed on the impact of the youth suicide prevention plan, the impact and the outcomes of that plan, and – perhaps I'll just throw in my follow-up right away – whether or not you are aware of plans to renew the strategy, to develop a new strategy, and whether you are recommending that there be a new five-year plan to address youth suicide prevention, please.

2:30

Ms Pelton: We have evaluated that recommendation as ongoing with some progress. I have not had an update about where they are at this point in time. We had also asked that they do a forum or some kind of public event where there was some kind of discussion about how successful it was being or was it being successful and what were the next steps. So I don't have any information at this point in time on where we're at, but we will, by the end of next month, be asking for updates from each of the ministries, and the deputy advocate of indirect services meets with senior officials, so she'll also be talking to them about where we're at with that.

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

Member Eremenko: Yes. Do you think that you would recommend that there be a consideration of another plan given the rates of suicide even in the last annual report that you've shared?

Ms Pelton: Absolutely. We're not seeing it get any less, unfortunately, and personally, knowing that an 11-year-old took his own life is enough to – I have tears every day in this job, and so by the time I'm able to talk about these young people, I've already had the cry. But when we think about and we're hearing about younger

children talking about hurting themselves, it really is critically important that there be a suicide prevention plan. Absolutely.

Member Eremenko: Thank you.

The Chair: I have Armstrong-Homeniuk, Rowswell, Shepherd, Dyck, and Wright.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Hello. Thank you, for the Chair, through you to the panel, for the good work you do and your staff do. Working with vulnerable children is of most importance, and I was deeply saddened to read that of the 83 notifications of death and serious injury your office received in 2022-2023, 53 children and young people were identified as having Indigenous status, representing 64 per cent of those who were injured or died this past year. The overrepresentation of Indigenous people in such tragic situations is of great concern for us. I note that the previous year there were 67 young people, or 76 per cent. Can your office expand on the factors for this overrepresentation, and can you expand on some of the factors that have led to a decrease in injuries and deaths amongst this demographic?

Ms Pelton: Sure. I can do my best. Our work is really dependent on what is coming through the doors with child intervention, and so if child intervention services is serving more Indigenous young people, then our numbers tend to go up. Now, I think this past year their numbers were about 76, and ours were 64, so it's not 100 per cent correlated that if they have 76, we have 76. But I'm concerned that when Indigenous children and families become involved with child intervention, they stay involved for longer periods of time and their children are more likely to come into care and stay in care. I'm not sure why the numbers with children's services are on the rise, because they are. It was lower, and it's at an all-time high now. I don't know if that's answering your question, but it really is related to what child intervention is doing.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you.

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

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: No. That's all for now.

The Chair: Okay. MLA Rowswell.

Mr. Rowswell: I just want to build on Member Dach's thing about serious injuries a bit. On page 30 of the report you provided a breakdown of age ranges of children, young people, who were seriously injured or died in the last year, and the largest number is for the 18-plus group, and it was like 47 per cent of 39 notifications out of 2,200 young adults that were in the system. It sounds like we need to define what a serious injury is; there needs to be some work done on that so we can get appropriate results. What would you say are the main factors that have contributed to the injury or death?

Ms Pelton: The post-18 group?

Mr. Rowswell: Yeah. The 18-plus group.

Ms Pelton: I'm really worried about the post-18 group because what they – well, I'm sure we've all known an 18-year-old who's happy: "Today I'm an adult and I can do whatever I want. I can go to the bar and I can vote." But they don't have the capacity to – capacity is maybe a strong word, but their brains are still developing and some of that consequence: the stuff isn't fully developed. My 18-year-old child can come back home if they make a mistake and I can, you know, float them a loan for rent for a month. If these

post-18 young people don't get adequate supports, they're really scared and they are more inclined to end up with a negative peer group or turn to substances to deal with their pain. So I really believe that we need to do more for this post-18 group.

I did some media in November when we released a report, and two of our young people from our youth council participated with me. Autumn talked about, you know, she was really excited to turn 18. Then she had transition to adulthood programming until she was 22. But then on her 22nd birthday she didn't have anything. What was she going to do if she needed help? Where would she turn? So I think that we need to give more thought to, again, brain science. Especially for young people who grew up in care and government is their parent, turning them out the door at 18 or 20 or 22 and not knowing that they've got what they need, is a recipe for disaster. They're so hopeful, but, again, if they don't have – they get evicted from their apartment and the only place they can go is a shelter and it's dangerous there, so they choose to sleep on a bench instead of in a shelter bed. They just don't have the supports that our kids have. And that's where my heart – really, I struggle to know how we're going to help them reach 30 years old.

Mr. Rowswell: You kind of answered my second question, which was: why do we include them? But you've kind of answered that. I know, it was probably the first year I was elected that I was talking to a parent in central Alberta. She was really concerned because the kid was a normal kid at 16, and got into drugs, and she was really scared that when she turned 18, she can then make her own decisions. You could put them somewhere, but they could check out the next day, right? So maybe that's why you need to track it. At what age do you, kind of, let them migrate or you don't follow them anymore?

Ms Pelton: I think we should be – you know what? It's pretty subjective, but if we could help them until they were 24, maybe even 25, or knew that when they left that they have a safety net. It's that piece around when they make a mistake and they've got nowhere to turn, or where they've got to turn is family who weren't healthy enough to take care of them when they were kids and still haven't managed to get healthy, so they end up back there in a chaotic environment where drugs and alcohol are a way of coping. It's just that when I look at my grandchildren and I think, boy, if they needed something at 25, of course I could give them a place to stay, or I'd float them a loan, or I'd do whatever I needed to do. These young people don't have those natural supports unfortunately.

The Chair: The next member I have is MLA Dyck followed by Wright.

Mr. Dyck: Thank you so very much, Chair. Yeah; some tough questions, tough answers here. I guess I really want to chat a little bit – we've got a couple of questions here just on drug and alcohol use, coping with your past, current trauma, some of those feelings of hopelessness that can come about. I'm concerned, our government is concerned about the opioid crisis in our province, and I know that we're committed to helping and supporting Albertans who are struggling with addiction. I read that you were also concerned over similar things.

We've done some investment into the virtual opioid dependency program at the provincial campus-based care facilities, and we've also introduced a mandatory opioid and substance use training for child intervention practitioners, both good things. So what I'm very interested in in this world is: what is your office seeing in terms of numbers when it comes to youth dying from substance-related causes? We've kind of been chatting a little bit about that. With

youth coming in and it sounds like using substances at an earlier age and also using more potent substances earlier, what are some of the contributing factors for this trend?

2:40

I am concerned as a parent and I'm concerned as a community leader, seeing younger and younger Albertans turning towards drugs and various opioids in order to numb their potential pain. So what are your thoughts on it? What are the contributing factors behind this?

Ms Pelton: Okay. Well, I'm not an expert and I won't pretend I am. But in terms of numbers, last year confirmed that we had 42 of 68 drug or alcohol-related deaths and six of 15 serious injuries confirmed related to drug and alcohol use. I think a couple of things. One is that we need a strategy that is educational for the younger kids because I think sometimes young people are exposed in their homes to drugs and alcohol, that they may not know what it is, so I think they need to know what it is. I think information is power, and young people need to have information so they can make good decisions. I believe that when parents struggle with addictions, young people often also struggle with addictions. Like I said earlier, if you don't have a way of coping with your pain or you don't have a positive person in your life, you may end up turning to substances instead.

In the report that we just released in November – and I know it's not the annual report, which we're talking about right now – we really looked at how we could prevent some of these tragic outcomes, and we met with experts on brain science and really talked about the importance of things like team sports and arts and drama and things that children are passionate about and supporting them to have that before they turn to the negative things that will result in negative outcomes.

I have a young person in my life – this started the conversation – who was really being bullied in school in grade 4, and she was really struggling and we were very worried about her, and then we got her involved with basketball and team sports, and so then she had people that weren't being mean to her, and she was part of a team. So one of my most recent recommendations is really around ministries working together towards what the positive things are and that all kids should have access to those positive outlets, what they're passionate about. I think that that will help, if we can start moving towards more of a preventative early intervention, but not just for kids who are struggling. All kids, before they start to struggle, should have access to those positive outlets. I think that will help.

And then, with what we're looking at now, I'm really concerned about the number of young people who have repetitive losses that aren't being addressed. When we think about – initially, we think about loss as death, right? Like, if somebody dies, that's a loss, and they should have counselling for that. But when you think about young people involved with child intervention, they're removed from their parents. That's a loss. They're removed from their community. That's a loss. They may have lost a pet. That's a loss. They don't have contact with their siblings. That's a loss. And so you have this compounded grief and loss, and if somebody isn't paying attention about how to channel that and resolve it and move forward, we're not going to be able to reduce the number of suicides or the number of substance and drug use problem deaths.

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

Mr. Dyck: I do have a quick follow-up here. I know that the government has put just over a million dollars – I think it's \$1.3 million – into the Alberta mentoring partnership. Are you aware of

any other efforts being made to improve services that support young people struggling with addiction, and are there any services your office provides as well to support them?

Ms Pelton: We don't provide direct services. We advocate for the services to be provided for the young people. I am not aware, other than the youth treatment centre that's been announced out at the Edmonton Young Offender Centre, but in the conversations with the ministries that we've had since November, they all agree. Like, there's no disagreement amongst the ministries that it would be good to put money or resources and co-ordinate. It might not even cost any more money because if children's services has an initiative and Mental Health and Addiction has an initiative and they don't know that each other has it – there should be a co-ordinated approach.

Then, following that, the recommendation speaks to assessment, co-ordination, and navigation for those supports for young people but then on top of that to have for Mental Health and Addiction a posting, like ER waiting times. We'd like to see a website that has a list of all of the services and supports that are available for Mental Health and Addiction across the province and what the wait times are for that so that if I'm in Grande Prairie, I know what's available in my community and how long the wait-list is. I'm hopeful that will be implemented because I think it has the potential to make a huge change.

Mr. Dyck: Thank you for that. I appreciate that.

Back to you.

The Chair: Thank you, members. I don't see any more on the list. We'll do last call.

Ms Pelton, again, as you can tell from all the questions around the table and the weight and the gravity that you have in your portfolio, we do really appreciate all that you and your team do with this very heavy matter.

We're going to move to the next part of the meeting after this, and we'll get back into the actions that we need to do. You and your team are more than welcome to stay if you wish, but if you need to be somewhere else, then we completely understand that, too.

Ms Pelton: Thank you. We are going to head back to the office, but we really appreciate your time. If there are questions that come up after, I'm always happy to respond or see if we can get the answer to a question. By all means, you know, Jody knows how to find me.

The Chair: We'll track you down if we need to. Really appreciate it. Once again, thank you.

With that, members, it's obviously a pretty heavy discussion. Now we're at the part of the meeting where we've heard it; what would we like to do with it? At this point, I'll put it to the floor for any discussions or thoughts. I know there were a couple of motions potentially tabled.

MLA Wright.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I've got a couple of comments and a motion I'd like to bring forward as well. You know, to continue with the review of this annual report, I think it would be incredibly beneficial to hear from departments such as Children and Family Services; Seniors, Community and Social Services; and Justice so that they can show how they're responding to the recommendations discussed today.

With that, I would move that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices invite officials from the ministries of Children and Family Services; Seniors, Community and Social Services; and Justice to each provide an

oral report to the committee's next meeting on the ministry's response to the recommendations in the 2023-2024 annual report of the Child and Youth Advocate.

The Chair: The clerks have put something on the screen. MLA, if you can take a quick gander to make sure that's correct.

Mr. Wright: Yeah.

The Chair: Okay. Perfect.

Having heard the motion, I will put it open for discussion. MLA Eremenko, I caught you on the screen. I'm not sure if you were wanting to discuss the motion.

Member Eremenko: I apologize. I'm not sure if I'm doing this in the right order, but I did have a presubmitted amendment to the motion. Is now the time to be discussing that, or do we need to vote to discuss the motion first?

The Chair: No. This would be the perfect time to talk about the amendment if you would like to read that or have the discussion for it.

Member Eremenko: Sure. Please just give me one moment while I actually pull it up. I'm going to mute myself so you don't hear me humming and hawing as I curse trying to find this thing. Here we go. My apologies. Okay. What I had proposed, please, for your consideration – it looks different than it was this morning. My apologies, folks. Submissions, perhaps?

The Chair: What we're seeing here on the screen, MLA, is that the motion be amended by adding Mental Health and Addiction immediately after Seniors, Community and Social Services. Is that what your intent was?

Member Eremenko: Thank you very much. Yes. It looks like what I'm seeing on my side of the portal is slightly different, and I didn't appreciate you had it there on the screen. Yes. Please. I would like to add the Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction to the list of other ministries provided here in terms of the opportunity to get some further insights from their piece of the work, please.

2:50

The Chair: Okay.

With that, I'll open up for discussion. MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to support this amendment from my colleague Ms Eremenko. You know, I think we just heard from the Child and Youth Advocate that, again, she has this recommendation, that's been in front of the government for some time now, that there be a specific strategy for supporting children and youth in terms of addressing the opioid crisis and in terms of substance use and addictions. That so far has not met with any support from government.

But, certainly, the ministry that we're talking about here, Mental Health and Addiction, has just taken on the supervision and co-ordination of Recovery Alberta, which is now the home for all of the co-ordination for all of these programs for the province of Alberta. Therefore, it has, I think, a significant stake in responding to this chief issue, one of the top concerns that was raised by the Child and Youth Advocate. Given that we have not yet seen a response from government to this recommendation from the Child and Youth Advocate and the significance of the crisis and the direct responsibility of this ministry, I think it makes sense that we would have them come and present to the committee and be able to have

the opportunity to answer questions, particularly as they're in the process now of just establishing a lot of these new processes.

Member Eremenko asked the Child and Youth Advocate about that, and she, the Child and Youth Advocate, Ms Pelton, acknowledged that they themselves are not navigators. So they themselves are dependent on, I think, the assistance of the ministry and some others to determine how youth themselves will be able to navigate. We have the new plans from this ministry, in particular, to open a new youth treatment centre at the Edmonton Young Offender Centre here in Edmonton. So given all of those things co-ordinating on a significant issue, I think it makes sense that we add Mental Health and Addiction to the list of ministries we are inviting to come and speak with the committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Any others wishing to discuss? Sure. MLA Wright.

Mr. Wright: Mr. Chair, I struggle with this one a bit. All the new recommendations that were brought forward in the 2023-2024 recommendations are already with the original ministries that they were advised to go to, so I feel that by adding Mental Health and Addiction, this may convolute the process to where we're trying to get the recommendations in the right buckets with the right ministries doing the right things. I don't believe that this is necessarily the right suggestion at this time. Most of the mental health and addiction-related recommendations would be encapsulated under Health, and they have already been making progress on some of these steps, so I don't think that is the appropriate call at this point in time.

The Chair: MLA Shepherd, I saw your hand there, and then MLA Dach.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. To respond to Mr. Wright, I would note that the Ministry of Health is also not on this list. So if they have the primary responsibility for addressing these things and that's where most of the work to respond to this recommendation from the Child and Youth Advocate is, then they should be on this list.

But let's be clear. The Ministry of Health is no longer directly responsible for mental health and addictions; that is directly under Recovery Alberta, which is under the aegis of Mental Health and Addiction, which is right there in the name. So I would suggest, Mr. Wright, that I think they are the appropriate ones to address this, and I would suggest that it's not going to convolute anything; it's just an opportunity for us to get some additional information alongside the other ministries. I think more information is better for us to be able to properly, I guess, understand the landscape and how we can best see these recommendations implemented.

The Chair: I have a few hands going up here. I saw MLA Dach, but I think that you waived off for Shepherd, if I'm not mistaken. Wright wanted to respond, and then so did the mover of the motion.

MLA Eremenko, did you want Wright to reply? You both kind of caught my attention at the same time. Maybe you want to do a follow-up after Wright speaks.

Member Eremenko: Yeah. I think that's the right approach. Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: And, MLA Dach, just to confirm: you've waived off?

Mr. Dach: I'll defer to Member Eremenko.

The Chair: Okay. Perfect.

Mr. Wright: I just wanted to clarify my point of new recommendations. Any of the new recommendations are with the appropriate ministries and did not include Health. So the new recommendations for the 2023-2024 report: I just wanted to clarify that point on that. That would be kind of my two cents, and I will cede from there.

The Chair: Okay. MLA Eremenko, the floor is yours.

Member Eremenko: Thank you. Yeah. Just on that particular point, recommendation 4 on page 31, that Ms Pelton actually referenced just at the end of her presentation there, is specifically related to Mental Health and Addiction, that they should be posting public mental health and addiction service options available plus wait times. I think that both directly and indirectly the ministry has plenty to contribute to the conversation related to eight recommendations pertinent to children and families who are experiencing disability, plus some of the others that are made with the annual report. So I would certainly agree that it's in scope and believe that the amendment does in fact make the motion stronger, that we're ultimately trying to get the very best information to move forward and to contribute some value-add to the report, and Mental Health and Addiction is a critical piece of that in my mind.

The Chair: Okay. Any other further discussion?

Okay. Just to be clear with everybody, we are on the amendment to the motion. So that's what I'll be prepared to call the question on. All of those in favour of the amendment, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. And we'll go to those online. All those in favour of the amendment, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. Okay. And I think, if I'm not mistaken, it's split right now from what I've seen. So maybe what we'll do is we'll call a . . .

Ms Robert: You have to announce a result the best you can.

The Chair: I call a tie. So we'll have to ask the question again. I've got two here . . .

Ms Robert: No. Sorry. That means you have to vote.

The Chair: Oh, I don't want to do that.

Mr. Wright: If it makes things easier and can work with the committee, I would change my vote to a yes if that would be beneficial to break the tie.

The Chair: Okay. So let's call the question again. All those in favour of the amendment, please say aye. Okay. I have three in the room. All those opposed, please say no.

MLA Sinclair, did you indicate? You can abstain if you wish. I just wasn't sure if I missed you.

Mr. Sinclair: May I speak freely? Is that allowed or no?

The Chair: Not right now, sorry. No. You can abstain if you wish.

Mr. Sinclair: I would like to abstain then, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay. And those online in favour of the amendment, please say aye.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: I couldn't hear. I'm sorry, could you get MLA Wright to repeat what he said? It faded off; I didn't hear what he said.

The Chair: We're in the vote right now at this point.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Yeah. Okay. I heard him say something when he voted there. He would be agreeable if, and then that disappeared. Sorry.

Mr. Wright: I just voted yes.

The Chair: So for those keeping score at home and in the room, currently I have three in favour, one against. Online, I have two in favour, and I'm about to call the question for those against.

Mr. Dyck: No, Chair. I am also in favour of the amendment.

The Chair: That motion is carried.

Back on to the motion itself as amended. Now, I've got – this is just like being at home. I got two ears going, my mouth at the same time, and I'll carry that forward. So, yes. The amendment to the motion now has passed and now we're on the motion itself with the amendment, and now I am prepared for discussion on that. Is there any further discussion?

Seeing none, all those in favour of the motion as amended, please say aye. Any opposed? Then online, all those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed?

Motion carried.

And that's how democracy works. Well done, committee. I really like that.

So anything else that we should be putting here for motions?

Mr. Dyck: I have another motion, Chair.

The Chair: Okay. Please go ahead.

Mr. Dyck: In the case that there are any further questions, as it was done last year, it would be beneficial, I think, for the officials of the office of the Child and Youth Advocate to be available to answer any relevant questions that may come up during the following steps of the review. So I'd like to put forward a motion that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices invite the officials of the office of the Child and Youth Advocate to provide technical assistance to the committee if requested when officials from the ministries of Children and Family Services; Seniors, Community and Social Services; and Justice meet with the committee regarding the recommendations of the 2023-2024 annual report of the Child and Youth Advocate.

3:00

The Chair: Perfect. It is on the screen. We just want to ensure that that's what you had read.

Mr. Wright: There's a T missing. I don't think the "hat" of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices would be appropriate. Not sure if it's a top hat or a fedora, but yeah, I would say that it looks good.

The Chair: Okay. Good. I had MLA Shepherd for discussion.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd note that ball caps seem to be the popular political commodity these days.

That aside, I'm wondering – now, of course, we did not have an amendment submitted ahead of time, but certainly if the committee were of the will to entertain considering an amendment, I think it might be worth considering putting one in given that we had an amendment to the last motion, which might change what we want to have here. Recognizing that I cannot debate the amendment until the committee has approved us an ability to bring forward one, I

would ask if we could have a vote of the committee to consider bringing forward an amendment.

The Chair: Yeah. In the famous words of former President Bill Clinton, it depends what your definition of “is” is. There was an amendment that was tabled within time. If the member is referencing that one that potentially is for this amendment, then we might be . . .

Mr. Shepherd: I apologize. I didn’t see that, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: No worries.

Mr. Shepherd: By all means, then, if I believe that is the amendment that I’m thinking of, yes, by all means, then I would suggest we move that amendment. If I’m able to do so, I will, or if Ms Eremenko would need to do so, I’m happy to cede the floor to her.

The Chair: I would leave that for you to discuss. Always as a gentleman, ladies first. So MLA Eremenko, would you wish to move the amendment that was tabled at the appropriate time to the chair, or would you prefer to have MLA Shepherd move it in the room?

Member Eremenko: I will happily move the amendment as submitted. The amendment is
to add Mental Health and Addiction immediately after Seniors,
Community and Social Services
to the motion as presented.

The Chair: Okay, and we’ll open it up for discussion. MLA Wright.

Mr. Wright: I think, based upon the previous amendment, that this is a fair amendment to move forward keeping consistency through the previous motions.

The Chair: MLA Sinclair.

Mr. Sinclair: The comment I was going to make there at the wrong moment – I apologize, Mr. Chair – was just that I do feel like it was a fair amendment given the importance, I think, of Mental Health and Addiction. My question was the overlap of, the ripple effect, I guess, of other ministries that could be involved here. So if we’re including Mental Health and Addiction, Indigenous Relations to me would – like, I’m just trying to find, we’re trying to find where the scope begins and ends. Because I thought, my understanding of that was just based on the new recommendations from Ms Pelton’s department. That was my only confusion with the previous, so that’s all I wanted to say to the committee. Thank you.

The Chair: Any other further discussion points?

Ms Rempel: On the amendment now.

The Chair: I’m with you. I got her. Thanks, Clerk. We’re going to have too many audibles on the play. So again, for everyone’s clarification, we are on the amendment. I am prepared to call the question on the amendment to the motion. All those in favour of the amendment as proposed and read in by MLA Eremenko, please say aye. Any opposed? And online, all those in favour, please say aye.
Motion carried, all in favour.

Now we’re back onto the motion as amended. I will open the floor to any further discussion.

Seeing none, I am prepared to call the question. All those in favour of the motion as amended, please say aye. Any opposed?

Motion carried.

Anything else? MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would note that there was another motion that was submitted that has not yet been moved, but certainly it was submitted by Mr. Dyck. If Mr. Dyck would like to move that motion, I would certainly be interested in discussing and supporting it, and if not, if possible, I would like to put that motion forward.

The Chair: The subtle nuance in this, and I appreciate that explanation, MLA Shepherd, and the congeniality in which it was moved and the spirit of it. If there wasn’t a motion that was submitted in time, then we have a little bit of housekeeping to do. We would have to refer back to Standing Order 52.041, and we would have to have that agreed on by the whole committee. So if that is – yeah. MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: If I may clarify, Mr. Chair. The motion was in fact submitted, that being the motion to invite officials from the Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Services to provide a written submission.

The Chair: Perfect. Well, we’re going back and forth. Now we’ve got the right one we’re speaking about.

So with that, MLA Dyck, if you would like to speak to or propose your motion.

Mr. Dyck: Yeah. Great. Thank you, Chair. I’m absolutely happy to do so. They’re a great ministry. They’ve done good work. I would love to read it into the record. I move that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices invite officials from the Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Services to provide a written submission no later than February 3, 2025, on the ministry’s response to the recommendations in the 2023-2024 annual report of the Child and Youth Advocate.

The Chair: Perfect. Appreciate that, Mr. Dyck.

We’ll open it up for discussion. MLA Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to it, and I’d like to thank Member Dyck for putting forward this particular motion. In my role as shadow minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services I’m certainly interested in hearing from them on this and particularly given the discussion we had with the Child and Youth Advocate about her recommendation regarding having that work done by that particular ministry to look into what accommodation should be put in place for youth with disabilities in order to ensure that they are having the most positive experience possible in moving through the justice system and that it is not in fact causing further harm or creating deeper cycles of criminalization and indeed the opportunities that might be there for prevention, which could be of great benefit to our communities and certainly not only benefit these youth but also save us costs in the criminal justice system. I welcome the opportunity to have that written submission. To be honest, as I considered it further, it might have been great actually to have them come in person, but I missed my window and opportunity to put forward an amendment in that regard, so I will instead put my support behind Mr. Dyck’s motion for a written submission.

Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you.

Any other further discussion?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call the question on the motion. All those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed? None. Online, all those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed? None.

Motion carried unanimously.

I almost want to take a standing vote on that. This is working good, you guys. Well done.

Any other items that members would like to bring forward at this time?

Seeing none, I will move on to other business. Any other business items under discussion?

Seeing none, the next meeting date. We'll be looking for early February. We'll send out a straw poll to everybody to try to line up our calendars on that.

The next part is probably everyone's favourite part of the meeting. That would be the adjournment, but just before we move to that phase, I want to thank all of the members for your very thoughtful questions today. The tone and the demeanour of which you carried yourselves is exemplary, so thank you so much. This is a very heavy subject to deal with. Again, I really appreciate it from the bottom of my heart as the chair. Well done, members. I'm very proud of all of you.

With that, is there anyone who would be looking to make a motion to adjourn? MLA Sinclair. All those in favour, please say aye. Online, in favour, please say aye. One abstaining. That's great. Motion carried. We're out of here. Thank you very much.

[The committee adjourned at 3:09 p.m.]

