



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Public Accounts

Technology and Innovation

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

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Ministry of Technology and Innovation

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Martin Dincl, Assistant Deputy Minister, Cybersecurity

Cindy Fox, Associate Vice-president of Finance, Alberta Innovates

Richard Isaak, Assistant Deputy Minister and Senior Financial Officer, Strategic Planning and Financial Services

Michael Mahon, Chief Executive Officer, Alberta Innovates

Gene Smith, Assistant Deputy Minister, Digital Design and Delivery

Paul Thorsteinson, Executive Director, Broadband and Strategic Support Services

Maureen Towle, Assistant Deputy Minister, Innovation, Privacy and Policy

Kim Wieringa, Assistant Deputy Minister, Data and Content Management

Kristina Williams, Chief Executive Officer, Alberta Enterprise Corporation

8 a.m. Tuesday, November 19, 2024

[Mr. Sabir in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee to order and welcome everyone in attendance. My name is Irfan Sabir, MLA for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall and chair of the committee. As we begin this morning, I would like to invite members, guests, and LAO staff at the table to introduce themselves.

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

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

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

Ms de Jonge: Chantelle de Jonge, MLA for Chestermere-Strathmore.

Mr. Cyr: Scott Cyr, MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Mr. Smith: Gene Smith, ADM, digital design and delivery, T and I.

Mr. Isaak: Richard Isaak, senior financial officer, T and I.

Mr. Alford: Janak Alford, deputy minister, TI.

Mr. Dinel: Martin Dinel, ADM for cybersecurity division.

Ms Towle: Maureen Towle, ADM of innovation, privacy and policy with Technology and Innovation.

Mr. Ireland: Good morning. Brad Ireland, Assistant Auditor General.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

Mr. Schmidt: Marlin Schmidt, Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Ellingson: Court Ellingson, Calgary-Foothills.

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

Mr. Huffman: Warren Huffman, committee clerk.

The Chair: Thank you. We do not have anybody online, do we? No.

We have a few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting. Comments should flow through the chair at all times.

Approval of the agenda. Members, are there any changes or additions to the agenda? Seeing none, can a member move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the proposed agenda as distributed for its Tuesday, November 19, 2024, meeting? Any discussion on the motion? All in favour? Any opposed? The motion is carried.

We have meeting minutes from the Tuesday, November 5, 2024, meeting of the committee. Do members have any errors or omissions to note? Seeing none, can a member move that the

Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the minutes as distributed of its meeting held on Tuesday, November 5, 2024. Any discussion on the motion? All in favour? Any opposed? Thank you. The motion is carried.

I would like to now welcome our guests from the Ministry of Technology and Innovation, who are here to address the ministry's annual report 2023-24 and the Auditor General's outstanding recommendations. I invite officials from the ministry to provide opening remarks not exceeding 10 minutes.

Mr. Alford: Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for this opportunity. My name is Janak Alford. I'm the Deputy Minister for the Ministry of Technology and Innovation. It's a privilege to present several of the key highlights and accomplishments from our '23-24 fiscal year. As a new ministry this was Technology and Innovation's first full operating year since our formation.

The ministry consists of three significant parts. The first is the department, commonly referred to as "TI," which is responsible for the administration of all information technology and information management services on behalf of the government of Alberta as well as the delivery of significant innovation grants and the development of related policy. The ministry also consists of two operating agencies, Alberta Innovates and Alberta Enterprise Corporation, or AEC, which I will highlight below.

I will begin by addressing some of the key accomplishments from our departmental annual report. TI has a broad mandate in delivering digitally enabled government services for both the public sector as well as Albertans. In the domain of technology we are presently accountable for the government of Alberta's critical IT infrastructure, including networking, data centres, and the information and data assets. We operate and maintain several data centres in Alberta as well as numerous cloud-based services for secure computing and disaster recovery.

We are also accountable for end-user devices such as laptops and mobile phones and the digital office experience and many of our daily tools that public servants use to deliver key programs. Each year we secure and maintain and manage more than 30,000 computers for GOA staff plus secure mobile devices in over 700 digitally enabled boardrooms.

On behalf of all other ministries TI supports a broad portfolio of nearly 1,300 applications, which support operations throughout the government of Alberta. This includes 116 designated critical systems such as the 1GX platform and the alberta.ca portal amongst other systems for Justice and public safety, to name a few. In the '23-24 fiscal year we worked with 16 of the government's ministries to deliver modern digital services, many of which you would have heard from at this committee from other ministry representatives directly.

To highlight a few key accomplishments: TI launched the affordability application portal in '23-24, providing relief payments to more than 1.3 million Albertans for more than \$770 million. Additionally, drawing from local expertise in artificial intelligence, we also implemented machine learning to streamline our processes. We launched two AI-based systems and completed six projects with nearly 700 government staff engaging in the ideation of these solutions, building a strong future capacity for the delivery of efficient services through artificial intelligence.

The department is also responsible for the cybersecurity of these devices and systems, which protects against continual attempts to compromise our network via direct attacks to the infrastructure or indirect attacks to staff through spam, malware, and social engineering. In '23-24 we prevented more than \$4 million in fraudulent claims to services. Each day we block more than 130

million potentially malicious network connections and more than 91 million potential malware infections.

However, our work does not stop within the public sector. Our CyberAlberta program provides tactical and strategic cyberdefence support for Alberta organizations. In '23-24 it increased its membership from just over 300 participants to 584 members, with notably 41 per cent of these from the private sector. Partnered with the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, we also launched an industry-leading cybersecurity work experience program to provide a direct career path to new graduates into this important domain.

Protected by these programs, we also maintain the government of Alberta's data holdings, which are managed under a new data secretariat and a data ethics and literacy framework. In '23-24 we established a new data and content management division to strengthen our data governance, literacy, and interoperability. The team also published out 3,400 government publications and 145 data sets for public consumption and transparency.

With respect to innovation, TI is also accountable for developing new policies and legislation in this domain. In '23-24 we introduced two new important frameworks for privacy management and data ethics, which helped ensure that our systems are built to support accountability, equity, privacy and protection, and transparency. We work closely with Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction and other ministerial partners to identify opportunities to enhance service delivery and eliminate red tape. In '23-24 we eliminated over 140 redundant forms and streamlined numerous workflows. Our ministry remains a leader in red tape reduction since 2019 within the government.

TI is also responsible for administering the Alberta broadband strategy, which will ensure all Albertans have access to high-speed Internet. This program is primarily delivered in concert with our federal partners at Innovation, Science and Economic Development, or ISED, by providing grants to service providers to offset the cost of establishing new infrastructure to reach remote, underserved, and Indigenous communities. In '23-24 this program connected 429 communities in Alberta with 13,000 kilometres of fibre optics and 5,000 kilometres of wireless coverage. We invested \$370 million in 52 projects, bringing connectivity to over 51,000 households.

We piloted Starlink Internet service to provide remote communities incapable of being reached by traditional wired connections with positive outcomes, and we continue to further advocate to address gaps in cellular coverage in the province with both federal departments and cellular providers. The Alberta broadband program is solidly on track to achieve its goals by reaching 100 per cent connectivity by the end of 2027, with exciting announcements anticipated in the near future.

8:10

TI also administers a large granting program. These grants directly align to Alberta's technology and innovation strategy, which seeks to bolster job growth and continue to raise the province's profile as a leading destination for innovation in North America. In '23-24 we supported the research capacity program. We provided a grant of \$8.3 million to the major innovation funds to help support Alberta's competitiveness in areas of strategic interest. We provided \$15 million to the scale up and growth acceleration programs in technology, energy, and agriculture, which contributed to the creation of hundreds of jobs and attracted significant venture investment as well as the graduation of over 230 companies. Two point three million dollars were granted to support the strategic research initiative to establish and strengthen ties between postsecondary institutions and industry. Fifteen point two five million dollars were allocated to support the innovation catalyst grant to develop innovative companies in Alberta. Finally, the

ministry provided \$3.4 million in essential funding to launch GovLab.ai, an industry-leading program to leverage private-sector know-how to efficiently solve complex government problems.

On behalf of my colleagues who are present in the gallery, I'll provide a brief overview of the Alberta Innovates and AEC programs and key successes in the fiscal year. Alberta Innovates provides research and innovation support through funding, business development advice, and collaboration within the technology ecosystem. It is crucial to diversifying Alberta's economy, nurturing new technology, and attracting investment. It provides critical program funding in five significant areas of smart agriculture, digital health, clean resources, AI, and entrepreneurial ecosystem, and it operates two subsidiaries, InnoTech Alberta and C-FER Technologies, to provide research and development services to industry and government.

With respect to AEC, through their efforts Alberta attracted \$707 million in venture capital through 86 deals. By 2024 AEC's five-year growth rate for venture capital reached an impressive 48.5 per cent, more than triple the compound national average. These successes helped to make Alberta one of the hottest markets for venture investing, a trend which is building year over year.

In conclusion, the ministry plays a crucial role in delivering effective programs of technology solutions and enabling innovation within the province. Our programs continue to result in the attraction and monetization of Alberta research and innovation, attracting hundreds of millions of dollars in investment and significant job creation. Yet technology is not without its challenges as standards change, systems age, and new innovation is continually required to meet the needs and expectations of Albertans. Like any ministry we are on a continual path towards making our programs and services more efficient and effective. As you will hear in the Auditor General's report, there are areas where we are actively improving our services, with all but one of the outstanding recommendations on track for delivery this year.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I look forward now to answering your questions from the committee.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have another member who joined us. Member McDougall, would you like to introduce yourself?

Mr. McDougall: Myles McDougall, MLA, Calgary-Fish Creek.

The Chair: We do have some tech issues that we are trying to resolve here with captions.

Meanwhile I will now turn it over to the Assistant Auditor General for his comments. Mr. Ireland, you will have five minutes.

Mr. Ireland: Good morning, committee members and those officials here from the Department of Technology and Innovation. Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with an overview of the work of the office of the Auditor General.

I'll start with our financial statement audit work for 2023-24. We audited the financial transactions at the Department of Technology and Innovation as part of our work of the consolidated financial statements of the province. We also audited the financial statements of Alberta Innovates and Alberta Enterprise Corporation. Our annual report on the consolidated financial statements was tabled yesterday in the Legislative Assembly for the year ending March 31, 2024. We issued clean opinions on all of these audits. As part of our financial statement audit we repeated a 2021 recommendation to the department on user access.

Now I'd like to provide an overview of the status of the outstanding recommendations our office has made to the department. At present there are six outstanding recommendations,

including one directed to Alberta Innovates. In our annual summary of ministry audit work released yesterday, we repeated our November 2021 recommendation that the department improve its user access controls to remove terminated users' access to the government's network and IT applications promptly. Not removing access rights of terminated employees creates noncompliance with the government's IT policies and increases risk of unauthorized access to government data and Albertans' personal information.

In our November 2021 processes to report on value generation performance audit we recommended that Alberta Innovates improve its processes to measure, monitor, and report value generated by its research and innovation activities. By clearly linking and quantifying desired outcomes, measures, and targeted planned results, Alberta Innovates can better demonstrate annually to Albertans what its programs and activities achieved in a cost-effective manner relative to desired outcomes.

We also made four recommendations in our July 2024 alberta.ca account performance audit. We recommended the department periodically test automated controls, strengthen data encryption protocols, improve program onboarding and governance practices, and enhance monitoring practices for systems related to the alberta.ca account. The service is fast becoming essential, with over 3.7 million personal accounts and 75,000 business accounts activated. It is important that the department take steps to decrease the risk of data breaches and unauthorized access to information.

In December 2023 we reported our findings and recommendations related to cybersecurity to the department. We have shared our findings and related recommendations with management. In order to not increase cybersecurity risks to government, we will report the results of our audit once management has implemented the identified improvements to its cybersecurity program.

Thank you to the management group here today for their time, co-operation, and assistance during our audits.

That concludes my opening remarks, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to questions from committee members, and we will begin with the Official Opposition. You have 15 minutes.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Chair. First off, I want to note that this annual report discusses forward-looking information on pages 18, 23, and 30. Clearly, the department is willing to discuss issues beyond fiscal '23-24, so I hope that any questions that fall outside of that time frame will not be called out of order.

On page 54 of the Alberta Innovates report executive compensation is discussed. It states that in 2023 the CEO received total compensation of \$737,000. Can the department break that down into base salary, cash benefits, and noncash benefits?

Mr. Isaak: Okay. Yeah. The CEO for Alberta Innovates for 2024 base salary is \$441,000, other cash benefits are \$122,000, and other noncash benefits were \$22,000.

Mr. Schmidt: No. Sorry. That's the '24 fiscal year. I'm asking for fiscal year '23, which indicates that the total compensation was \$737,000. Can you provide a breakdown of cash benefits, noncash benefits?

Mr. Isaak: I don't have that here in front of me.

Mr. Schmidt: Can the department commit to returning to the committee in writing that breakdown? This is really important because CEO compensation, as everybody knows, was regulated in 2023 by the RABCCA regulation, and I think it's important that

Albertans understand whether or not Alberta Innovates was complying with the regulation.

Mr. Alford: We can certainly take that away and provide a written response.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you.

On July 20, 2022, the then CEO of Alberta Innovates was approved by ministerial order to have her maximum salary increased to \$431,000, which was a 9 per cent increase over the maximum salary that the RABCCA compensation regulation allowed at the time. There were no subsequent approved increases, at least not that I could find, published on any government website. Can the department explain why the CEO was approved for this astronomical salary increase?

8:20

Mr. Alford: Yeah. I'll turn to Richard.

We will commit to returning and providing a written response to the question.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, I appreciate that. I asked the Department of Finance this spring why the Treasury Board and Finance minister approved that ministerial increase, and the department refused to answer the question, so I would certainly appreciate it if Technology and Innovation can provide an answer to that question.

Regardless, the CEO was approved for a maximum salary of \$431,000. We don't know what her base salary was in 2023, because the department can't provide a breakdown of her salary in 2023, but clearly the base salary in 2024 was \$441,000. Can the department tell us why the base salary for the CEO in 2024 exceeded the regulated limit of \$431,000?

Mr. Alford: Unfortunately, we don't have that information. We'll be happy to look into that and provide a response.

Mr. Schmidt: So you don't know why it appears that the department is breaking the regulations for executive compensation?

Mr. Alford: We will have to take that away and provide a written response.

Mr. Schmidt: I think it's shocking that the ministry doesn't even know if it's complying with regulations when it comes to CEO salaries.

If the department determines that, in fact, the CEO's salary exceeds the regulated rate, what steps can the department take to recover the compensation that was illegally paid to the CEO?

Mr. Alford: I would have to take that away and confer with our colleagues in Treasury Board and Finance.

Mr. Schmidt: When the deputy minister says that he's taking this away, what kind of response can the committee expect, and when can the committee expect a response?

Mr. Alford: Mr. Chair, what's the standard for providing written responses?

The Chair: Within 30 days.

Mr. Alford: We will work to meet that standard.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. Just to confirm, the deputy minister is going to investigate whether or not this compensation complied with the regulation, make a determination about that fact, and then provide us with an answer of what steps can be taken to recover this

compensation if it was in fact paid out not according to the regulations. Is that my understanding?

Mr. Alford: I'll work with the team to look into the history relating to the question as it was asked. For questions with respect to the compensation or the financial implications I'll have to refer to my other colleagues at Treasury Board or the Public Service Commission to understand what policies are in place, with respect to that second part of your question.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. Yes.

Page 54 indicates that the CEO was paid out \$122,000 in other cash benefits. Now, other cash benefits are also clearly regulated by RABCCA as to what can and cannot be paid out in other cash benefits. Can the department confirm or provide a breakdown of what those cash benefits were?

Mr. Alford: Could I get Mike Mahon, the CEO from Alberta Innovates, from the gallery?

The Chair: Yes. They can use that mic and introduce themselves.

Dr. Mahon: I'm the interim CEO of Alberta Innovates. I've been in the job for five months, so I know everything about Alberta Innovates you want me to answer.

I'll just say that I've just consulted with our AVP research, and I don't have all of the details, but I can say that the majority of that and the other cash benefits would have been in vacation payout and . . .

Cindy?

Ms Fox: In lieu of pension.

Dr. Mahon: Thank you.

. . . and in lieu of pension. That would be the majority of the funds allocated.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

As we know, Dr. Mahon is now the new CEO of this organization. Can the department confirm that his pay package actually complies with the current ministerial order?

Mr. Alford: Yes.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

What is his base salary for this upcoming fiscal year?

Mr. Cyr: Point of order.

Mr. Schmidt: People have the right to know.

Mr. Cyr: Let's go with point of order 23(b). [interjection] No.

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah. You don't even know what you're doing.

The Chair: Through the chair.

Mr. Cyr: That's very insulting. I'll actually add that the member is also guilty of 23(j).

It's 23(b). This is well outside the scope. Just because he reads a statement at the beginning of the meeting, says, "I'm allowed to go outside of the year in question," doesn't mean he can go outside of the year in question, sir.

Then following up with a clear insult. I would like an apology from that member, sir.

The Chair: You're raising two points of order?

Mr. Cyr: Yes.

The Chair: One is under 23(j) that relates to the question that was asked?

Mr. Cyr: His current conduct, sir. He was mocking and . . .

The Chair: What was the first point of order?

Mr. Cyr: The first point of order was 23(b), that this is outside the scope. Just because he reads a statement, sir, into the record at the beginning doesn't mean he goes outside of the scope of this meeting, information which is clearly outside this meeting.

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah. Well, I would think that the members of the government would also be interested in making sure that executive compensation in Crown corporations that they're responsible for overseeing complies with the regulation when we clearly have evidence that in 2023 and 2024 it didn't. I also pointed out that on pages 18, 23, and 30 the annual report is clearly willing to discuss forward-looking information. In fact, those sections are labelled Forward Looking Information. I think the CEO's salary for this upcoming fiscal year falls into that category of forward-looking information, and I look forward to the department answering that question.

The Chair: One, it's, I guess, standard procedure here that you can't call a point of order on a point of order, and that's why in the beginning I did say that conversation at all times should flow through the chair. That will help us reduce those kinds of interactions.

The second thing. With respect to 23(b) I think, generally speaking, at this committee we ask questions about the report under discussion, any outstanding recommendations, and generally about the business and activity of the ministry in the year under discussion, so I would advise members to keep their questions strictly relating to the report at hand and any Auditor General recommendations.

Mr. Schmidt: All right. Well, I guess we'll have to find out next year whether or not the CEO's compensation complies with the regulation.

Page 63 of the Alberta Enterprise Corporation indicates that their CEO's base salary up to March 31, 2024, was \$288,000. The compensation regulation caps the CEO's salary at \$249,000. There were no published ministerial orders that I could find that exempted the CEO from the compensation framework in place in 2023. Can the department confirm that the CEO's salary does not comply with the compensation regulation?

8:30

Mr. Alford: I'd like to invite Kristina Williams from AEC to come up and speak.

Ms Williams: Kristina Williams, president and CEO of Alberta Enterprise. I can confirm that the CEO compensation is in line with RABCCA. The base salary is at the maximum range of the level, and then there is RRSP contribution in lieu and health benefits according to RABCCA.

Mr. Schmidt: Explain to me, then. Your base salary, according to RABCCA, can only be \$249,000. It is reported as \$288,000 in the annual report. Explain that discrepancy.

Ms Williams: It would be 18 per cent on top of that in lieu of pension payments, plus 5 per cent in terms of health benefit payments, and then there is a . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah. But the health benefit payments are other noncash benefits that should be reported under noncash benefits and not as base salary. Why is it not reported that way?

Ms Williams: That I will have to refer to my CFO and get back to you with.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, I certainly hope so because on paper it looks like you are breaking the regulation.

According to the ministerial compensation that's now in effect, the CEO of Alberta Enterprise Corporation can earn a maximum salary of up to \$319,000, which is a 30 per cent pay increase over what she should have been allowed to be paid in 2023. That's certainly much higher than any other public servant will get and certainly higher than the average Albertan's wages have gone up. Those wages have only gone up 19 per cent since 2017, which is when RABCCA came into effect. Can the department tell us what the CEO's salary for this year is going to be?

Mr. Lundy: Point of order. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I believe this is 23(b) and was ruled on by yourself not 10 minutes ago, another forward-looking question that is clearly a point of order in this instance.

Thank you.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, I'm going to make my case again, Mr. Chair. Clearly, the department is willing to discuss forward-looking information in the report. I'm sorry that the members of the government aren't actually interested in making sure that their agencies under their purview are complying with the RABCCA regulation.

Mr. Lundy: Point of order.

Mr. Schmidt: You can't raise a point of order on a point of order.

The Chair: Member, let him finish. As I said earlier, you can't raise a point of order on a point of order.

Member.

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah. I would think the members opposite would be interested in understanding whether or not – and who knows when Technology and Innovation is going to appear before this committee? I think now is the right time to answer this question.

The Chair: As I said before, this question will not be in order.

Members, try to make questions about the report that we have for discussion. That's '23-24. And anything that's outstanding from the Auditor General's office: that will be in order. I would urge members to make their question about the report that's under discussion. Ministries in these reports sometimes do, I guess, share some forward-looking information. If the DM wants to answer, that's fine. Otherwise, I guess I would suggest that you make your questions about the report that we have under discussion.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Can the department tell the committee what aspects of either the Alberta Innovates CEO's or the AEC CEO's performance justified their pay outside of the range of the RABCCA compensation regulation?

Mr. Lundy: Point of order. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to call point of order 23(i). The member opposite has taken numerous

opportunities to imply false motives, make accusations that our department is intentionally outside of RABCCA. This is clearly a point of order. The member opposite has also accused government members of similar conduct, which is clearly a point of order.

We could also call 23(j). He's doing this to cause disruption. I think maybe he hopes he can get on social media. Maybe he's a little frustrated being in opposition. I don't know. But this is not helpful to this committee. Our officials here did not come here to be accused of this conduct. He's certainly welcome to ask his questions on what the compensation is, but to then go on the soapbox and accuse our ministry staff of misconduct is clearly a point of order, 23(i).

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Member.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. I mean, the members opposite, I assume, have also been listening in to the meeting. The DM cannot actually confirm whether or not the Alberta Innovates CEO salary was in line with the RABCCA compensation. On paper it looks like the AEC CEO's compensation is not in compliance with the regulation, and, in fact, maybe it's a reporting error, and maybe it actually is in violation of the compensation regulation. Nobody here at the table has been able to provide us an answer to that question.

I'm not implying false motives. I'm just asking why our compensation appears to violate the regulations. I would think that members opposite would also be interested in making sure that the Crown corporations under their review, under their scrutiny, would be in line with the compensation regulations. Moreover, Mr. Chair, my question that I asked – obviously, the members weren't listening – was in line with: what performance metrics did the CEOs meet to justify these pay increases? That has nothing to do with . . .

The Chair: Thank you. I guess that's the question that I also heard, that it was about performance metrics justifying the salaries.

Mr. Cyr: May I add to this as well? I'm not doing a point of order, but this is a point . . .

The Chair: Sure, if it's strictly related to what's under discussion.

Mr. Cyr: It is. Yes. The member across is alleging that because they are going to be writing us an answer . . .

The Chair: No. What I am asking here: if you want to add something to this particular point . . .

Mr. Cyr: That is what I'm doing.

The Chair: The question asked was about the performance within the year. I hope so. That was about the year under discussion, about the salaries. If you want to add to that debate, how that's out of order, sure.

Mr. Cyr: Okay. Mr. Chair, they have committed to writing us a response to this. He is alleging that they're guilty simply because they don't have the paperwork in front of them.

The Chair: I didn't hear that he alleged something, that they are guilty.

Mr. Cyr: He did.

The Chair: I heard a question that is about the performance, what justifies these salaries. I think that's a fair question, and I would not rule that out of order.

DM, if you want to answer, sure. If you don't, you can provide an undertaking as you see fit.

Mr. Alford: It's our understanding that the compensation that's reflected for the '23-24 year is in range plus what was explained by the CEOs of those two organizations, that these reflect the compensation in lieu of. But if it is unclear through the financial tables in the report, we'll certainly take that away and make sure that that's the case and provide any clarity or correction if required.

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah. Again, that wasn't my question. What aspects of the Alberta Innovates CEO or the Alberta Enterprise Corporation CEO payment justified their pay increase?

Mr. Alford: It's my understanding that that is not with this department. It's with Treasury Board. So I will have to take that away and confer with my colleagues there.

Mr. Schmidt: So you don't manage the performance of the CEOs of Alberta Enterprise Corporation or Alberta Innovates?

Mr. Alford: Are we be able to answer that?

Ms Towle: Not at this time. I can't answer the question at this time. We are accountable for that oversight, and we will respond.

Mr. Schmidt: So you're accountable, but you can't provide an answer today. Is that what you're saying?

Ms Towle: It's the specifics of the question that you're asking.

Mr. Schmidt: Right. This is an organization that you're accountable for. You knew that this meeting was coming up, it was set months ago, but you can't provide information here today this morning. Is that my understanding?

Ms Towle: We have committed to responding to you in writing.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

My next question is about a company called AltaML, which was granted over \$3 million in grants in the fiscal year under review. Can the DM tell the committee what AltaML does for the department?

Mr. Alford: Maureen, I'm going to refer that to you, the AltaML review.

8:40

Ms Towle: We have a partnership with AltaML, and they provide AI and machine-learning services in partnership, too. How this agreement works is that departments will come forward with a question, and we will work with AltaML, and they will provide resources to solve a problem. An example would be wildfire prediction. That is an example of what happens with AltaML and TI.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much. How were they selected for this grant?

Ms Towle: That I would have to check. There was a procurement process for AltaML's partnership with Technology and Innovation.

Mr. Schmidt: Who were the other companies that applied to receive this grant?

Ms Towle: I don't have that information. Richard, do you have that?

Mr. Isaak: That's three years ago, so . . .

Ms Towle: Yeah. That's outside of this annual report.

Mr. Schmidt: So the grant was awarded a number of years ago. Was it a multiyear grant? I see '23-24. There's another grant for even more money in '24-25. Like, how long was that grant established for?

Ms Towle: It is a multiyear, and it was a five-year agreement is my understanding.

Mr. Schmidt: A five-year agreement. And it was signed when?

Ms Towle: That would have been 2017.

Mr. Schmidt: Two thousand seventeen? And it's still ongoing?

Ms Towle: Yes. But no – 2022. Sorry.

Mr. Schmidt: Oh, 2022. Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: We'll now proceed to questions from the government members. You have 15 minutes.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Chair and through the chair to the ministry staff for being here this morning. The deputy minister in his opening statements talked about Alberta's booming tech sector, about the growth in venture capital that we're seeing. That's great news for Alberta. I think we should be proud of that. It's exciting, and I think that's also indicative of the good work you're doing and that of the organizations in your oversight.

I want to jump right into performance measure 3(a) on page 31. It looks at the sponsored research revenue attracted by Alberta's comprehensive academic and research universities. The report does state that this performance measure lags by one year. So looking at the metric for '22-23, Alberta's comprehensive academic and research activities attracted almost \$1.2 billion in sponsored research revenue, and that exceeded the target of \$1.1 billion. According to the report, that's a 6 per cent increase over the previous year. Can the ministry explain the factors behind that 6 per cent increase, which is higher than the average yearly increase of 4.73 per cent over the past 10 years? I'm also interested to know if the ministry did something specifically to promote that growth over the past year.

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. Sponsored research in that period was classified in five categories: provincial, federal, industrial, nonprofit, and other. The '22-23 increase was primarily due to increased provincial funding followed by federal funding. This correlates to Alberta leading and attracting more money into the province through TI's innovation program, which has allowed Alberta's institutions to build world-class research programs, attract top-tier faculty and graduate students, and foster robust partnerships. With consistent and impactful provincial funding, Alberta's institutions are becoming even more competitive.

Maureen, do you have additional items on this topic?

Sorry. I'm not sure if that answered your question.

Ms de Jonge: All right. Thank you. Yeah. It's interesting to hear how technology and economic growth are so intertwined.

Just flipping the page now to performance measure 3(b), the "cumulative value of Alberta Enterprise Corporation attracted venture capital funds (and their syndicate partners) invested in Alberta businesses," as highlighted in the report but also a very real experience for us as MLAs here. I'm talking with businesses in

our constituencies. Access to capital enables Alberta businesses to start up and grow, and that's important for economic growth, for diversification, for jobs.

I have two questions for ministry staff. The '23-24 target was set to achieve just over \$1.1 billion, roughly, of AEC cumulative investment. The actual result, as we see in the report, was over the target at just over \$1.2 billion, so similar to my last question, I'm interested to know what allowed the ministry to exceed that target. In addition to that, the report indicates that results confirm that for every \$1 invested by AEC, venture capital funds and their syndicate partners invest almost \$5 into Alberta companies. So in addition to that question I just asked, can the ministry staff explain to everyone here and to those who might be watching now or in the future how that formula was achieved and what that means?

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. I'm going to invite the AEC CEO up to answer that question.

Ms Williams: Thank you very much. Happy to be back. If I'm getting a 30 per cent salary increase, can someone let me know? I haven't seen it.

Anyway, we will clarify, and I have the detailed breakdown for you later, but I can provide that in a written format for you.

To answer about the \$5, for every dollar that we invest in a technology venture capital fund, we have had \$5 come back into Alberta in terms of investment. How we calculate that is we look at the dollars invested in Alberta technology companies that are inside our portfolio and from our venture capital funds and their partners, and we divide that by the dollars that we put into these funds. That includes fees and money for investment.

Does that answer your question?

Ms de Jonge: Yes. It does answer the second part of the question. Thank you.

Ms Williams: Would you like to repeat the first part?

Ms de Jonge: Yeah. The question was just on what the ministry has done to exceed the target of AEC cumulative investment.

Ms Williams: Excellent. Well, what we've done to do that is we've actually aggressively increased our investment pace. There's a couple of things happening in the province. First of all, we have awesome entrepreneurs that are all developing new companies, so we have more companies in the province, so there's a higher demand for capital right now. On top of that, to meet that demand, we've been aggressively increasing our investment pace, so there's more capital available right now in the venture capital space that's coming into Alberta. So those two factors in combination together with that the companies are maturing and growing; therefore, the financing rounds are larger.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you.

All right. Well, with that, I'll cede the rest of my time to my colleague.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you. Thank you, everyone, for coming this early morning. I just want to thank the department, starting off. We had a security breach at the city of Cold Lake, and I will say that it was sure nice to see that Alberta really stepped up for the city of Cold Lake. That's one of those success stories, and it's nice to see when there's great co-operation between municipal and provincial.

I also will say that a lot of my questions will be about broadband. MCSnet is within my constituency. It's actually based out of St. Paul, and it's one of those homegrown Internet providers of

broadband, and it's right in northeast, so it's kind of neat to see how you're actually putting real money into the northeast region. I'm very thankful for that.

Let's start with looking at expenses in the report on page 38. I see that the expenses were \$188.5 million lower than budgeted. The report indicates, "This is mainly attributed to unspent budget in Technology Support and Operations" due to the factors affecting the timing of the broadband initiative. Given that this program is aimed at bringing high-speed Internet conductivity to rural, remote, and Indigenous communities, this program seems highly important. Can the minister please explain a bit more about the program, including how it works?

Mr. Alford: Certainly, and thank you for the question. The goal of the strategy is to provide access to high-speed broadband to 100 per cent of households, as you said, in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. We have to recognize that this is a big challenge. The strategy estimates that the size of the problem is over a billion dollars to ensure connectivity.

8:50

The broadband strategy is really composed of two parts. There's a universal broadband fund and an Alberta broadband fund. The UBF is a joint program shared between the government of Alberta and the government of Canada. This fund provides \$780 million equally split between the two governments. Alberta and Canada signed a memorandum of understanding in 2021 and amended it again in 2022, and the MOU lays out how both levels of government will work together to reach the goal. The program selects projects based on an approval, on consensus between both governments.

Since the start of the project over 600 applications were submitted. Projects could request either up to 75 per cent of government funding or up to 90 per cent government funding for Indigenous or very remote areas, and then the selected projects were then conditionally approved and moved to negotiation to finalize the scope. Once negotiations were completed, projects moved to the contribution agreement, and work could begin. All of the projects have to be completed in this program by March 31, 2027, at the latest.

The ABF is an Alberta-only initiative that carves \$36 million out of our \$390 million commitment to focus on areas that will not be reached by UBF projects or are underserved because of the growth of communities or failing of existing service provisions. The ABF mirrors a similar carve-out that the government of Canada made with their rapid response stream program, that predates the MOU. Both governments have recently again partnered on an expression of interest, which closed on November 8, to identify projects which will address the gap of approximately 40,000 households not covered under the UBF. The Alberta broadband fund is also looking at how low Earth orbit satellites such as Starlink can be utilized to ensure service for any houses not served within the expression of interest, but we expect this to be a small percentage of households located in more remote areas.

With respect to the first part of your question on the expenses, the start-up, the first year we underspent just due to the time it took to establish those contribution agreements and ramp up. The money was reprofiled to future years, and the program remains on track to meet its objective of serving 100 per cent of households by 2027.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you for that response.

Can the ministry unpack the factors behind the delay in the broadband initiative? Like, was this a federal, provincial delay? That's what I'm hearing according to some of the broadband providers, that

they were waiting on the federal government to step up, but we were all ready to go. Can you kind of work us through the process, please?

Mr. Alford: I wouldn't characterize the initiative as being delayed. The stated goal was that we would get 100 per cent access by the end of the '26-27 fiscal year, and to that end we're well positioned. You know, we have worked with the federal government very closely to review hundreds of high-quality UBF applications, and it's been a long process but something that we were not willing to rush. This helps to ensure that we connect as many households as possible while getting the most out of Albertans' tax dollars. The selection and negotiation process did take longer than originally anticipated due to the sheer number of applications we received, over 600, and the complexity of those applications and the need for robust due diligence.

Factors impacting the timelines have included the need to descope overlaps between applications, a very active telecommunications sector, which impacted the availability of resources such as staff and hardware, addressing inflation, delays caused by wildfire, and corporate mergers and takeovers that led to project withdrawals. However, we remain confident that all the projects will be completed on time and we will meet the stated goal of 100 per cent.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you for that. I know my communities, my First Nations, and settlements appreciate that, too, sir.

On page 19 of the annual report the ministry outlines that 21 recipients signed 21 contribution agreements with the Ministry of Technology and Innovation so that the Alberta government could begin 45 broadband projects in over 200 communities across the province. These projects move our Alberta government forward in our promise in connecting all rural, remote, and Indigenous communities across Alberta, ensuring these communities can thrive and be included in our economic growth going forward. Can the Ministry of Technology and Innovation please explain to the committee how the 21 recipients were chosen for these broadband projects?

Mr. Alford: Certainly. Just to provide a clarification – and thank you for those numbers – the numbers in the '23-24 report are cumulative, and those are the numbers I stated in my opening comments. All universal broadband fund applications were reviewed by both the government of Alberta and the government of Canada separately. Each government then brought forward a list of projects that met the program criteria, and both governments then developed a consensus short list of projects that became the list of projects which were conditionally approved to proceed to negotiation. Some of the factors considered were the cost per household, the type of technology proposed such as fibre versus fixed wireless access, ensuring that there is no overbuilt, the financial health of the applicant, and community support. Based on those criteria, those 21 recipients were selected for the grant and proceeded to deliver.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you for the response. Again, when it comes to my local communities, I will tell you that I'm seeing a few of the Starlink initiatives going forward, and my First Nations are really valuing that approach that we're taking, especially with the fact that they're so remote that it's hard to get that fibre out to them. So I really am appreciative of what your ministry is doing. I know that as we continue to move forward, this broadband is going to be something that is going to bring us into the future in the northeast. Thank you so much for your responses.

I cede my seven seconds.

The Chair: Thank you.

I will now proceed to questions from the Official Opposition. This round you have 10 minutes.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm going to continue asking about broadband, initiated by the member opposite, and maybe just try and gain some clarity on some of the information that was provided. First of all, to note that the target is to have all of the projects completed and those households connected by March of 2027. Stepping back a little bit, the 2022-23 report talked about two projects and 10,700 households on those two projects. In '23-24 you noted that the 45 projects is cumulative. This report in '23-24 doesn't specifically state the number of households. Can you tell us the number of households that have cumulatively been included in the projects?

Mr. Alford: I believe I have that information. For the '23-24 numbers I believe the number of households is 51,000 households.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you.

Now I'm curious to – with the 10,700 households that had contribution agreements signed or projects to cover them in '22-23, in '23-24 how many of those projects had completed construction and the percentage of those households that gained access in '23-24?

Mr. Alford: Give me a moment.

I'd like to invite my colleague Paul Thorsteinson, the executive director on the file, to come and speak.

Mr. Thorsteinson: Good morning. I'm Paul Thorsteinson. I'm with the Department of Technology and Innovation. I'm executive director of broadband and strategic support services. To answer your question, in that particular year I believe there were five projects that completed. Your second part of your question is: how many of those households were connected? We don't have that information about how many subscribers partook of the new service available to them. All we can say is that service could reach 10,000 households.

Mr. Ellingson: So you would – sorry. Just to clarify, of the five that are completed, you would know how many households would be reached by those five projects.

Mr. Thorsteinson: Yeah. We would know that number. Yes. I just don't have that particular breakdown at this point with me today.

Mr. Ellingson: Right. So if that could be provided after the fact, that would be great. I do appreciate that you're not responsible for whether or not people actually subscribe to the service, but you are responsible for ensuring that the service does reach them and that the potential is there.

9:00

That actually does kind of, like, weave into another question that I have. My understanding is that the funds that are provided through the broadband programs: these funds are infrastructure related, to see that there's infrastructure in place, that people would be able to subscribe. Now, my question is: what provisions does the department have or anything else in another area of the government for people who now could be physically connected – the infrastructure is there – but they don't have the funds to have a subscription to what is offered? Are there programs in place to help low-income families in these rural and remote areas connect and get a subscription?

Mr. Alford: I'll call up Paul again for a second.
Are we aware?

Mr. Thorsteinson: I guess the strategy itself and the program do not contemplate subsidizing the service costs.

Mr. Ellingson: I guess I'll ask a forward-leaning question. Is that under consideration by the department?

The Chair: I guess if the department doesn't want to answer this, you can move on with your next question about the report.

Mr. Alford: Sorry. I was just conferring. I don't want to speculate on behalf of the government, but at this current time there is no program in place, presently.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you.

Of the projects that were in '23-24, so the contribution agreements that would have been signed in '23-24, what is the expected, like, timeline of delivery on those projects? We heard in '22-23 that approximately half of the projects had been completed a year later. So those that are signed in '23-24: what's the project delivery schedule? When would we expect 100 per cent of those projects to be complete and delivered?

Mr. Alford: Just to clarify, specifically for the ones signed in '23-24?

Mr. Ellingson: Correct.

Mr. Thorsteinson: I don't have the specific breakdown of the schedules for each of the contribution agreements with me today, but I can tell you that they will be done before the end of fiscal '27, and some of them will come online or partially come online during that time between now and the end of 2027. Some of the projects are very complex and they have different phases, where subscribers will be able to partake of new service before the end of the actual project itself. So we do get that from each of the proponents, the schedules, and we track that. We meet with the project proponent and the federal government partners on a regular basis to ensure they're on track and meeting their obligations of the contribution agreement and to help them solve any problems.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you. Appreciate that, through the chair.

We are, at the end of 2024, approximately projects approved that would reach 51,000 households. We do still have 149,000 households remaining, projects to be delivered before March of 2027. So I guess I'll ask the question: knowing that the complexity of these projects, the time that it takes to deliver these projects – we still have 149,000 more households to be connected by 2027. Contributions still need to be signed. Those projects are going to be equally complex. So I will ask the level of confidence of the department that, in fact, 200,000, 100 per cent, of those households will actually be connected by March 1, 2027.

Mr. Alford: I can answer. We're very confident that we will reach that target since, you know, subsequent to the numbers here the program has continued to proceed and will continue to proceed and, as noted, most recently closed its final round of requests for proposals through ISED just this month. So we still remain very much on track for the delivery, and we're confident we're going to reach that number.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you. We will obviously look forward to future numbers, knowing that in the timelines that are taken for these complex projects, you probably do need to sign off contribution agreements in the following year. In '24-25 you'll

probably need another 100,000 households signed up in contribution agreements, so you've got heavy work ahead of you. I look forward to seeing those results.

I want to talk a little bit about Starlink, and I am very curious about reaching rural and remote households and Indigenous communities. Many of the households that we're talking about, the 200,000 households, will be in towns and villages that are easier to connect. What percentage of those 200,000 households are outside of towns and villages and are much more difficult to connect and might be reliant on programs like Starlink?

Mr. Alford: Paul, do we have the percentage?

Mr. Thorsteinson: We don't have a percentage because we're continuing to evaluate terrestrial solutions. Until we exhaust terrestrial solutions, we won't know what gaps remain that will be a fit for low Earth orbit.

Mr. Alford: Just to build on that answer, the strategy being that presently those technologies are more expensive for the subscriber. Relative to kind of a land line based technology, a satellite-based technology would be more of a financial burden on those households, and that's why we want to absolutely explore all terrestrial opportunities before we shift to that.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you. In the last nine seconds I'll just say that when I come back, I'll ask you more about that. I'm really interested, and I also know that some of those nonterrestrial solutions cut off at 55 degrees north, and I grew up at 55 degrees north, so I want to make sure the northerners are . . .

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now proceed with questions from government members. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Lundy: Why, thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the department officials for joining us here today. Like many of my colleagues, I'm certainly interested in rural and remote parts of Alberta. I grew up in rural Alberta – I don't want to give my age away too much – at a time where, you know, the types of stuff we're doing wouldn't have seemed very possible, so I certainly want to express my appreciation for that.

I'd like to maybe dig in a little specifically on the SuperNet network. This is on page 16 of the annual report. It highlights the efforts of the ministry to modernize Alberta's technological infrastructure and service delivery approaches to support "better, faster, and smarter services" and, again, especially in communities that need these services most. These services include greater access to fibre or fixed wireless Internet coverage, with 429 communities across Alberta gaining connection to the SuperNet network in '23-24. This included 13,000 kilometres of fibre optic cabling, an additional 5,000 kilometres of wireless coverage. Through the chair, could the ministry please explain to this committee and to Albertans what the SuperNet network is and how this network is able to connect Albertans across the province regardless of their postal code?

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. Just to note and distinguish for all of the members here today, the Alberta SuperNet is not the Internet; it is a broadband wide area network infrastructure composed of network routers, fibre optic transport, and wireless towers that are connected throughout the province of Alberta. This extensive fibre optic and wireless backbone has the ability to deliver and share data with all of the communities on the network. SuperNet has a point of presence in 429 communities,

including First Nations and Métis settlements, where stakeholders like schools, hospitals, libraries, and other government offices can connect to the network to deliver services for Albertans.

SuperNet also allows Internet service providers, if they so choose, to connect through wholesale agreements with the SuperNet operator to offer residential commercial Internet services to Albertans without the Internet service provider having to build their own costly infrastructure to reach those communities. So it's, you know, enabling that kind of connectivity that we're looking for. It's providing the fundamental underpinning technology that those service providers can then go and provide services available.

9:10

Mr. Lundy: Through the chair, thank you very much for that answer. Obviously, important technology for our communities.

I just wanted to ask about the 429 communities that were added to the SuperNet network in '23-24. Can you please describe how those communities were chosen?

Mr. Alford: Certainly. The investment to build out the 402 of the 429 SuperNet communities was made back in 2000 because there were few service providers available or competing in those communities. The remaining 27 communities, which were referred to the urban communities such as Edmonton, Calgary, had and continue to have sufficient competition and services available. The 402 rural and 27 urban communities make up the SuperNet network that you see available today. That was the methodology for adding those additional 27 urban communities, areas that were underserved by current competition.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you very much, through the chair.

Unlike the minister of this file, I do not self-identify as a tech nerd, so you might have to bear with me on the 2.0 question here. In the annual report it's mentioned that this is "the first year of operation under SuperNet 2.0." I just wondered if you're able to explain to the committee the difference between Alberta SuperNet and now we have a SuperNet 2.0.

Thank you.

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. SuperNet and SuperNet 2.0 are somewhat one and the same. The 2.0 name was used to delineate an evolution in the SuperNet with new operating models and contracts as well as new services, so offering more broad bandwidth for lower cost and to refresh the network infrastructure. It was the second iteration of that but providing the same SuperNet backbone throughout the province just with the latest hardware and features.

Mr. Lundy: Awesome. Thank you very much, through the chair.

Switching gears a little here, of course, you know, our government is very focused on red tape reduction and making things easier for Albertans. I did want to note that the ministry has some impressive key highlights achieved in '23-24, and one of those was related to red tape reduction. The ministry eliminated over 140 redundant forms in streamlining workflows. Through the chair, can the department unpack what kind of forms these were and what the process is by which the forms were selected for elimination?

Thank you.

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. The government of Alberta has more than 3,000 different forms that have been historically used, and as we identify forms that can be eliminated or systematized, we're able to streamline that. The forms that were removed primarily were those used for the applications into the

ministry's innovation programs and the reporting forms required for grant recipients. The forms were selected for elimination or simplification after the review of those forms that the department conducts on an ongoing basis as part of our red tape reduction mandate. During that review, we make an effort to identify forms that are duplicative or contain unnecessary language or requirements, and in instances where entire forms are deemed unnecessary or programs discontinued, the forms were removed altogether. As programs change, we will also eliminate the forms associated to that program. We're on an ongoing basis to do that across all of our forms.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you. I know I certainly appreciate that often tedious work of red tape reduction and that Albertans certainly appreciate seeing that from their government.

I would like to transition over to the enterprise content management system. On page 19 of the annual report the ministry outlines that \$1.36 million was spent in the '23-24 reporting period to continue modernizing our government's collaboration, security, and information management tools by implementing Microsoft 365 as the enterprise content management system. This implementation is reported to make our public service more efficient and secure going forward. Through the chair, of course, could the department please explain to this committee why Microsoft 365 was chosen over other software providers to act as our government's enterprise content management system?

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. The government completed a business case with KPMG in 2018-2019 which outlined the requirements that we had, and we utilized an RFI, request for information, process. Vendors were evaluated, and Microsoft was chosen as the enterprise content management system because TI already had an enterprise agreement in place and something called E5 licensing, which would allow for life cycle management of the content. The budget was allocated by TI to implement Microsoft 365 over a three-year program.

I can also explain briefly, as well, some of the features if there's interest as to what we leverage from that platform.

Mr. Lundy: Yeah. Thank you. Please, if you wouldn't mind elaborating a little on those features.

Mr. Alford: Perfect. The Microsoft 365 platform offers security measures such as multifactor authentication, data encryption, and threat analytics which protect sensitive government documents from unauthorized access and breach. It enables us to implement real-time threat detection and continuous monitoring; to respond to security incidents and reduce the risk of data loss; it also, importantly, implements centralized content management so we can enforce consistent security policies and compliance standards across, ensuring that we have a unified and streamlined document management approach; and, importantly, it allows us to implement information security classification, ensuring that our documents are adequately classified and protected based on that level of sensitivity.

Mr. Lundy: All right. Thank you very much.

We have 10 seconds, but you know obviously important; security is an important part of your ministry's mandate. Thank you very much for answering the questions.

Mr. Alford: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to questions from the Official Opposition. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Ten minutes; rapid fire.

Let's go back to Starlink. Okay. Thanks for the clarification that the \$36 million is a carve-out from the UBF. How many households have been physically connected through Starlink so far?

Mr. Alford: For the stat, I'm going to invite Paul back up to speak about the stats on the Starlink program and also how we invited people to participate.

Mr. Thorsteinson: Sure. So in fiscal . . .

The Chair: You can introduce yourself.

Mr. Thorsteinson: Pardon me?

The Chair: You can introduce yourself for *Hansard*.

Mr. Thorsteinson: Okay. It's Paul Thorsteinson again. I'm from the Department of Technology and Innovation, executive director, broadband and strategic support services.

The Starlink. In 2023-2024 we undertook a Starlink pilot project to see what the response would be from not only the technology side but also the participation from Alberta households. We selected an area in southern Alberta, and we eventually saw an uptake of just about 3 per cent. We didn't actually subsidize very many kits. Out of the households in the region, we identified there were 150 eligible, and only four households decided to participate in the pilot. They received the reimbursement for the hardware for the Starlink service.

We did some additional follow-up, and we understand that the primary causes for that are because of the costs of ongoing service. It's generally 50 per cent more expensive than terrestrial services.

Mr. Ellingson: Can I jump in and also ask, like, the cost differential for – of those four households, how much did that cost the program just for those four households?

Mr. Thorsteinson: We offered a subsidy of up to \$1,000, and that would include the cost of the kit itself and installation service. We only had one, if I recall correctly, of the four that submitted a claim for the full \$1,000. The rest were partial amounts.

Mr. Ellingson: How about the administration that ultimately delivered four households?

Mr. Thorsteinson: The cost of the . . .

Mr. Ellingson: Yeah.

Mr. Thorsteinson: We use department staff, and I don't have a breakdown with me on what that would look like.

9:20

Mr. Ellingson: Okay. Thank you. I think there are lots of questions on the future of Starlink given the low uptake, the costs to the government. It is absolutely critical that we reach rural households and remote households. Clearly, the Starlink project as a pilot is very expensive to both the government and to the subscribers, and I look forward to, like, the evaluations of that and kind of understanding how we're going to go forward to reach those very remote households. Clearly, there are some blocks there.

I'm going to quickly switch over to the SuperNet for a second, and then I'm going to go to some stuff on Alberta Innovates. Thank you so much, Paul.

For the SuperNet 429 communities sounds impressive, 13,000 kilometres of fibre. We know that this is the backbone for a lot of services in Alberta. Thank you for clarifying that we started

building this out in 2000. It was really quite miraculous that the government of Alberta did this way back in 2000. It's just unfortunate that for the first 20 years we didn't actually leverage the SuperNet.

Before '23-24, out of those 429 communities, how many of them were connected to the SuperNet?

Mr. Alford: One moment.

Mr. Ellingson: You can answer later. That's okay.

Mr. Alford: Sure. We'll answer that.

Mr. Ellingson: With respect to Alberta Innovates, just to clarify, I did spend about eight years working in the tech ecosystem, and I'm relatively familiar with Alberta Innovates and scaleup and GAP, so I just want to ask some clarifying questions around what we see on page 29 in the scaleup and GAP program: the 327 companies referenced, attracting \$282 million, which was an increase of \$147 million. I'm not going to deny that is amazing. I love those numbers, too. But I'm curious with respect to – so Alberta Catalyzer is the preaccelerator program as a part of scaleup and GAP. How many of the 327 companies were Alberta Catalyzer, and how many were with the other four accelerators as part of the program?

Ms Towle: We don't have that available, but we will again respond to you in writing.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you.

What I'm driving at is that that preaccelerator program largely is working with Alberta-based companies; the other accelerators have a higher percentage of non-Alberta-based companies. So I'm wondering: out of the 327, can you tell us how many of those 327 were located in Alberta or relocated to Alberta as part of the scaleup and GAP program?

Mr. Alford: Unfortunately, we'll have to provide that as well as a follow-up.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you.

Just pursuing that line of questioning, of the \$282 million in venture capital or capital that was attracted by those companies, what's the dollar amount attracted by companies that are located in or relocated to Alberta through scaleup and GAP?

Mr. Alford: We'll provide a full report on that through Alberta Innovates.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you.

I'm also curious – one last question – how many companies did we successfully, like, relocate to Alberta from another location through the scaleup and GAP program?

Mr. Alford: Similarly, I'm afraid we'll have to take that away.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you for that. I do look forward to hearing these answers from the department because those are also answers that we don't really get out of reporting from Alberta Innovates. I'll say this also, too, with Alberta Innovates being in the room, that I think all Albertans would appreciate this level of reporting just to know, like, the real success of these programs. Like I said, I'm not going to deny the success of the programs. I spent a lot of time in the tech ecosystem and with a lot of the companies that are engaged in those accelerators.

Now I want to talk a little bit about the – thank you for the member opposite asking about the sponsored research revenue to

Alberta postsecondaries and understanding that there was a lag in the year reporting '22-23. You noted in the report a 40 per cent increase from the province in research funding. Out of that \$1.192 billion attracted by Alberta's postsecondaries, what percentage was provincial and what percentage was federal and what percentage was industry?

Ms Towle: Maybe we'll have to get back to them.

Mr. Ellingson: I appreciate that. I look forward to that response.

Of the federal funding that was provided, that \$1.192 billion, which you'll provide the answers to, I'll also ask what percentage of those federal funds had no matching with provincial dollars.

Mr. Alford: Respectfully, we'll add that to the list.

Mr. Ellingson: Understood. Understood.

This is a future-looking question. With those federal funds, in the department's opinion, does Bill 18 place those federal research grant funding at risk?

Ms Towle: I would say that the government is working on that, and we don't anticipate to have a negative impact.

Mr. Ellingson: I can say that the postsecondaries do, as do the students that are working on those projects. But thank you for that.

I have only 20 seconds remaining in this block, so I wanted to throw out there a question around accessibility on the digital programming from the government of Alberta. We know that Canada has accessibility standards for digital infrastructure.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will move back to government members for 10 minutes of questions.

Mr. McDougall: Yes. Thank you very much for coming here today. On page 23 of the annual report the ministry outlines that in the '23-24 reporting period "\$500,000 was allocated [by the government] to implement a Development, Security and Operations . . . approach to the development and maintenance of digital services to ensure that cybersecurity is embedded throughout the entire lifecycle of all business systems" across Alberta. Of course, obviously, cybersecurity and security systems are critically important, especially with all the personal and private information that is involved in a lot of the government databases. Could the ministry please explain to this committee and to all Albertans how this new development, security, and operations approach to the development and maintenance of digital services differs from our government's past approaches and outline why this direction is an overall improvement?

Mr. Alford: Certainly. Thank you for the question. As we are seeing a marked uptick in the amount of bad actors and cybersecurity threats facing our systems, we have to respond to that with an enhanced and forward-looking security approach and be much more agile to the rate at which these threats are evolving.

Traditionally in an IT infrastructure deployment you would essentially plan and design an application or a system for, you know, a period of months, and then you would go through an IT security audit at the tail end of that implementation. In this case, the development, security, and operations, or DevSecOps to use the jargon, embeds the security design into all aspects of the forward-looking system development, so security teams are embedded into the solution development from the very initial conceptual design and then continually validate the security of our systems through every step of the development life cycle.

This enables us to be much more rapid in our application development life cycle and use common security blueprints and methodologies, including automated scanning and artificial intelligence, to look for any vulnerabilities that may be present in the code based on new exploits that are continually made available in the ecosystem. This ensures that our security is much more quick and cost-effective and not simply just addressing security after our systems are operational. This becomes the new industry standard to ensure secure systems, and Alberta is following that same methodology.

9:30

Mr. McDougall: Thank you for that answer.

On page 24 I would like to bring attention to performance indicator 2(a), the number of malware infections prevented across Alberta during the '23-24 reporting period. This indicator reports the volume of e-mails which were stopped by security measures because they contained harmful content that was deemed suspicious. This criterion covers e-mails containing spam, malicious links, malicious attachments, or containing any type of engineered attack. In the report we see that 91.2 million malware infections were prevented by cybersecurity controls in this reporting period. If during '22-23 95.1 million malware infections were prevented when accounting for this new updated methodology for this performance indicator, that would leave a difference of 3.9 million malware infections between the '22-23 report and the '23-24 report. Could the Ministry of Technology and Innovation explain this difference of malware infections prevented between the two reports?

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. I'm going to turn the answer over to our chief information security officer, Mr. Martin Dinel.

Mr. Dinel: Good morning. The annual variation, of course, comes from a number of factors essentially, including the evolving nature of the malware, changes in the threat landscape, overall changes in politics, political infighting sometimes among nation states and such, improvement in detection and prevention technology, and user behaviour as well as security practices.

As touched on in another question here, the '23-24 annual report, there's been an update in the methodology when discussing a performance indicator of malware infection prevented. This new methodology is reflected in the updated figure of malware infection prevented from the previous reporting period.

Mr. McDougall: Okay. Touching on the previous question, this new methodology is reflected in the updated figure. Can you outline why this new methodology was implemented in this report?

Mr. Dinel: Mainly to evolve with the times. There have been a lot of changes in our tool system. For instance, we modernized our protection systems from an e-mail perspective, an Internet perspective, our applications with new methodologies and such. So we needed to reflect not only, for instance, malware that was coming through our e-mail systems but also that was blocked through some of the malware appliances that we had in place and such. In the past we were looking mainly at, for instance, e-mail as a method of infecting the government of Alberta.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you for that.

Changing the direction here a little bit. Under key objective 3.2 we can see that the government of Alberta through the Ministry of Technology and Innovation is incentivizing investment in research and development to build upon our province's innovation capacity.

This research capacity program funded several projects in the '23-24 reporting period, including two projects from the U of A, two projects from the U of C, one project from NAIT, and another project from Lethbridge College. Could the Ministry of Technology and Innovation please explain the criteria for what projects are granted funding through the research capacity program and why these projects were chosen in particular?

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. I'll call on Maureen Towle, ADM of innovation, privacy and policy.

Ms Towle: Thank you for that. RCP projects are reviewed by an external expert panel based on two categories: innovation excellence and alignment with Alberta's strategic priorities as outlined in the Alberta Technology and Innovation strategy. The panel provides funding recommendations to the Technology and Innovations minister, who then makes the final funding decision. The panel is composed of national research and innovation leaders who have leadership and expertise in the promotion of high scientific quality and the acceleration of innovation to promote economic growth and diversification. The use of an external expert panel is considered an innovation funding best practice and ensures that Alberta is always considered a fair and impartial funder. The projects chosen in '23-24 were deemed as high quality and high innovation potential, with strong alignment with Alberta's strategic priorities in the areas of life sciences, energy, and emerging technologies.

Thank you.

Mr. McDougall: Okay. Could the ministry please explain to this committee how many projects were accepted under the research capacity program in '22-23 as compared to the '23-24 reporting period and explain the difference in this project acceptance rate?

Mr. Schmidt: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Schmidt: I'm repeatedly called out of order for asking questions outside of the '23-24 fiscal year. Member McDougall has clearly referenced '22-23. I don't think he should be allowed to ask that question and should focus only on '23-24.

Thank you.

Mr. McDougall: Perhaps the member opposite wasn't actually listening to my question. What I'm asking for is: why the difference in '23-24 versus '22-23? So I think the question is exactly related to the time period of this report, and I don't understand why he's even raising this question.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, Mr. Chair, if I can respond.

The Chair: Sure. Really quick.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much. I would be happy if the question just referenced '23-24, but clearly the reference to '22-23 is out of bounds.

The Chair: I think I will let the member proceed with the question. I think if you're looking for variation, start with '23-24. That won't, I guess, give rise to any question.

You can proceed.

Mr. McDougall: This is kind of silly. Can the ministry explain how the '23-24 acceptance rate changed from previous and why?

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. Again I'll pass that to Maureen Towle.

Ms Towle: Thank you. What I will say is that in the previous year there was a 65 per cent success rate. In '23-24 36 projects were approved of the 53 applications submitted, so that was a 68 per cent success rate. The project's success rate was similar between a previous year and '23-24, which reflects the high-calibre applications set forth by the institutions.

The number of projects submitted by the postsecondary institutions and subsequently funded in each year varies due to different frequencies of competition cycles of the four streams under the research capacity program. This program holds both annual competitions as well as larger competitions every two to three years in alignment with the companion federal program. This ensures we maximize our ability to attract and retain talented research as well as bring as many federal dollars into the province as possible.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you very much. Since I only have about 30 seconds left in my time, I'll cede my time.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will move back to the Official Opposition for 10 minutes of questions.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm just going to continue with my colleague's question. He was talking about accessibility features, accessibility features really for people with disabilities or different needs. Your ministry is responsible for digital design and delivery, so could you talk to us a little bit about the steps that you've taken to ensure that all of the products are accessible to all Albertans?

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. I'm going to call on my colleague Gene Smith, ADM for digital delivery and design.

Mr. Smith: Yeah. Thank you for the question. Accessibility is important to us. In '23-24 we developed a set of digital service standards that have accessibility as one of the main principles. Those were approved in May 2024. The principle specifically is to make the service accessible as part of our standard to design with users, meaning Albertans in this case. That document is available on our IMT policy website. I believe that's public, but if not, I'm happy to provide that after the fact to the member.

We understand accessibility can mean different things to different programs and so can be implemented differently depending on which digital service we're talking about. We do provide to all of our teams user interface templates and components that are used to build the front-end design of these systems, and for those we strive to align with AA compliance using the web content accessibility guidelines 2.1 as our guide. That's an industry standard in this area that gives us a base level of accessibility for our products.

Ms Renaud: Well, thank you very much. Just to follow up, will you be able to table that policy? I think you called it IMT policy.

Mr. Smith: It's a department policy. I believe it's on our IMT policy website. I believe that website is public, but we can certainly provide the document.

9:40

Ms Renaud: Thank you very much.

Performance measure 1(a) on page 33 discusses products available through MyAlberta e-services, with some projects

consisting of one product. Others may have a few iterations or a range. What is the total number of projects and associated products?

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. Again, I'll refer that to Gene Smith.

Mr. Smith: Yeah. Thank you. There is a bit of a methodology for counting those products. We do count the ones that are individually published on our e-commerce platform as individual services, and then the other digital services that are developed for department programs are counted individually. Some are quite expansive. Some are narrow. We can provide a written explanation of that methodology.

Ms Renaud: Maybe more specifically, as an example, the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services. Could you tell me how many products are currently available in that ministry?

Mr. Smith: I don't have that information offhand, but we can provide it after the fact.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Other than the work that you described a little bit earlier, could you tell us specifically, like, how these products were maybe designed or tested or reviewed at all by anybody with experience or lived experience around disability or academic experience around disability, just around accessibility?

Mr. Smith: I don't have information on the specific practices used in those products. Certainly that's something we can go back to our team and get more details to provide a full answer to the question. In general, the practice within DDD is to engage with our users and stakeholders in the design and development of products early on so that they're fit for the needs of those citizens.

Ms Renaud: The stakeholder then would be the ministry. Is that correct?

Mr. Smith: Could the member repeat the question?

Ms Renaud: Is the stakeholder that you're referring to that you would go to the stakeholder and ask the questions, is that the ministry?

Mr. Smith: No. A stakeholder group in the case of the Department of Seniors and CSS could potentially be a seniors' group. They might have relevant information about designing digital services for seniors, and it would also be individual seniors who are trying to use those services, just to provide a general example.

Ms Renaud: Thank you.

Next, performance measure 1(b) discussed the number of web pages viewed by all users of the open government portal. Now, the ministry notes reporting on this measure has changed, and the ministry now reported reports page views as opposed to site visits. Given the change in methodology for performance measure 1(b), can the ministry clarify if the information in the table called Total Number of Visits to Open Government Portal on page 21 reports site visits or individual pages?

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. I'll pass that again to Gene.

Mr. Smith: Thank you. This portal is not actually managed by this division, but I'm happy to go back and get a clarifying answer on how those metrics are calculated.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I'm sorry. This information is in the annual report, and you have no additional information about that?

Mr. Smith: I don't have any additional information at hand, but I'm happy to provide it in writing.

Ms Renaud: I guess the department couldn't explain sort of why that change was necessary?

Mr. Smith: I can explain in general why these changes are necessary sometimes. It can be due to the differing ways the analytics tools calculate things like site visits and page views. I can't provide a specific reason for why it was changed here, but I'm happy to provide that after.

Ms Renaud: Okay. If a ministry is deciding – let's say they have been in the open data reporting on a wait-list for many years and suddenly decide not to, is there any process that a ministry would have to undertake to remove that reporting or stop that reporting or let you know that they're no longer updating this information?

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. I'd like to invite my colleague Kim Wieringa to speak at the podium.

Ms Wieringa: Good morning. We had to move our tool, our calculation tool from . . .

The Chair: You should just introduce yourself for the record.

Ms Wieringa: Oh, sorry; I thought – Kim Wieringa, assistant deputy minister, data and content management.

The tool, the Google universal analytics tool became end of life, so as a result of that, we had to move to Google analytics 4, which used a different way of calculating statistics. They look at the page views versus the site visits. The page views are actually more accurate regarding the usability and what's being looked at versus a site visit, which is someone just looking at a site and maybe not drawing information from it. Because of that, we can't retroactively calculate the change in the activity other than to say that the page views are probably much more accurate as to what's being used. Specifically to your question, I might – did I answer your question?

Ms Renaud: No. Maybe I'm not clear about the question. Maybe I can repeat that.

Ms Wieringa: Okay.

Ms Renaud: Is there a mechanism for different ministries or departments – let's say that they're always reporting data, so they're putting it into the system for the public to view, and then suddenly they stop. Is there somebody that's responsible for knowing who is continuously reporting and where and when it stops, sort of letting us know why that stopped? These variables are obviously impacting visits.

Ms Wieringa: Each department manages their own information and provides us with the – we provide the venue for them to display it, but they manage it themselves. We don't monitor them or go back to them and ask why they stopped a product. You know, it could become irrelevant or be replaced by something. We don't know. But right now there isn't a process for that.

Ms Renaud: There really is no mechanism in government, not in the ministry, that stops reporting or in this particular ministry to note: okay; we've been seeing this data published for this many

years; suddenly it stopped. There is no mechanism for the public to ask the ministry responsible or this ministry?

Ms Wieringa: There is an ability for the public to ask questions on the site and to ask for information as to why something isn't there any longer or ask for information to become available. There is an opportunity on the site to do that.

Ms Renaud: Like a FOIP request, are you talking about?

Ms Wieringa: No, no. There's a question and answer. You can just write directly to government asking for that information.

Ms Renaud: It hasn't really worked out so far. I've asked why the wait-list stopped reporting in 2021, and still no answer. Okay. I'll move on. I understand that. Thank you very much.

Key objective 1.2 – actually, I'm not going to get to this. Key objective 1.2 discusses the ministry's goals of modernizing infrastructure and service delivery approaches. I note on page 17 that the ministry led efforts to design citizen-centred government services to collaboratively deliver modern digital services in partnership with 16 ministries. Could you table a list of those 16 ministries and the criteria used for selecting those 16 ministries?

Mr. Alford: We'd be certainly happy to provide that list.

Ms Renaud: Perfect. Thank you.

And I'm out of time

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move to government members for 10 minutes.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Chair. Through you to the deputy minister, thank you, first of all, for the work you do. A lot of it is a foreign language to myself, but I do appreciate it. I know there's a lot of work that you do that I'm not meant to understand. I know my rural communities are happy that we're working on connecting them, and that's all that's really important, so whether I understand it or not doesn't really matter.

Machine learning solutions are increasingly used by individual companies and government institutions around the world. I see Alberta is not an outlier, with one of the highlights in this report being the implementation of machine learning to streamline processes and improve resource allocation. With these benefits, I know that concerns have been raised by folks all over Alberta regarding the extent of these processes in government. Can you explain what sort of processes machine learning is involved in streamlining within the Alberta government and what safeguards are in place? Or, to put it another way, how can you reassure Albertans that machine learning is being used as a support and not as a decision-maker?

Mr. Alford: Thank you very much for the question. Yeah. Certainly, there is a lot of new innovation coming out that we are all learning together. You know, we can all respect that the world is changing quite quickly. We are actively looking to keep up and be on the leading edge of that change, and we've been leveraging machine learning to streamline some of our processes.

I'll give you a couple of examples. Over the past months we've developed a wildfire occurrence prediction solution that uses machine learning to predict the likelihood and timing of future wildfire occurrences. This will allow duty officers to adjust the start and end times of their resources, optimizing the use of heavy equipment, aircraft, and personnel suppression resources. The goal is to reduce expenses while maintaining an acceptable level of risk,

and this tool is used with other tools to provide duty officers the ability to accurately do resource allocation.

9:50

Another example is what we call a nowcasting solution, which leverages machine learning techniques to provide real-time labour market insights. The mission of the nowcasting project was to provide near real-time labour market insights to empower policy-makers, businesses, and researchers. We're also looking to use machine learning to help to classify our documents and information records to classify and appropriately apply retention schedules. We anticipate that the outcome of this will be more rapid access to documents and information, minimizing productivity losses when searching for information, and reducing litigation preparation costs for historical information.

Now, of course, this all sounds good, but how are we being safe about it? The ministry has implemented several safeguards to ensure that machine learning is used as a tool to support rather than as a decision-maker. These measures are designed to maintain transparency, accountability, and the ethical use of AI. One of the primary industry concepts is human in the loop, and that means that all machine learning models are designed to support human-based decision-making rather than replace it. So in no instances are machines making decisions on behalf of the government. They are simply there to provide humans who have the oversight to assist in the gathering of information and the preparation and the completion of what are often very manual tasks. And it is also – oops; my pages are out of order here. I apologize for one moment. I'm just going on to my other notes.

Then, also, we've implemented a responsible AI framework. We've built this as a means of screening potential future AI projects and looking at the development and testing of models. This framework allows us to look at principles of inclusivity, fairness, transparency, privacy, and data protection. These are some of the safeguards that we put in place, and we also benchmark against our other jurisdictional colleagues in the other provinces as well as the federal government, whose departments have released numerous AI frameworks. So we're looking all across Canada and North America to ensure that our policies are in place and that we're securely and safely utilizing this technology.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you. That's very interesting.

Chair, through you back to you, Deputy Minister, I would like to highlight performance measure 2(c), the initiative for the Ministry of Technology and Innovation to annually develop new cybersecurity talent via the work experience program of the government of Alberta. This indicator measures the number of individuals who took part in the cybersecurity work experience program to support job diversification and create new employment opportunities. During the 2023-2024 reporting period eight individuals were able to take part in the cybersecurity workforce program, which is twice the amount of people working through the program as compared to the previous reporting period.

Could the Minister of Technology and Innovation please explain to this committee what the work experience program of the government of Alberta entails and how we are continuing to work with postsecondary institutions to expand the program to generate more talent in the cybersecurity field? Also, could you explain to this committee the criteria for choosing candidates to take part in the government of Alberta work experience program?

Mr. Alford: Thank you for the question. To answer this, I'm going to pass this to the chief information security officer, Mr. Martin Dinel.

Mr. Dinel: Good morning. The work experience program was implemented a few years ago with the intention of filling the global gap that we are seeing around the world right now from a cybersecurity perspective. I was often in a situation where I had a hard time finding cybersecurity professionals with experience in this province to fulfill some of my full-time roles. So we worked with Advanced Education in technology and a few of the postsecondary institutions here in Alberta to develop a program that was more than just, say, a student summer program or something like this.

We wanted to actually bring in people, put them through a curriculum, and teach them how to become cybersecurity professionals. So we are bringing in individuals who actually have some basic experience and meet some requirements from a cybersecurity perspective. For instance, we bring in people from a computer science program that understand what a network is, how to support a desktop, how to install software, how to develop application systems, and things like that. But we also bring in people from law enforcement programs that maybe have experience and understand things like forensic investigation and such.

We essentially use the normal, the standard hiring process of the government of Alberta. People have to apply with their resumé, they state their level of experience, and then we also provide them with a little bit of homework because one of the things we want to evaluate, since they don't have the experience, is at least their level of passion and their willingness to actually learn through the program how to become cybersecurity professionals. This is essentially how we select the candidates.

When I actually compare the initial program that we put out, we wanted it to be quite small because we wanted to mentor the people really well and see how well they would react to a rotation across all of the services in cybersecurity; for instance, threat intelligence, cyber awareness, creating articles that we publish on a monthly basis, incident response, digital forensic investigations, and things like that. Seeing how well the program worked and how well the students essentially responded, we managed to actually hire three of the first four candidates. We decided it's time to expand the program, and we decided this is primarily how we're going to staff some of our more junior vacant positions. We created eight such positions out of this program. The program is ending right now, the two-year cycle, in May of 2025, and we've already hired two of the students that were in the program because they were doing amazing work. We're about to, actually, this winter, hire two more of those in the work experience program.

Now, one of your questions was: how are we planning to expand that across the province of Alberta? We have two ways of doing that. We have one effort through our CyberAlberta program. It's an external-facing program where we're working with the cybersecurity leads of cybersecurity programs from both public and private organizations across the province of Alberta right now to strengthen the overall security posture of the province. We're going to be doing some presentations and encouraging organizations to leverage some of the mentoring material, teaching material, overall successes that we have accomplished, even some of our own expertise, to actually implement similar programs in their own organization.

Now, one of the issues with that, of course, is it means they have to inject some of their own money and their own time for a program like this, and we want to go further in helping them. We're now working with Advanced Education and technology with the goal of implementing something that's been extremely successful for the province of Alberta since the '70s: an actual apprenticeship program; something that is partially funded by the government of Alberta to bring in some people who are fresh out of school but need some basic requirements to indeed bring them . . .

The Chair: Thank you for the detailed answer.

We are left with, I guess, two minutes, but we do need at least five more minutes to complete the full agenda. That can be done through unanimous consent if committee members are okay to go past 10 o'clock. I will ask just one question: is there anyone opposed to it?

Okay. So we will now move to the Official Opposition for three minutes to read questions into the record.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The first one I will ask is if the department will agree to more comprehensive reporting on the broadband program through that broadband website – dollars spent to date, households reached to date, projects that have been approved, and deadlines for the completion of those projects – to be on the broadband website, I think would be a really good idea.

Earlier in the introduction, Deputy Minister, you talked about CyberAlberta and how you've got over 500 partners now in CyberAlberta. So the Canadian Internet Registration Authority also has a cybersecurity program that works across the country. They also have partnerships here in Alberta, so I'd like to hear in a written response your relationship with CIRA and if you're working together with CIRA on your cybersecurity program.

We had a question earlier on accessibility, and I think you made reference, ADM, to an Internet kind of standard that you're following in accessibility. The government of Canada does have a national standard for accessibility for ICT products, and that aligns with a European standard. That only applies to programs delivered by the government of Canada. I'm curious if the Internet kind of protocols or the protocols or standards that you're using in the department align with the national standard of Canada.

I think those are all of my questions.

10:00

Ms Renaud: Awesome. Thank you.

Page 13 notes the implementation of "fraud detection tools that helped identify and prevent the disbursement of over \$4 million in fraudulent student aid disbursements and affordability program claims." First question: how many student aid claims were found to be fraudulent? Number two: how many affordability program claims were found to be fraudulent? Number three: how many suspected fraud claims were reversed? And how did the ministry arrive at \$4 million specifically, and was this after verifying all claims that were indeed fraudulent?

Yeah, that's it.

The Chair: That's it.

We will move to the government side for three minutes.

Mr. Rowswell: In the interest of time I'll cede the three minutes.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to thank officials from the Ministry of Technology and Innovation and the office of the Auditor General for their participation. We ask that any outstanding questions be responded to in writing within 30 days and forwarded to the committee clerk.

Other business. I have called a meeting of the subcommittee on committee business after this meeting ends. The deputy chair and I along with the officials from the office of the Auditor General will discuss the schedule for the committee during the spring session. Any recommendations made will be reported to the committee for review at a future meeting.

Are there any other items for discussion under other business?

Seeing none, the next meeting of the committee is on Tuesday, November 26, with the Ministry of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction.

At this point I will call for a motion to adjourn. Would a member move that the Tuesday, November 19, 2024, meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be adjourned? Member

McDougall. All in favour? Any opposed? Motion carried. The meeting stands adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:02 a.m.]

