

[Mr. MacDonald in the chair]

THE CHAIRMAN: Good morning, members of the committee and representatives from the Auditor General's office and, I'm sure, five individuals from Children's Services. In light of the traffic problems, perhaps after we call the meeting to order we could have an approval of the revised agenda. Approval by the Member for Edmonton-Centre. Thank you.

This morning we are meeting with the Hon. Iris Evans, the Minister of Children's Services, and five of her staff. In light of the arrival of the minister, we shall continue. We will deal with, as noted, at 9:50 a notice of motion as presented again by Miss Blakeman.

If the minister could give us a brief overview of her department, and if you would like to introduce your staff, please feel free to do so. Thank you.

MS EVANS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I had a collective-kitchen breakfast that I was chairing out in Sherwood Park, so I'm very grateful for your indulgence.

I'd like to first of all welcome the staff members that are with me today. To my immediate right, deputy minister Paula Tyler; Nancy Reynolds, assistant deputy minister in charge of partnership and innovation; Keray Henke, who's going to make sure my real glasses arrive, assistant deputy minister of strategy and support services. We have Bryan Huygen, director of finance, sitting behind, and Susanne George I believe is coming in. Other officials from my department may join us in the gallery later.

I'd also like to note and begin with my very strong and sincere appreciation to the Auditor General. Peter Valentine has not only been a friend of the people of Alberta, but he's been a wise counsel in the way we address this ministry. Through his participation with our officials, we and the public of Alberta have been very well served not only by his candour but by his astute recommendations. I see that Ken here this morning is taking a lead role. Would you please convey my most sincere appreciation to Peter. I will do that at a later date. We have learned a lot from you and from the auditors in the department and from all of those you have contracted to work with the child and family service authorities. I want it on the record that I don't think there has been any better service than we've had from your department. Having said that, I know there have been some critiques made that we have tried to follow through and improve on, but with your guidance I know we have done a lot better than we would have otherwise.

I'm going to keep my remarks very brief and say that I was so pleased this year that our officials, along with the officials throughout Alberta through the child and family service authorities, have made great strides in accountability in not only the area of planning but joining up of the support service elements for delivery on the banking side and on the governance side. I'm so pleased there have been such great strides made with the board members themselves. The board members have had orientation. They have come light-years in their understanding of their responsibilities for evaluation of the CEO and for doing proper business planning.

I note the Auditor General's remarks about the need to make sure our business plans precede the fiscal year – there's been a lot of work done in that regard – and also to make sure that over the three-year time frame we understand exactly how we can most cohesively do our planning, our evaluation.

One of the hon. members opposite asked about risk management last time, and we are moving in that direction. I think we were just in the very beginning stages. But reflecting on the notes from last year, observations made about risk management and assessment are

things that I think will pose challenges ahead. Still, many more people are very familiar with those opportunities to really do a proper job in accounting for our services.

That is a great challenge, Mr. Chairman, to have what has been traditionally a practice of delivering social welfare and protective services to children and families, a great challenge for practitioners in accounting for travel time and accounting for the time which doesn't appear to be on task but which, in fact, is decision-making that is, as human beings often are, made with human elements rather than financial elements in mind. A lot of the work we do through our tracking of children in the system and families that are in difficulty takes real thinking, and to put a quantifier on that is often a very difficult challenge.

Of course you know that in Children's Services we have family violence, we have the postadoption registry, and we look after adoptions. There are changes being made in those areas even as we speak. We look after day care supports through the communities, not the least of which is our community support in the 80-20 funding share that we have for family and community support services throughout Alberta, although of the dollars that we expend – in this particular budget year that's being reported today, \$334 million on child welfare, but out of a \$585 million budget – over half of those dollars are spent in the direct delivery of protective services and, I think, delivered with the best intent of looking after children of every socioeconomic class and every ethnic group.

Well, Mr. Chairman, I think it's time for me to cut short my remarks and leave it for your questions and simply say thank you for the privilege of being here today. In the order that you select, we will endeavor to answer your questions. May I make sure this year that I issue the invitation to pose any question. If we cannot fully respond here today, we will deliver answers in writing expediently to the members. So if you don't get your complete answer today, every single question will be rigorously scrutinized and responded to in writing at a later date. I have a lot of good help to help me, so we'll do our best.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. If I could remind the minister and the staff, the answers are through the clerk, please, Corinne Dacyshyn.

At this time I would like to ask Mr. Ken Hoffman, the Assistant Auditor General, to introduce his partners this morning.

MR. HOFFMAN: All right. Merwan Saher, Assistant Auditor General, is beside me on my right. Next over is Jeff Dumont. He's the principal responsible for this audit.

Just as a response, I will certainly pass on your kind words to Peter. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Hoffman.

Now, Ms Blakeman, would you like to start the questioning this morning, please?

MS BLAKEMAN: I would. Thank you very much. Welcome again to the visitors I can see in the gallery, and I think we have sports fans. Yes. Great. Welcome to the sports fans and fun seekers that have come to see this. I'm always pleased to see people in the galleries observing our Public Accounts Committee.

The minister is right; this is an interesting year to review, in that this is the first year the children's authorities were really running full steam and where we've actually got enough to look at and learn from. I'm looking forward to this.

As I was reading through, just for fun, the Auditor General's report, something leapt out, so I'll just ask this question right off the

top. I'm referring to page 59 of the Auditor General's report. It talks about achievement bonuses. I'm wondering if there are incentives, financial and otherwise, as it appears there are, that were offered to managers or CEOs of the children's authorities to finish the year under budget.

8:45

MS EVANS: Mr. Chairman, if I may, achievement bonuses were for achieving objectives as identified, not under budget at all. I will not be frivolous about that, but I doubt that there were many that generated significant surpluses, and most of those that did so did because they were not able to fully follow through on the work that the funding allocation model provided. They were achievement bonuses based on their overall delivery as viewed by the members of the child and family service authority. In response to me, they informed me about their decisions based on performance leadership in the community, collaboration with other partnerships. But absolutely nobody had the criteria of achieving underneath the targets; that was not one of the criteria.

The Auditor General recommended that we put both vacation and accruals for achievement bonuses within the authorities' budgets themselves, and we're working in that regard. We're closer to the evaluation and performance being properly documented by the authorities to take advantage of it. Those dollars in actual fact for achievement bonuses were miniscule. The dollars that are much more challenging, Mr. Chairman, quite frankly are the dollars for vacations and for vacation accrual. Paula has already informed me of some things that will be done for vacation accrual. But as to your question on achievement bonuses, they were very small – less than 10 percent in almost every instance that I'm aware of, usually about 3 or 5 percent – where they've written to me and said they'd like to provide that because of a recognition. They were never targets to get under. I'm interested in people doing the programs properly and making their targets. I'm not interested in accruing if in fact we are leaving services undone. There's one particular community right now where getting an outreach worker is, quite frankly, very difficult to do, and we're looking at incentives to get outreach workers to distant and remote communities. But there's been no formalization of any policy yet on that.

THE CHAIRMAN: Ms Blakeman.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you. Yes. I have been interested in the corporatization of government with the incentive bonuses, and some people get the little awards where they wear the lapel pin, the Premier's badge of merit or something. That is definitely a corporate business approach to management, where people are given a cash incentive if they achieve certain things.

Just to finish off this question then. The minister was talking about "less than 10 percent." Is that less than 10 percent money or less than 10 percent of the managers? I'm looking for how many people received these bonuses and how much the bonuses were. I don't want the personal information; I'm just looking for "person A got \$3,000, person B got . . ." or whatever, so I have some idea.

MS EVANS: I'd be pleased to provide that schedule. On the bonus side it's very small; it's not universal. But we'll be pleased to provide that schedule.

MS BLAKEMAN: Great. Thanks.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Marz, again followed by Dr. Taft.

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good morning, hon. minister. My question is regarding adoptions, under outcomes and performance measures on page 40 of the ministry's annual report. That's the blue slick-covered one that wants to slide off your desk. You indicate on page 40 that only 6.7 percent of children under permanent guardianship were adopted in 2000-2001. That's between newborn and age 11. That seems extremely low. I was wondering if you could comment as to why the number of children being adopted in that age group is so low.

MS EVANS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. That number is low. That number, of course, does not include private adoptions which are already levered out to private agencies that conduct adoptions, but we believe that target is still too low, that there are far too many children not being adopted that could be adopted. At one point last year I was aware that we had 100 international adoptions, which cost people upwards from \$15,000 because they have to go overseas to explore and work with these agencies. But 200, approximately, adoptions in our area I believe is too low. Part of it is because many of these children have behavioural problems, fetal alcohol syndrome or fetal alcohol effect, may have mental disorders, may have families that are indefinite: show some signs of improvement, take the child back, and then regress again.

One of the biggest thrusts we're going to do to try and bridge this is our new Alberta response model where we will be working on home improvement from the very first instant the child comes into care. So in fact the minute you have to take a child, which is the last resort in child protection, you work with that family to try and make improvements in that home so that child doesn't move from caregiver to caregiver to caregiver. That is not achieving what results we really need.

With some of our programs – the kinship program, the Yellowhead tribal adoption program, some of the pilots we have with First Nations families adopting other First Nations children – we believe we'll make some significant strides. But beyond the advertising we're currently doing to get adoptive parents and to adopt special-needs children, of which there are many in our system, we believe we can improve on this target, and in our new business plan we'll be talking about some measures we're taking to do that.

But this is not a performance measure that we brag about. We believe it's one that we're working on. It's a work in progress, and there is significant and much more work to be done.

MR. MARZ: Well, where adoption is a good solution for a child, what steps is your department taking specifically to ensure that adoptive parents are found?

MS EVANS: I think a good part of those steps are taken. It sounds very basic, but in the home assessment model in the assessment we do for the foster/adopt program, for example, there's a really thorough screening given to those people that are potential parents. There's a lot of work done to see whether that home has all the adequate resources, and assessments of the child both through psychologists and through careful monitoring of the home. I think it's the due diligence that has been done by the practitioners, but I'm going to ask Paula if she wants to add to that, please, for the work that we're doing.

Mr. Chairman, I hope you understand that this is a really important area for us. It's one that we are struggling to do better at, so I am grateful for the member's question.

MS TYLER: One of the challenges we have is that a number of the children available for adoption who are wards of the government are

older children and come into our care at a higher age, and most of the families, of course, are looking for newborn children. One of the things we've been exploring is ways to describe adoption or, shall we say, permanency a little differently for those children. If we really take the view that children need families and people in their lives who care about them because of who they are, not because they're paid to do so, then we take a look at our current foster families who have had children in their care, some of them for a number of years, even though they do not feel they are in a position to adopt. What we're looking at are opportunities to describe those situations more fully to encourage foster parents to take on more adoptive roles where there is some support because of the children's higher needs.

In the past we were, I think, very rigid in terms of looking at adoptive families in light of a sort of typical white, middle-class family. Now we're taking a look at expanding that a little bit in terms of extended family, looking to them to take a child into their home more on a permanent basis, and for foster families who currently have children to continue with those children and not still describe them as foster children but really as part of their family. So we are trying to expand that repertoire.

The minister referenced First Nations children, who are children that are very difficult for us to find families for, partly because First Nations communities don't recognize adoption formally in the same way we do. They're more comfortable with kinship-care models, grandparents looking after the children. So we are trying to be flexible, still providing the fundamental elements of family for these children.

8:55

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Dr. Taft, and Dr. Taft will be followed by Mr. Goudreau.

DR. TAFT: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I'm on page 14 of the annual report, the dark blue section one, looking at the four pillars of child and family service authorities. Pillar number one is early intervention. I'm just quoting from the first paragraph.

The CFSAs' work in 2000-2001 has been mainly focused in the area of Early Intervention. This reflects the new philosophy adopted by the ministry that recognizes the critical role of prevention services, especially during early childhood. Supporting families of young children is particularly important . . .

and so on. I'd be interested in any elaboration. Why was that last year a critical priority? Why were you emphasizing that?

MS EVANS: Mr. Chairman, early intervention and early child development, two programs that we are working on in the ministry, are, we believe, the long-term solution to supporting families and communities. Initially the authorities had a lot of work to do to build their capacity to do this work. They have partnered in part with the family and community support services throughout communities to initiate and follow through with it. The programs that are offered I think establish a sound footing with families, and even in this recent round of reduction, we have still had our very youngest children attended to through the home visitation program. We have levered dollars out to communities to take care of both prenatal and neonatal circumstances for children. So while we have a strong belief in the early intervention pillar, I'm very sensitive to the fact that the hon. member may be, as I am, concerned about reductions or stalling of programs while we're building programs in capacity in communities.

During this period a lot of the planning for the current home visitation program dealing with the zero- to 18-month-old and for those health agencies that are providing programs has gone on

largely uninterrupted. Other early intervention programs have been most recently deferred during the part of this report that they were being planned for, and the delivery mechanisms and partnerships were being established. Throughout Alberta that's not entirely universal.

One of the areas where I think we have to do more work is providing those programs through day cares and building capacity in local day cares to help deliver those programs, because some of those day cares have not got the same capacity, for example, to provide the service that families in their own homes could provide for children in need. Why do we believe it's important? We think a strong foundation is important, just as the words say in the plan. We intend to build on that in this ministry.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Dr. Taft.

DR. TAFT: Yes. I'm wondering, then, just carrying on, if there's any formal analysis or any studies being done on the benefits of investing, as it were, in prevention and the savings that may generate down the road or in fact if there's any evidence at all to support the benefit of early intervention and preventive services. If there is, maybe you could provide some of that to the committee.

MS EVANS: We'd be pleased to. I think I could cite some references right off the bat. Fraser Mustard's early years study done with Senator Margaret McCain would be one such document that we referenced during the Children's Forum held two years ago and again recently. Dr. Margaret Clarke and Dr. Lionel Dibden have provided evidence. There's significant international and national evidence. Nico Trocme of Health Canada has been gathering statistics for some period of time.

I think it's been generally accepted over the last two decades that early brain development and development in the early years can only support a lifelong success story for children. Much of it, while not gathered by individual authorities, has been referenced over a consistent and an extended period of time. Authorities themselves still believe that this emphasis we're currently placing on the home visitation program is likely to glean the greatest breakthroughs because of our partnership with Health and the help with the early mother.

In this particular budget year I'm referencing here, we're also doing some significant early intervention with the stage from youth to adulthood, Mr. Chairman. We did planning through this budget year, and then in the current year we're expending some resources towards youth in transition to adulthood: a different kind of early intervention but important nonetheless. So we can be pleased to provide the references for the authorities.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Goudreau, again followed by Mr. Mason.

MR. GOUDREAU: Thank you. To the hon. minister. I'm referring to the annual report of the Auditor General of Alberta for the year 2000-2001. That's the light green one. The report recommends that each CFS authority "establish a risk management system." What action has been taken on this recommendation?

MS EVANS: You know, at the time this year was going on, we were working still through the accountability measures that have been available to improve the governance and accountability of each of the authorities. Many of them had just newly received their delegation, and I think in collaboration with our officials it was

important to establish how the business plan was developed and what the government expectations were. I think this part is the greatest success story from the people that are joining me from the finance side under the team managed by Keray, and I have to give a lot of praise to the work done in the field by Susanne George and Bryan Huygen in helping with the business planning and to the Auditor General. These are the areas where they have been developing what is going on.

If you looked at the business planning we did last year, there was always a little bit of a shift between what the local authority was doing and the expectations of the department. This year the support services, the program support and the supports that have been provided by our department officials with the local officials, have lined up and fit much more closely together both in sharing of information, where authorities have had to learn what's enough and what's too much in some areas, and also in supports they need to get the program under way. And you're aware that there are six, if you will, minimotherships in the Alberta shared social delivery network which in regions of the province assist the business planning of the local authorities, and they have been providing guidance in financial planning. We've improved our information sharing not only through greater familiarity with the model we're using but through the development of technology that helps.

If I may, I think it's particularly difficult when the CWIS system, which is our record of each child that comes in care, accounts for the service delivered to the child or what the child's needs were but doesn't necessarily identify the dollars that might go along with that service. So business planning is perhaps a greater challenge.

One other area is that the local boards have had to learn in their governance what's policy and what's administration. That's something that's a frequent citing, as well as questions from the hon. member opposite last year generating on risk assessment. There have been other things, along with the evaluation of the CEO, that many more boards were getting familiar with and following through with. So there are some strides. We're still just walking, not running but walking.

MR. GOUDREAU: The report sort of indicates areas of noncompliance and that they rely on the CEO to note areas of noncompliance. In one place it says that the authorities did not clearly understand their roles and that they depended on the department for their legislative and regulatory responsibilities. What expectations will the ministry have insofar as the implementation of a risk management system in the CFSAs?

9:05

MS EVANS: Well, I think the expectation, frankly, starts with our own monitoring of what they're doing. They are going to have to more frequently report to us so that we're aware of what has been done; for example, on interauthority transfers, something that has challenged us as families move from one area to the other. I think more frequent reporting is part of what is expected in strategy and support services. More frequent attention to the accounting details: I think that's one of the things that has been stressed.

Many of the authorities are now assuming a program unit funding approach where they are taking a look at what the funding is within each unit. It's best described by taking a look at some of the neighbourhood places that are delivering children's services and trying to establish what the costs are of servicing those various communities and then delivering that to government through the CEOs and through strategy and support services.

You know, initially, Mr. Chairman, when we established all 18

authorities, they started like pioneers in delivery of their social and child welfare services and had to learn a lot with newly appointed people out there. Our accountability back through the business planning process not only establishes some roots for planning, but on their operational plans, which are separate from their business plans, it establishes a framework in conjunction with strategy and support services where risks have to be reported, where the risks not only to the child but to the staff resources have to be identified. Perhaps, Keray, you'd like to add to what I've stated so far.

MR. HENKE: Well, I think, Madam Minister, you've provided a pretty comprehensive solution. I think the point the Auditor General was making earlier in the report was that we are in a very high-risk business. We are intrusive. We go into families; we go into children's lives. We make decisions in context that influence people's lives. Our intention is always to influence them for the better.

We have a number of outstanding litigation issues where people will allege, in the future, that we've not necessarily exercised our responsibilities with due care and diligence. So part of the risk management and risk mitigation policies are going to revolve around the clear articulation of policies, guidelines, case management practice, and ensuring that there is an appropriate review of those decisions and those case management practices as they are occurring so that we have good child care practice happening in our program delivery every day.

MR. GOUDREAU: Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Mason, followed by Mr. Cenaiko.

MR. MASON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Minister Evans, on page 55 of the Auditor General's report he identifies challenges facing the ministry in the year 2000-2001. He says that "since Authorities were set up, caseloads have grown rapidly." That's been going on for some time. Why is that occurring?

MS EVANS: Mr. Chairman, in the old days one would have said that that's the \$64,000 question. Today that question is challenging every child caseworker and every deputy across Canada. Why is it growing? One could speculate. Nico Trocme of Health Canada tells us that some of those things may be societally related. When I was giving birth to my children, only about 16 percent of women in Alberta worked outside the home. Today in 86 percent of families both parents work outside the home. Often children at various ages are looking at alternative relationships. It's not the same world it used to be. Could we fault society? Perhaps. Could we fault any of those things? Perhaps. But why have they grown? In our examination we have felt at the very first instance that people were aware where they could get help. They found out that there was a child protection service that offered more than just establishing a framework for evaluating the angst or the weaknesses in a family. They found out that they could get help for mental disorders, for some of the challenges the family was facing.

The biggest challenge and one of the biggest reasons we are taking children into protection, I believe, relates to the increased proliferation of family violence exhibited not only to the opposite spouse but to the children. I should mention, Mr. Chairman, that both Ms Blakeman and Mr. Mason attended the annual general meeting of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, and I think we were all only too poignantly aware that for every woman that is looked after, two children are looked after. So it's the

acknowledgment that family violence is more commonly and prevalently an activity that children witness, even more than sexual abuse, which was one of the issues in the past.

I think the other thing is that with increasingly fragile children that are living for longer because of new methods of sustaining life among newborns, sometimes it's not obvious that children have developmental disabilities that might completely frustrate families in coping with the child. Sometimes those families are delivering to child welfare children that they cannot care for properly.

So why is it growing? Our work on connecting the dots established that some of it was the Alberta advantage. It also cited that increased training for practitioners, increased supervision might be the answer. I've got a lot of confidence in our social workers, so I'm not so likely to place stresses on the system there but on society itself. If I may, in Fort McMurray the people that came to us from Syncrude examined it from their quality assurance perspective and assured our department and our officials that a hundred percent of the reason was the accelerated economy, where people were out there working and some people didn't know how to handle the resources as easily as they should have. Perhaps those families got too quickly on the racetrack, using drugs or other substance abuse, and in the other circumstances perhaps came here to seek their fortunes and found out, up there at least, that the fortunes weren't always there for the making.

So we have numerous answers. I don't think any one of them is necessarily the best answer, and I think for the future the best answer lies in this. Children who have the life sentence – and it is a life sentence for some – if they are in the system, are maybe not served as well as they could have been had we been very rigorous in our approach at the very outset, diverted some for community attention and they actually were looked after in a very intensive fashion, those moms in particular who need our support. Judge Milliken's paper, which I am going to voluntarily share with everybody at this Public Accounts, clearly identifies that in San Diego they're making a success in case management by taking their case intake and looking after those moms in a very intensive way. They've got a 70 percent success rate on those families. So if we can find ways to turn that around over this next year, we're hoping to do so.

MR. MASON: A supplementary. The next line in your report says that the rapid growth in case loads "has put pressure on the Authorities to shift funds earmarked for preventative programs to child welfare programs." Now, we've just seen this in spades. I'd like to know what the ministry has been doing over the past year or so to prepare for this situation.

9:15

MS EVANS: I suppose, Mr. Chairman, the best way to respond to that is that it depends on the authorities, on numerous things and numerous different places. I'm going to ask the staff to help me with this, because I'll just give a general policy direction.

First of all, we've been working with the authorities so that they understand the importance of those programs. Much of what we've had to really work on is this: partnership building. You know, both Mr. Mason and I come from the street front of local community councils that are duly elected and are very comfortable and well recognized in communities. Child and family service authorities in regions are almost the new kid on the block. They've had to make partnerships with health authorities, with school boards, with municipal councils, and the regional challenges of establishing and staking out their turf for partnership has been a good part of their emphasis. So part of the preparation that Mr. Mason asks about has been in the establishment of partnerships to help.

Now, further detail, Paula and perhaps Nancy, on what they've been doing for partnership and anticipating the intervention.

MRS. REYNOLDS: Certainly there is that continuing challenge of the child welfare needs and the mandate for those services with the early intervention. Through some of the partnerships with other ministries what we've been trying to do – and this refers to an earlier question as well – is really focus on those kinds of programs where there is clear evidence and research that shows they do work, that they do support families and the children to ultimately try and keep them out of child protection. So we're continuing to try and really focus. The authorities are also reviewing that kind of information, reviewing all their programs to identify those that are getting the best results and that broader evidence shows will give the best results.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

MR. CENAIKO: Madam Minister, the Auditor General suggested the need for improving the orientation and training of authority boards including customizing for specific issues at the regional level. What action has been taken on this recommendation?

MS EVANS: Thank you for that question. One of the most successful ways that we tackled the governance was in our separation of the way we used to recruit members for boards and the way we did it this year. This past year we have had an outside consultant coming in with the express target of selecting the very best people in communities. That selection was made by a selection panel that was selected at the local level. It might be a mayor, a school trustee, someone who had delivered child welfare service. So there was a selection panel, a consultant engaged in the selection who was very definitely nonpartisan in his view of who should be selected. They did a very thorough screening. Those people came on in the very first instance as people who were nonpartisan and who were established in the community as people who had the interests of children and families in mind.

From that point onward we provided two days of orientation for the boards. We encouraged the boards to write up their orientation plans. The Auditor General has cited in his report that more could be done on those plans, but I'm confident that after they had two days of intensive tutorial on the financial, the legal obligations and on their moral obligations as members for children and for the protection of children, we made light-years in strides this time.

I would tell all members here that one of the ways I knew that this was done well this year is that we didn't have a lot of negative reaction from people to the people that were outlined. People throughout Alberta said that those were good choices throughout Alberta, and very modest differences were made. I think that the two-day orientation we've just had plus some of the work we'll do with the co-chairs, helping them learn their roles and responsibilities in that process of looking after governance, will also help.

MR. CENAIKO: My second question, Madam Minister, is: how have the priorities for ongoing training been established?

MS EVANS: To a large extent we have taken a look at what the needs of the board members themselves were. We have looked at the needs of understanding their financial accountability, their accountability to evaluate their CEO so that the delivery of the administration can be properly developed. The board members have told us where they believe the gaps are in their understanding. Some of the boards need a certain amount of understanding about the role of themselves as mediators. Others need the understanding of their

role as people predominantly focused on policy. In other words, they're not the hands-on deliverer of the service. They are the ones that have to understand that their sights are raised at the policy.

I think a good part of what we have done is that the officials that are sitting here with me have universally traveled across this province, as I have. When I go in to listen to a board I say: would the officials retire and sit with the officials to talk? We have great talks about: "What are your problems here? Are you having any special needs? How are you looking after the management team? Are you recognizing those star performers in your district? How are you functioning between each other?" Just like we do in our own caucuses, many have differences of opinion from one to the other, and sometimes I'm called to be a priest and counselor on those. So we're establishing priorities on interpersonal relationships as well as in staff and board policy management and how we follow through with our accountability on the financial side of the system.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Ms Blakeman, followed by Mr. Ouellette.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you. I'll refer you to goal 2.1, appearing on pages 35 and 36 in section 1 of your report. It's around "reduce family violence and address its impact on children and families." It's about the only place I can actually find acknowledgment of women still existing. [interjection] Well, it's true. I objected at the time to women's shelters being moved under Children's Services, but there they are.

In this fiscal year the department stopped releasing turn-away rates. I raised that at the time. What I'd like to know is why. Can the minister defend that choice? I see it as an excellent management tool. If we know how many people can't get into the shelters, then we know how many we are definitely not being able to reach in every way, shape, and form. I know the minister defends it by saying they're in a hotel. But really for the complete package of services that are anticipated to be offered, they should be in the shelters. So in just looking at how many women were admitted, how many children were admitted, and how many calls there were to the crisis centre, we're not getting the whole picture. I'm looking to the minister to defend that choice.

MS EVANS: Yes. Mr. Chairman, the hon. member is quite right that it would be very useful information to know where the numbers were, where our admissions were, our admissions for children, and I think our frustration was always that on the turn-away side we could never establish whether or not they were people that took advantage of getting some assistance from Human Resources and Employment or if they sought refuge with family and friends and others. I think in defence of what we're doing today, Paula Tyler, as deputy minister, and Jan Reimer, with the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, are looking at a couple of things: first of all, whether or not we should be enveloping two authorities throughout Alberta, the funds for women's shelters, or whether or not we should be looking at a direct relationship between the department and women's shelters. We should be looking at perhaps a different type of relationship with Human Resources and Employment in the gathering of statistical data that has been less than perfect. Through Keray's shop and support services as well as the Council of Women's Shelters we are looking at whether or not we can set up terminals for accurately accounting for data in ways that would be easily understood and yet not break the bank in getting that data.

I think the most important thing to assure the hon. member is that this year, as in last year, we not only increased the funding for women's shelters; we increased the supports for children that are in

women's shelters. This year, when we've had the most recent round of cuts, women's shelters, if they volunteered to give money, were not requested by the ministry or the department themselves to do that. Some of the local regions may have asked them to make a contribution. Because of my very strong concern that women's shelters need that support, I have not been looking at that, nor have I been looking at family and community support services as areas for taking any kind of reduction.

So on the accountability side each local authority has been given their statistics, which they may wish to discuss with their family and community support services, their local shelters, but to report those statistics provincially with the anomalies and the way the evidence was gathered we didn't believe was responsible. I think we're moving to a more responsible model, and with Human Resources and Employment on those turn-away statistics I think we can do some work.

But I'm going to ask Paula if any of the work you're doing right now will lay the groundwork for doing it better in the future, because in the past those statistics didn't mean very much from some of the areas. Please.

9:25

MS TYLER: Well, we certainly now, I think, have a very good partnership with the Council of Women's Shelters to address these issues. This has plagued us, as you know, for a number of years and certainly predated the establishment of this Children's Services ministry. How to account for the usage in shelters and the demand and the turnaway was difficult. We do not track women in a detailed way unless we have their permission to do so, and often it's difficult when a woman comes and presents an issue to the shelter to then sort of follow her path. We do the referral. We have, I think, a growing connection with Human Resources and Employment to make sure there is follow-up.

The work we're doing with the women's shelter is important from two aspects. It speaks to, if you will, the governance issues and the funding relationship that the minister referenced and whether or not the fact that we've now moved into 18 authorities, whereas before in family and social services that was done through six regions, has hindered the development of programming and competency in women's shelters and whether we need to have a different relationship. Quite frankly it probably doesn't matter which department women's shelters are in so much as what the relationship is and whether those shelters are getting the connections and support for human services for the children that are in there and for the women.

In terms of the systems, that's where we've had the most significant problems around tracking woman. A few years ago what would happen is that we had no way to be able to track duplications, so if I were a woman that needed refuge and made multiple phone calls, those would be multiple contacts and potential turnaways. We're trying to refine that so that we have better statistics to guide the resource development, and we're doing that work jointly with the women's shelters. So that's just a bit of an elaboration.

MS EVANS: And if I may add, one of the other things I discovered on my tour of shelters this summer is that there was great fear that DIAND – that's the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs – may be tracking to the greater detriment of the First Nations and other women that were attending shelters, and we've done considerable work to assure and I think have received some assurance from DIAND that there will not be tracking of native women that would in fact ultimately reveal that woman back to her First Nations residency. We had quite a bit of discussion over that,

and probably the hon. member is familiar with that issue. We've been assured that that anonymity will be respected as it is for nonaboriginal people, but we have, I can assure you, done a lot of work to try and see whether or not – we have an interest, too, in getting this as accountable as possible.

If I can just make one more observation. The Solicitor General has a great interest in this as well, dealing with sexual assault centres and the other work out of that department, and perhaps in the future we will get there, but we're still in the establishment of how well we can tackle this problem.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Ms Blakeman.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks. I'm confirming. I do know that you get turnaway numbers. You're just not publishing them because you can't talk about where the women have actually gone.

My supplementary question to that is that again in this fiscal year I was aware of and raised the points that in the rural shelters, which are not at a hundred percent capacity at all times for women fleeing abusive situations, there was increasing pressure from some children's authorities for those rural shelters to be taking in other women seeking refuge for whatever reason – and there is a list – whether they were looking for emergency accommodation for health reasons or whatever. I know that there was also some discussion about having the rural shelters take in people with mental health issues, and I'm wondering if you're tracking statistics on what other categories of people were admitted to the rural shelters. Did you track that, and are you able to give me the numbers?

MS EVANS: Mr. Chairman, I hope it won't be deemed frivolous if I say that almost every woman that comes to a shelter may have some mental health issues, because they are only there if they need particular refuge from a storm in their personal relationships. Some come back because they have found those places to be good counselors and sources of refuge, but we have made it abundantly clear to the CEOs of all regions that a women's shelter is a women's shelter for the purposes of sheltering women and families who need refuge in times of violence. There were concerns being raised by some of the women's shelters that this may not have been fully understood, and I have had a direct contact with anybody that would suggest that those women's shelters were for any other purpose. I can sit here with a strong assurance that there are no cases currently or will be in the future of this administration that will be making suggestions for topping up the numbers in ways that would be deemed inappropriate. Women's shelters are for those that are struggling because of violence issues, and they will continue to be as long as we understand the purposes of women's shelters.

I would like to say that the hon. member has raised a point in Public Accounts dealing with mental health issues that you may wish to pursue with the minister of health, because there are obviously women with mental health issues, too, that from time to time may seek refuge. Many of those women may receive some supports through Human Resources and Employment or through health agencies at the local level, but I would be very doubtful because of recent discussions I've had with those child and family services authorities if there's any continued pursuit or suggestion that the beds be occupied by people with other issues.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

MR. OUELLETTE: Good morning, hon. minister. Can you tell me what actions the ministry will take to continue to improve business

planning in future years?

MS EVANS: Well, Mr. Chairman, that's an important element. One of the things we're trying to do is establish an information system that will help us track our cases and manage them well. That'll be one of the actions. The other action will be our approvals of business plans before the fiscal year commences, our three-year plans to be improved and submitted and scrutinized by our officials in advance of the three-year module. We'll look at the information provided for regional child and family services, scan the environment, the number of births, the number of statistical bits of evidence that can be gathered through our vital statistics. We'll try and strengthen our guidelines for the authorities, and we've already worked on strengthening our accounting practices, our banking, as you know. I think, further, we'll be doing more to our immediate planning and reporting where people have variances, establishment of a system to make sure that the authorities are linking not only with the department but providing us as soon as possible with their challenges financially. Increasing our training sessions will increase the support for people that are practitioners and improve our shared services' understanding of the business that's currently being delivered. So much of that will be done for the business plans in the future.

MR. OUELLETTE: So what has the ministry done to ensure the approval of the authority business plans by the end of the year?

MS EVANS: There's been a review team that the Auditor General references here that is also reviewing and working on a much more frequent basis with the people at the local level to make sure they understand the needs and also, if there are gaps, that they'll be followed through with. We're doing some work on refining the performance measures. Some had as many as 25 measures, and we believe and agree with the Auditor General that more focused measures will help, so we're helping them work with the performance measures. Some of that is very difficult.

We're moving the dates of the submission of our plans so that they are going to permit that responsible planning and the articulation with our own plans. This has to be considered a seamless process from the local authority right through to the approval of the ministry. We're going to try and fast-track that so that by the time they get to us – and you can imagine what lands on Paula's and my desk to read – they have not only the plan, but they have the critique of the review team, the areas for improvement, and we've already talked to the co-chairs when we talk about signing off. For all of these service plans we will be working on a model where not only every member of the authority and the CEO signs off, the department will sign off, the ministry will sign off in our submission of those plans.

9:35

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Before we continue with questions, I would like to remind all hon. members of this committee, please, that questions are to be specific and targeted regarding the annual report from Children's Services for the year 2000-2001 and the annual report from the Auditor General for the year ended March 31, 2001. Okay?

Dr. Taft.

DR. TAFT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Specific to the year that we are discussing, although it's not mentioned in the report, I'd like to talk about fear. It's mentioned explicitly in the Children's Advocate

report, and certainly it's a concern that I've heard about repeatedly. I'm wondering if the minister has particular comment on the comments that there is fear in the system to express concerns openly.

MS EVANS: Mr. Chairman, when I was a principal's daughter, I used to remember people being afraid of my father because he was an authority figure, and I knew how soft he was inside, so I saw that that fear was unfounded. I think the parent has the same fear when they go and talk to a teacher, that perhaps somebody will engage in retribution because they've dared to complain. There may have been – and I say may have been – people in the past that identified that people should fear retribution, but they will never, ever, ever say that that remark could be attributed to me and not to this deputy and to others. I don't agree with that.

I would tell you this. I respect more the people that come to me and tell me the problem rather than keeping it closeted. In the very first six months of my ministry I had dared to quote Drucker on the point that we should recognize the value of social workers much like we recognize the value of volunteers. Many of them misinterpreted that to be me saying that they should volunteer their work when they were already volunteering. I got thoroughly blistered. Some signed vitriolic criticisms of my remarks, but not once did I ever suggest that those people be terminated or that any kind of disciplinary action take place. I am much more respectful of people who speak the truth than those that try and hide it.

So, for the record, we do not intimidate and we do not inspire fear, but we do inspire truth and we hope complete candour in the delivery of responses to the system. That's my remark.

THE CHAIRMAN: Dr. Taft.

DR. TAFT: Thank you. Actually, it is mentioned on page 9 in the report. My comments weren't directed at you personally, but I can tell you that there is fear, there is genuine fear that we hear in our constituency offices about raising issues. So do you have or would the Auditor General perhaps have any comments on how, looking at last year, that fear at lower levels – and this is not meant to be a personal issue at all – may affect the operation of the department and the provision of services?

MS EVANS: I'm very interested in that response.

MR. HOFFMAN: Thinking about the question, in terms of the work that we've done, I don't think we've come across situations where I would feel a need to report that we've had that inability to do work or where we've not received answers or support or questions or challenges from people in the areas that we've worked on. So I don't have any evidence that I would be prepared to report of people not dealing because of fear. I've not seen it. I don't think the team has seen it, in terms of all the auditing that we've done. I will say that we've not done a systems audit, if you like, on that particular subject, so we've not looked at that as a subject.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Lukaszuk, do you have a point of order?

MR. LUKASZUK: I do, Mr. Chairman. My understanding of the purpose of this committee is to review last year's Auditor's report and how it relates to this department. Discussions of this nature neither pertain to the Auditor's report, nor do they pertain to the purpose of this committee.

THE CHAIRMAN: I heard the hon. member who was questioning make specific reference in his question, Mr. Lukaszuk.

DR. TAFT: There's a reference on page 9 to the Children's Advocate report, and if you read the Children's Advocate report, there are very clear and dramatic statements in there.

MR. CENAICO: But the Children's Advocate report isn't here. You just gave us an explanation of what we could ask.

THE CHAIRMAN: Precisely. Yes. It is referenced in these documents, and the representative from the Auditor General's office, Mr. Hoffman, was answering the question.

That was Dr. Taft's second question. The next question is from Mrs. Ady.

MRS. ADY: Thank you. As a parent I have to provide basic clothing and shelter for my children, but I know that the things that are most important for my kids aren't provided with money. You know, I'm not paid for those the last time I checked. In fact, I'm sure I'm not paid to do those things. But I know that in your world you need to hire those services, so you always have to be scrutinizing the dollars in order to provide more services for children.

In the Auditor General's report, on page 60 of his annual report, the Auditor General said that the department should regularly reconcile recoveries from the federal government and [First Nation] band agencies to the related payments to Authorities for services provided to children normally resident on reserves.

What controls do you have in place to ensure that all eligible costs are recovered?

MS EVANS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. If you'd take a look at the Auditor General's report and our response in a management letter – I don't know if it's tabled here – we have been working significantly on regular reporting of those funds. That is probably one of our most challenging areas, because the accounting, because of the frequency of movement between one reserve and another or on reserve and off reserve, sometimes really challenges the people in our native liaison groups as well as in partnership and innovation to follow through. But a good part of it is just making sure that when those services are delivered, there is an acknowledgment of the case and that when those youth move from one place to the other or are moved, we provide that additional support. If there's a frequency of movement or a frequency of change, then it's even more important to report through to the department and through to the local authority.

Working with the federal government in our department is deemed to be more successful than it is in many other departments. Frequency of contact between Nancy Reynolds and the people at the field level that are working with our native liaison is helping somewhat, and our tracking of dollars in our various programs and program support is helping.

Perhaps, Nancy, you'd want to comment as it relates to working with those First Nations people. I do appreciate the Auditor General recognizing that we're doing some things better in this area, but we've still got a way to go.

MRS. REYNOLDS: Thank you. Maybe just one point to add is that we have been focused on trying to be very clear about roles and responsibilities between federal government funding and where provincial responsibility is and really trying to communicate that right down to the worker level, ensuring that the children are

appropriately coded. That was an element that was not always well understood. We've been working very closely with the authorities to ensure that children that should be the cost responsibility of the federal government are appropriately captured when they come into the care of the provincial government. So we continue to work on that and to monitor it, but certainly there was some misunderstanding, and I think we've come a long way to improving that and just trying to make it very clear about the differences in the roles and responsibilities around funding.

9:45

MS EVANS: One of the biggest irritations is that if we take in a child off reserve and they move on reserve, we're not allowed to claim under the current rules of repatriation. There have to be some changes there. Of course the other, as we've noted in the House, has been the difficulty of getting the money for early childhood development funding. Somebody asked me recently how much money that was, and we don't know because it goes directly to First Nations. But I can assure you, because of their claims on our funding support, that they're not getting that from the federal government.

MRS. ADY: That was my supplementary question, which programs were not . . . Thank you. You've answered it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. You're satisfied? Yes.

Mr. Mason, followed by Mr. Shariff.

MR. MASON: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I want to come back to the pressure on the authorities to shift funds earmarked for preventative programs to child welfare programs. I understood from your answer, Ms Minister, and from your staff that what it really amounts to is looking for preventative programs that were available to be discontinued in order to transfer the funds to child welfare programs. Obviously there will be a hierarchy of effectiveness, so the bottom ones get cut. I just wanted to come back to the question of what the ministry did to try and deal with the increase in caseload without cutting preventative programs and how the ministry feels about cutting preventative programs and its impact on caseloads in the future.

MS EVANS: If I reflect back on this year that we're accounting for, much of the emphasis was on trying to improve the training of staff. We worked with Dr. Gayla Rogers, the dean of social work at the University of Calgary, on staff training. We had a Back to Basics conference that was planned and delivered just recently, in the last few months, based on some of the staff training needs so that we could take a look at that.

How do I feel about cutting early intervention dollars? I don't feel good about that at all. You can't possibly feel good about taking something away if you believe that there's some opportunity to sincerely make a difference. On the other hand, in the times that we have had since this report, Mr. Chairman, obviously in Alberta we have some fiscal realities that we've had to deal with as well. But I don't think any of us feel good about taking dollars away from programs where they may benefit a child.

I will say this though. With my colleagues and with the other ministries I will be looking very seriously at whether or not two ministers should both be delivering dollars for programs to the same program where another ministry, for example the Minister of Learning, may have authority to act during that period of time. Dollars that are being delivered to programs for cultural awareness could perhaps be delivered better through other support groups and

agencies than dollars for learn-to-swim programs, which, while commendable, are not necessarily those kinds of programs that target our most essential ministry. So one of the things that I will say is that we have to learn to refine our expectations for early intervention so they are on what Paula calls proven therapies and strategies that work with families and children, so those are the targets that we have. But do I feel good about cutting anything for children? No.

MR. MASON: I appreciate that.

Ms Minister, I really would like to know if the ministry is concerned that cuts to preventative programs may lead to increased caseloads in the future. Are you not concerned that we'll get into an upward spiral if we attack the preventative programs?

MS EVANS: Mr. Chairman, obviously I'm concerned about that, and that's why this Alberta response model that you'll see more of this year will try and address that. Remember that in the year we're dealing with here, we moved a budget originally at \$467 million over a couple of years all the way to \$585 million in this particular year, added huge dollars, added more this year to \$647 million. So we've added a lot of money into the system. I haven't been convinced that all of that money that's been added in has been focused on all the priorities in the very best way possible. That refinement has to go on now. Now our intake system, which may have been too quick to put children into protective custody, has to refine itself so that we build those bridges to work better with those social services agencies, those nonprofits, and some of the profit agencies so that they can work on a model that doesn't see a child as a child welfare statistic. When my critic from Her Majesty's opposition, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, and I went to the catholic services protective safe house, a hundred percent of those children that were prostitutes had been, as they described themselves, PGO in our system, had gone to 12 and 14 other placements largely because the families had given up on them and then taken them back at whim and back and forth, back and forth. That is a life sentence of despair for a child, whether they become prostitutes or not. So just taking them in the system is not the answer. Intervening better on the front line of intake is the answer, and working so that those parents never do approach or need the system is part of it.

But part of it will not be solved just by the early intervention programs. Part of it is to understand that we've got people in our system who have generations of FAS, FAE, generations of mental illness, generations of behavioural disability and work with those people that are on the intake side of the child welfare caseload because that is another part of it which isn't necessarily early intervention. It's the direct contact between a practitioner and the child and family, and that child and family in need need that help.

Have I talked too long? Probably.

THE CHAIRMAN: No.

Hon. minister, this concludes this morning's questioning. We have another item on the revised agenda, but first I would like to express my gratitude to you and your staff for coming before the committee this morning, and also to representatives of the Auditor General's office. If you would like to leave before the committee has the opportunity to discuss the motion as presented on the agenda by Ms Blakeman, please feel free to do so.

MS EVANS: If I may just say one thing. I'd like to formally for the record thank Shiraz Shariff from Calgary-McCall for his work on the

Social Care Facilities Review Committee. He did exemplary work. I would ask members to acknowledge also Gary Severtson, who was on the youth advisory delivery service. He did exemplary work, now taken over by Cindy Ady and Mary Anne Jablonski. They are the ones that are keeping me on track and up to date. So thank you to all.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. Thank you.

I would now like to bring your attention, please, to item 4 on the agenda, and that is the notice of motion by Ms Blakeman. Also, I would like to remind you please that this is a revised agenda that was circulated Monday afternoon to all members of this committee. The motion by Ms Blakeman reads that

the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agree to meet twice per week while the Assembly is in session in order to accommodate scrutiny of all departments of the government.

Ms Blakeman.

9:55

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks. Well, if there's a need for me to formally move this motion, having given notice of it, I do so move that now. I am trying again to keep or make this Public Accounts Committee relevant. I repeat that I see it as a duty of this committee to scrutinize all departments of the government, of which we now have 24. In the five years I've sat on this committee, I see us scrutinizing fewer and fewer departments and significantly less percentage of departments as the Assembly itself sits for less number of weeks and the government chooses to have more departments. This fall sitting, for example, we will have examined one department, and that's the one we did today. If we follow the average of a 14-week sitting in the spring, of which usually in the first and last week there is no Public Accounts Committee meeting, then we're looking, at the very best, at 12 departments in the spring plus the one we did here. That's 13 departments out of 24. We are not doing our duty in this standing committee on behalf of Albertans to scrutinize all government departments.

I had brought forward a motion last week to use the unexpended budget money to meet outside of session, and that was defeated. So I'm hoping that perhaps this is a solution then, that we would agree to meet more than once a week – twice a week, as a matter of fact – while we're in session until we accomplish scrutinizing all departments that are available. I'll listen very carefully. I'll be very interested, if this is not supported by the government members, to hear why they don't want to fulfill the mandate of this committee and review every government department.

Thank you very much for the opportunity.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Ouellette, followed by Mrs. Ady and Mr. Mason.

MR. OUELLETTE: Mr. Chairman, I understand how the hon. member believes how important it is to scrutinize all these departments. At the same time, a lot of the members on this committee are some of the governing members, and they run very, very busy schedules already scrutinizing these departments and having to go out and meet with all their constituents. I personally just don't believe we can carry on two of these a week with the busy schedules we carry.

I also do believe that any concerns they have in scrutinizing – we have all their manuals, and they could send written questions to the ministry to scrutinize it. It is things that happened in the past, and they could scrutinize that. So if they don't like something in the manuals, they could ask that it be changed in what's happening in

the future. But by taking all our time away from our busy schedules to run two meetings a week – I just don't think I could support that. In fact, I would maybe amend it to say let's meet once every two weeks. I'm happy with the schedule we're running, but I don't think I could support this motion at this time.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Ouellette.

Mrs. Ady

MRS. ADY: I don't want to repeat what has already been said. I just want to start with how useful I have found this committee. At first I wasn't sure, but I'm actually beginning to understand departments differently than I did before. As a new MLA I found it helpful to be able to come in and to review and to look at and understand things better.

But I would like to echo the other hon. member's comments. I serve on many committees also that meet in the mornings before the day gets started, and I have a large constituency that when we're sitting only gets to see me a very brief time. So I find those tensions all there and would find it very difficult to be able to take another morning away from those other responsibilities.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Mason.

MR. MASON: I guess it goes right to the heart of the system that has been established in this Legislature where very much a lot of real work is done only by the members of the government caucus, and a system of committees and so on has been set up from which opposition members are excluded. Traditionally in this system this work is done by the Legislature rather than by one caucus of the Legislature. We have less all-party committees, I think, than many provincial Legislatures and certainly less than the federal Parliament, where they have standing policy committees which are on an all-party basis. The work is much more productive. Opposition members can contribute.

MR. OUELLETTE: Federal government work is more productive?

MR. MASON: Well, if I can just continue, it really seems to me that committees of the Legislature as a whole, particularly as it relates to the study of expenditures and the oversight of departments, are very important, and they ought not just be done by committees of the government caucus. I think that's an important principle.

Now, I would find two mornings a week difficult as well. Our schedules are all so heavy. I think it would be better – and I realize this motion was shot down at the last meeting – and I think it would be more helpful to actually have the committee meet on a regular basis.

I apologize to the member. I had to leave and wasn't here to speak to her motion. I'm not sure it would have swayed a whole bunch of people anyway. But, Mr. Chairman, I really do believe we have to start getting at this issue of a difference between committees of the Legislature and committees of the government caucus.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Are there any other members who wish to speak? Ms Blakeman to conclude, please.

MS BLAKEMAN: Right. In speaking now, I do close debate. I had said that I was interested in what reasoning government members would give for not supporting the mandate of this committee and not supporting scrutiny of all departments. Once again I'm hearing a

fundamental misunderstanding of what legislative committees are about and what political caucuses are about. I've heard the members talk about, "Well, they scrutinize these things behind closed doors in their standing policy committees." Well, those committees are not committees of the Legislature. They are political caucus committees. They are not open to the public. They are not *Hansarded*. They are not minuted. No member of the media or the public can have a look at what questions were asked and answered in those committees. They are not committees of the Legislative Assembly, and I think we have to be very clear about that. They are not a replacement for what we do in the Legislative Assembly on behalf of all Albertans and in full view of all Albertans.

I regret that government members are too busy to perform the duties of the Legislative Assembly as assigned to us and scrutinize all departments with the public accounts as we set out to do. I'm not going to get into a contest with members as to who is most busy here. I think we all are. We are all in a situation when we're in session that we only get into our constituencies on a Friday. I did offer the opportunity to meet outside of session previously, and that was shot down. Here was another opportunity for us to actually follow through and do our duty here. So to me this confirms the member had an opportunity to speak and chose not to take it.

MR. SHARIFF: Question.

MS BLAKEMAN: I still have the floor.

MR. SHARIFF: It's 10 o'clock.

MR. CENAIKO: It's after 10.

THE CHAIRMAN: I realize that. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, this meeting did not start at 8:30 sharp because we did not have a quorum, so if we're a few minutes past the hour, at least be patient and bear with us.

Thank you.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: You can conclude, because it is getting . . . Please.

MS BLAKEMAN: I understand that. Thank you.

I think it's important that this conversation is *Hansarded*, that it is available for the public to read and understand the complete misunderstanding by government members about what the Legislative Assembly is here for and what the Legislative Assembly committees are here for. I am deeply disappointed that that ignorance of what we are here to do exists in that caucus. I am in favour of this motion obviously, and I urge members to reconsider and vote in favour of the motion.

Thank you.

10:05

MR. SHARIFF: Mr. Chairman, very briefly, if I can make one comment.

THE CHAIRMAN: Certainly.

MR. SHARIFF: Very briefly, I'd like to make one comment. Every member here is in the capacity as an hon. member, as an MLA. We are not here representing our caucuses. We are independent members, and I trust that everyone is very honourable in that

responsibility. We take this job very, very seriously, and I think it's about time we put this motion to question.

THE CHAIRMAN: Fine. The motion as it reads, as presented by Ms Blakeman, is that

the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agree to meet twice per week while the Assembly is in session in order to accommodate scrutiny of all departments of the government.

Members of the committee in favour of the motion raise your hands. Members of the committee opposed to the motion raise your hands. Motion defeated.

Thank you.

MR. MASON: Mr. Chairman, on a point of order. It may have to do with the fact that the committee is now meeting in the Chamber itself, but the norms of the committee for the brief time I was on it before the last election, when we were meeting in one of the committee rooms, were quite different. There wasn't heckling. There wasn't thumping, applause, and so on. It conducted itself not like the Assembly but like a committee. Since we've been here, some members have been conducting themselves as if it were question period – you know, interrupting and heckling and that sort of thing – and I don't think that's an acceptable practice in a committee.

THE CHAIRMAN: Perhaps we could speak to this after the meeting, Mr. Mason. It is my information that this committee has never met outside the confines of the Legislative Assembly. Perhaps Corinne Dacyshyn can clarify this for us. She's the clerk.

MRS. DACYSHYN: In the 12 years I've been the clerk of this committee the committee has always met in the Assembly because we didn't have a committee room large enough to accommodate the numbers. But in the fall last year – you're correct – the Speaker required the Chamber for something for two weeks and we did meet in room 512. Our committee rooms in the Legislature Annex are just about ready. We should be able to meet in those rooms in the spring, so we won't be in the Chamber.

MR. MASON: My point is that there was a higher level of decorum and respect shown when we were meeting there, and I'm assuming it's the locale.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Mason.

Now, the date of the next meeting is Wednesday, December 5, 2001. The Minister of Gaming, the Hon. Ron Stevens, will be present. Again, I would remind all hon. members that's if the Assembly is still in session. That will be next Wednesday, and the appropriate documents are the Auditor General's report from the last fiscal year and the annual report from that ministry.

At this time I would ask for a motion to adjourn. Mr. Hutton. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 10:08 a.m.]

