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Mercredi 10 mai 2006

**Standing committee on
estimates**

Ministry of Community
and Social Services

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère des Services sociaux et
communautaires

Chair: Cameron Jackson
Clerk: Katch Koch

Président : Cameron Jackson
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ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATES**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT DES
BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES**

Wednesday 10 May 2006

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The committee met at 1605 in room 151.

MINISTRY OF COMMUNITY
AND SOCIAL SERVICES
MINISTÈRE DES SERVICES
SOCIAUX ET COMMUNAUTAIRES

The Chair (Mr. Cameron Jackson): I call to order the standing committee on estimates. We have assembled today to complete six hours of estimates.

Avant de commencer, je vous présente ma fille, Michelle Jackson, et sa copine Michelle Millar, qui assistent à la Législature aujourd'hui pour un projet de l'école Pineland à Burlington de "job shadow" leur député de la circonscription de Burlington. Bienvenue, Michelle et Michelle.

I'd also like to welcome madame la ministre des Services sociaux et communautaires. Madame la ministre, vous avez 30 minutes pour la présentation. S'il vous plaît, commencez.

L'hon. Madeleine Meilleur (ministre des Services sociaux et communautaires, ministre déléguée aux Affaires francophones): Merci, monsieur le Président. Distingués membres du comité, je suis honorée de me présenter aujourd'hui devant ce comité pour parler du budget des dépenses du ministère des Services sociaux et communautaires.

Comme les honorables membres ne sont pas sans le savoir, j'ai été nommée ministre depuis peu, assumant ainsi les responsabilités qui incombent auparavant à Sandra Pupatello. Depuis le début du mandat de notre gouvernement, la ministre Pupatello a établi des assises solides en vue d'apporter des changements au sein du ministère dans son ensemble.

I have with me today the staff of the ministry, the deputy minister, Kevin Costante, and the assistant deputy minister, Lynn MacDonald. Et puis, j'oublie votre nom, vous?

Mr. Bohodar Rubashewsky: Bohodar Rubashewsky.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Très bien. I don't pretend that after five weeks I know everything, but I know the questions that would be asked are important questions. That's why I will be sometimes, perhaps often, referring to the staff to answer the questions, because I wanted to give the most accurate information.

Ours is a people ministry. We have often been described as the heart of government, the soul of the

community. We have sought to meet those expectations with an optimistic view of human potential.

There will always be those who are vulnerable for many reasons, and usually through no fault of their own. I believe—and it has been the hallmark of my predecessor and of our Premier—that there must be a balance for everyone in Ontario: for women and their children fleeing violence, for people with disabilities and those without, for those who need assistance to get back on their feet again, and for those who need our help to re-establish their lives so they can raise their families. After all, all of Ontario benefits when there are opportunities for everyone to contribute to our economic and civic life. When our citizens have the opportunities and the support they need to turn those opportunities into reality, then our communities gain strength.

Today, I wanted to touch on three principles that define the work we do: first, helping our vulnerable citizens; second, helping people participate in their communities; and finally, improving accountability and efficiency in our social programs.

Ontario Works and the Ontario disability support program represent the largest expenditure of my ministry. Since 2003, we have been reaching out to the municipalities, community groups, organizations and individuals who deliver these services for input and assistance to make our programs better.

From the very beginning of our mandate, we said that the people who relied on our social assistance programs must not be treated unfairly. From the outset, our government pledged to treat vulnerable people with respect and dignity. We pledged to remove barriers that prevented people from improving their lives.

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We first eliminated the unfair lifetime ban for social assistance fraud. It is the job of the courts to determine penalties for fraud, not the social assistance system. We immediately brought in some practical improvements: allowing recipients to keep registered education savings plans, not penalizing them for personal loans, grants and awards earmarked for their children's education and not penalizing them for income their children earn working part-time or after school. How can children escape the cycle of poverty if we won't allow the family to save for a better education and future for them?

Next, we made important changes to help Ontario Works recipients increase their earnings and return to the

workforce. These changes break down barriers to a better life, barriers that never should have been there in the first place, barriers such as a need for child care and health benefits. We increased the maximum deductions for informal child care costs from \$390 to \$600 per month. This is one more child care option for working parents. We gave Ontario Works recipients access to drug and health benefits for a period of time while they re-entered the workforce. We also provided better incentives for them to work and earn more through a straight exemption of 50%, and we gave them more support for job-related costs.

I want to recognize my parliamentary assistant, Deb Matthews, who travelled the province and heard from hundreds of people involved in the social service system. Her recommendations provide valuable advice to my ministry as we work to improve these programs.

We also looked to new, more creative ways to help long-term Ontario Works recipients return to the workforce through our JobsNow program. JobsNow recognizes that many people who rely on social assistance can and want to find meaningful work; they just need extra support to get back into the workforce. JobsNow provides ongoing employment counselling, job placement and, most importantly, job retention support. This helps people find and keep jobs so they can become financially independent from social assistance.

I was recently in Ottawa to celebrate the fact that more than 2,000 Ontario Works clients are working right now thanks to the JobsNow program. In just one year, JobsNow has helped long-term Ontario Works clients get back to work and on the path to a brighter future. Their stories are giving encouragement to many people on social assistance.

I also want to talk about major changes to the Ontario disability support program, changes that help people with disabilities and their families find work, keep more of what they earn and, for those who can, move off of the program and into employment. Governments and the disability community agree that finding a good job is key to improving the quality of life and financial well-being of people with disabilities and their families. Currently, about 18,000 ODSP recipients are working to some extent, only 9% of the caseload. Many more are willing and able to work, but they need the right supports. We are giving them those supports by: improving access to employment services, such as job placement and retention supports, to help recipients and their families find and keep real jobs; increasing the employment start-up benefits to \$500 to help cover the costs of looking for a job, training or starting a new job; and introducing a 50% flat-rate earnings exemption and a new \$100 monthly work-related benefit for each adult working family member. The majority of working recipients will automatically see an increase in their disposable income.

For ODSP recipients and their families, the new rules also let them leave social assistance for employment without the fear that giving up the safety net might make their situation worse. For example, we are providing

ongoing drug/dental coverage and vision care until they are covered by their employer, and for people who need to return to the ODSP because their job does not work out, we're making it easier and faster for them to requalify.

There are big changes, big improvements—changes that our clients and stakeholders have asked for in our many consultations.

I would like to acknowledge the work that Ernie Parsons did. He travelled across the province, consulting with the disabled community and their families. I thank you for the help and the good recommendations you brought forward. We will continue to look for more ways to help people with disabilities enter the workforce.

At the same time as we help people reduce their dependence on social assistance, we're making steady progress in giving them some additional financial support.

In 2004, we gave recipients the first rate increase in 12 long years. We followed up that initial 3% increase with another 2% increase in this year's budget.

We also allowed recipients to keep the federal government's increase to the national child benefit supplement for the last three years. This means families on social assistance with children will receive an additional \$56 million in 2006-07 and another \$75 million in 2007-08.

In two and a half years, it is not possible for us to entirely make up for more than a decade of neglect. But our government has sent a strong message that we are committed to making steady progress and helping vulnerable people.

My ministry is about more than social assistance. We reach into all Ontario communities with programs and services that support a broad range of people who are disadvantaged. As MPPs, I know you have been approached in your communities by many people who need the services that my ministry supports.

I believe it is at the community level that our ministry's partnerships are strongest. These community partners include: emergency women's shelters; counselling and housing support agencies; and programs to help people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

These are programs and services that define compassion and caring in our communities, helping women and their children when life gets violent and helping the most destitute find hope when life seems hopeless.

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Our government's support for women facing violence has been unwavering. We inherited a sector that had, frankly, been struggling under the weight of increasingly tight budgets. Our government knew we needed a new approach, a comprehensive and coordinated approach to support the diverse needs of abused women and their children. That meant better community-based support for victims, earlier identification of and intervention for women and children at risk, changing attitudes to prevent violence from happening, strengthening the justice

system response and improving access to French-language services. These are the key components of our government's \$68-million domestic violence action plan.

The ministry has a central role in making this plan a reality. To date, the ministry has invested \$8 million towards the creation of 300 new and 136 refurbished shelter beds; committed more than \$4 million in base funding increases to help shelters and counselling agencies; invested nearly \$4 million to help shelters and second-stage housing providers make security upgrades, accessibility improvements and health and safety renovations; enhanced funding for community-based counselling by \$2.5 million annually; and invested more than \$10 million to create a transitional and housing support program for women's shelters, second-stage housing providers, affordable housing providers and community agencies to help abused women find and maintain housing and live independently. These programs do more than just help women escape abuse; they help them rebuild their lives for themselves and their children.

On May 1, I was in Ottawa to announce that the Ontario government is helping to set up an advanced telephone assistance and referral service for Franco-Ontarian women. We are also helping women's agencies strengthen their own financial human resources and structural capabilities with an investment of \$3.5 million in 2005-06 as well as in 2006-07, and \$1.4 million annually beginning in 2007-08. We know that good services start with good people and strong organization, and every cent we spend to strengthen these community agencies is an investment in women's future.

Finally, to maximize our investments at the community level, we are funding 39 domestic violence community coordination committees. These committees bring together women's agencies with other social service agencies, justice sector representatives and representatives from the health and education sectors. They will provide the community leadership we need to tackle domestic violence where it occurs in Ontario's community.

Just as we have brought better cohesion to our women's program, we have done the same for our homelessness programs. We inherited a jumble of homelessness programs which we consolidated to give municipalities more flexibility with less administration. We provided two increases in per diem rates for municipality-operated homeless services and additional funding for municipal programs that help people who are at risk of losing their homes.

In addition, we increased per diem rates by 9% for 280 domiciliary hostels. These hostels support 4,700 people, some of whom may have mental health issues, addiction issues, developmental disabilities or are frail and elderly. Domiciliary hostels serve some of our most vulnerable, many who are considered hard to house, and allow them to live with dignity and independence in their community.

Everything we do at our ministry is with inclusion in mind. It is vital that all Ontarians be able to participate in

the life of their community as much as possible. Our programs and services provide those opportunities.

Perhaps one of the most important steps my ministry has taken in many years is to assume responsibility for the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005. For many years, disability advocates fought for meaningful legislation that would improve accessibility for all Ontarians. Our legislation was the realization of those efforts and the commitment of our government. Today, Ontario has strong, meaningful legislation that will improve accessibility for people with disabilities and for all Ontarians.

The act establishes the Accessibility Standards Advisory Council and standards development committees. The council will advise me on proposed accessibility standards developed by our first two standards development committees in transportation and customer service and on public information programs. The work of our first two standards development committees is well under way.

These committees include people with disabilities and private and public sector representatives. Our accessibility standards will cover all sectors of the economy and will address the full range of disabilities, including physical, sensory, mental health, developmental and learning. I look forward to receiving their proposed accessibility standards in several months, and I hope to make an announcement on further standards development committees later this spring. I am confident that with their commitment and the guidance of our advocacy council, we will make Ontario a leader in accessibility and inclusion.

Another important commitment to inclusion is in our interpreter and intervener services for people who are deaf, hard of hearing or deaf-blind. These important services help individuals live as independently as possible by providing the bridge in communication they need to access essential health and social services.

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For the past two years, we have concentrated our efforts on bringing greater fairness and accountability to these services. We have invested in more hours of services to meet the greatest pressures. We are developing tools to better meet the needs of our clients. In this year's budget, our government's commitment of more than \$10 million will help us further improve services. This is a 64% increase in the budget for these programs. I hope to be announcing the details of this funding this spring.

Now I'm going to speak on the developmental services, in which MPP Parsons is well versed. One of our most ambitious transformations is in developmental services, and there is probably no better example of our commitment to inclusion. Ontario spends more than \$1.35 billion each year to support people with a developmental disability.

In September 2004, our government announced \$110 million to strengthen community-based developmental services. We've also increased the number of community residential spaces as we close our remaining institutions

for people with a developmental disability. We also launched a major policy review of Ontario's developmental services sector.

As our society has changed and become more inclusive, so have the expectations of people with developmental disabilities about the kinds of care and services that they want and need. Today, they want a system where they are integrated into all aspects of society. And their families want greater choice and flexibility to care for their family members at home.

So we knew we needed a plan that would: make it easier for families to find services, increase fairness and consistency in how supports are delivered and give individuals and families choice and flexibility.

On May 2, I released Opportunities and Action, a plan for a fair, accessible and sustainable developmental services system, a plan that is the product of 18 months of input, discussion and debate with hundreds of people in Ontario's developmental services community; a plan that will help to achieve the vision of a more inclusive Ontario.

As we transform our developmental services system, our government is also making record investments in community-based supports. This year, we will invest nearly \$84 million in new funding. This funding balances new resources for community-based services with direct funding for individuals and families. All of this new funding is permanent, and brings the government's four-year funding increase for community-based developmental services to a record \$276 million, an increase of 16% since 2003.

The Chair: Minister, pardon me for interrupting you. I just wish to advise you that the regulations for this committee allow for the minister to do a 30-minute opening statement. Clearly, as I look at your pages, you will not be done in 30 minutes.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: No?

The Chair: So I fear that you have been ill-advised by your staff about the process. However, my ruling today will be that you will be allowed to complete your presentation, as quickly as possible, but I wish to serve notice to the Liberal caucus office that if any other minister comes before this committee and exceeds their 30 minutes, I won't be as generous. If you would like to finish now, that is fine, and then we'll go into our rotation. I apologize for the interruption, but that is the procedure. I believe this is your first estimates, and we'd like to welcome you. Please proceed.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Chair, I was not ill-advised. They told me I had 30 minutes, but I'm probably speaking slower, so I'll speed up. Thank you for advising me.

This investment is:

- creating nearly 2,180 new residential spaces, including 1,000 for residents leaving the province's institutions and another 1,180 for those who live already in the community;

- strengthening specialized services for adults with a developmental disability who also have mental health issues or challenging behaviours;

- giving more than 5,000 more individuals and their families special services at home funding;

- creating the new passport Program to provide meaningful community participation supports for 1,600 young adults who have recently left the school system; and

- helping agencies address their operating costs, including employee wages, safety and security improvements and utility costs.

Our developmental services transformation also includes closing the final three provincial institutions for adults with a developmental disability. As committee members know, this policy has been in place since 1987, when the Peterson government announced a 25-year plan for full closure. All three parties, while in government, have supported this policy.

We have some great stories from the 113 residents who have moved already. One former resident who did not participate in activities in the facility has immersed himself in the social activities of his long-term-care home. Another former resident who has moved to the community forged a friendship with the owners of a business and was asked to work there part time. These seem like small things perhaps, but for someone who has not been able to participate in the community for decades, these are huge, positive changes that validate their right to live in their community just as each of us lives in ours. We are continuing to work closely with families and community service providers to make the best decisions as our residents return to their communities.

As you can see, the ministry has an enormous responsibility as steward of Ontario's commitment to help vulnerable people. We are Ontario's third-largest ministry, with a budget exceeding \$7 billion. But with this enormous mandate comes great responsibility. It is our job to make the best use of every dollar we invest in our social and community services.

Members of this committee are aware of recent controversies about the special diet supplement for social assistance recipients. Our government strongly believes that people who are eligible for this allowance should be able to receive it.

Since we took office, we have made changes that focus on treating social assistance recipients with fairness and dignity, but respect must go both ways. When some people don't respect the rules, it jeopardizes our programs for people who truly need them, both now and in the future. That is not fair to those who work hard within the rules to improve their lives and the lives of their families. So we took action to maintain the integrity of the special diet allowance and to make it do what it was designed to do. We will regularly review the eligibility criteria to keep pace with developments in medical knowledge, and we will make changes as required. Your feedback is always welcome.

Another important accountability measure is our sponsorship debt recovery initiative. There are thousands of sponsored immigrants in Ontario who rely on social

assistance because their sponsors do not meet their legal obligation to provide support. Forcing them to rely on social assistance is not fair to sponsored immigrants and certainly not to the people of Ontario.

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The ministry is working in partnership with the federal government to recover social assistance costs from sponsors who do not fulfill their sponsorship obligations through tax rebates and tax returns. It has always been the case that if a sponsored immigrant is forced to rely on social assistance, his or her sponsor will now be required to pay the cost of that assistance back to the Ontario government. It is a fair approach that recognizes that each of us, individuals and government, has a responsibility to live up to the commitments we make to those who rely on us.

Another way we are making our services work better is in our adoption disclosure legislation. This new law resulted from a great deal of consultation with adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents. We heard from birth parents that it was important to them to know that the child they gave up had a good life. We heard from adult adoptees who wanted the same right as non-adoptees: the right to know their own identity. We also heard clearly that the right to know is different than the right to a relationship. That is why our legislation balances the right to information with improved privacy measures. It is an important balance that treats adoptees and birth parents fairly and brings our adoption disclosure laws into the 21st century.

I want to talk about the changes we have made at the Family Responsibility Office. These are changes that recognize that accountability in public service does not just mean saving money; it means making sure that services work for the people who need them.

Our government inherited a Family Responsibility Office that simply was not working. For years, the Ontario Ombudsman, the Provincial Auditor and the Ontario Information and Privacy Commissioner had called for improvements, and they warned that the Family Responsibility Office was at risk of not being able to fulfill its legislative mandate, a very serious criticism. We had to move immediately to get the Family Responsibility Office back on its feet.

We began in February 2004 with immediate improvements to customer service, and we are building on those improvements. We have new legislation that will be implemented over the coming year, as well as new technology that will bring the Family Responsibility Office's operations into the 21st century.

Altogether, our efforts are improving customer service, strengthening our ability to enforce court-ordered support payments, treating people more fairly and working with them to meet their support obligations, and improving efficiency. As a result, we have collected more than \$112 million, due to our credit bureau initiative; the office now answers more than 36% more phone calls; average call wait times have been reduced from 13 minutes to eight; and we have been able to find the

addresses for support payers on 57% of the returned mail. I am certain that many honourable members will agree that the Family Responsibility Office of today is a far more efficient, fair and effective organization than the one we inherited in 2003.

These measures and others are improving the accountability of our social services system.

In conclusion, our government believes people deserve help in their time of need, and we intend to help. As a ministry, we will continue to believe and invest in the abilities of our people to build a more prosperous Ontario and stronger communities, and by maintaining the integrity and sustainability of our social programs, we are protecting them for the people who need our help today and for those who will need it in the future.

I now turn it over to you for questions or comments. Thank you for your patience.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madam Minister. We will now move in prescribed rotation. The critic has up to 30 minutes, but he'd like me to recognize Mr. Arnott.

Mr. Ted Arnott (Waterloo–Wellington): Thank you, Minister, for the overview of the activities at the ministry. I'm pleased that my colleague the member for Cambridge has given me this opportunity to ask you a question and raise an issue with you in the estimates forum. It's something that you and I had the chance to discuss privately a while back, and you may recall our conversations on this. I had a constituent and her mother come into my office a few weeks ago, and the constituent's name is Janice Fraser. Her mother is Marianne Fraser. They reside near Kenilworth in the township of Wellington North. In all my years in the Legislature, I've never seen a problem quite like this.

Janice Fraser received a cold—well, it's a form letter, I guess, that is cranked out by the Ministry of Community and Social Services. Janice is a recipient of the Ontario disability support program. She's disabled. This form letter, or whatever you want to call it, was sent to her, and I'll read you just the first paragraph:

“Dear Miss Janice Fraser:

“Your Ontario disability support program file has been reviewed for the months July 1989 to September 2005. An overpayment has been calculated for the amount of \$75,511.17.”

More than \$75,000—I couldn't believe it. I thought there must be a mistake. We looked into it further and it appears that this in fact is the case. So of course the ministry's response is to send this rather cold form letter indicating that the overpayment is going to be recovered month by month—forever, I guess.

Marianne Fraser wrote this letter to your predecessor on March 6, 2006:

“Dear Minister:

“I am requesting you to help my daughter, Janice Fraser.

“I am going to make this little note short.

“My daughter was assaulted in 1983 at her place of employment, and was very sick for a long time, she was

awarded a monthly amount from WCB, which was not a large amount and she could not have lived off that amount, so we applied for benefits for her.

“When the lady came to our home we were told she could still get benefits as WCB—you did not have to claim it nor pay taxes for it”—at that time. “When we moved, we had to get a new accountant, and he did all our taxes, but I never knew the law had changed, as no one informed us, and on February 27, 2006 we received a letter from social services, saying my daughter was overpaid about \$75,000. She has lost \$400 per month, and there is another \$47.95 also.

“I thought the statute of limitations was only seven years.

“In the year 2000 my daughter lost one kidney, and only a few months ago Janice had her bladder removed and now has a stoma which she urinates through.

“Janice has been quite sick since 1983 and now in the past six years has been terribly traumatized by the terrible illness she has had.

“I am hoping that between yourself and Ted Arnott, our MPP, there might be something you could do for Janice, and put all of this behind with regards to compassionate grounds.

“I am thanking you in advance.

“We remain

“Marianne Fraser for Janice Fraser.”

In response to this letter, we received a reply from a ministry staff person, Vince Tedesco, regional director, indicating that as a result of, I guess, Janice’s mother’s letter, there would a reduction in the overpayment deducted from Janice’s monthly Ontario disability support program allowance from 5% of her monthly entitlement, being \$47.95, to 2%, which is \$19.18 per month. So the ministry is going to be reducing Janice’s cheque, according to this, by around \$20 a month forever, until it can recover more than \$75,000 of this overpayment that it says has been generated.

My question is, is there any absolute limit to the overpayment amount that is going to be recovered over time? That’s my first question. Does it just keep going up forever and ever if an overpayment has been established by the ministry in excess of \$75,000? Is there any ceiling?

1650

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: First of all, I don’t think I can discuss any cases here. Is there any limit? I’m going to turn it over to the deputy minister. I don’t think there is any limit but, after five weeks, I can be wrong, so I’ll ask the deputy to answer that question.

Mr. Kevin Costante: My name is Kevin Costante, deputy minister of community and social services. The minister is correct; there is no absolute limit on the amount of an overpayment. We do have latitude, as it looks like was exercised in this case, to vary the amount of the deduction on compassionate grounds.

Mr. Arnott: I couldn’t believe the \$75,000 figure. I assumed that perhaps the ministry was adding interest to the overpayment over time. Is that the case?

Mr. Costante: I would have to check. I don’t believe that is our practice. I believe that is likely the amount of the WCB—again, I’m not familiar with the particular case. The policy is to deduct WCB payments from the income. I’m assuming that is because it was over a long period of time that the deduction is large and, therefore, the overpayment is large.

Mr. Arnott: Has that always been the policy of the government to deduct workers’ compensation benefits?

Mr. Costante: I would have to check back to 1983. I’ve been involved in social assistance since 1993, and it has been the practice since then. I can check, but I’m almost certain that it always has been the practice.

Mr. Arnott: What if the client didn’t understand that this was the case, or what if the caseworker misinformed the client, going back to 1983? Does that come into consideration in these kinds of situations?

The Chair: I can’t hear you, Mr. Arnott. If you’d speak more clearly into the microphone. I’m having trouble with the recording.

Mr. Arnott: You can’t hear me?

The Chair: I can hear you, but Hansard cannot, because it’s electronically recorded.

Mr. Arnott: Could you hear my question?

Mr. Costante: Do you want me to answer?

The Chair: Please.

Mr. Costante: OK. Sorry. I wasn’t sure whether you wanted Mr. Arnott to repeat the question.

The Chair: It’s your turn.

Mr. Costante: Sorry, now I forget the question. I’m going to get you to repeat it, if you don’t mind.

Mr. Arnott: I guess I’m exploring to what extent I can help my constituent. Really, that’s the bottom line. I’m wondering if you’ve ever heard of a situation where there was a \$75,000 overpayment that had been established. Is this normal? Is this routine?

Mr. Costante: I have heard of large overpayments. This is one of the larger ones I’ve ever heard of, correct. I think with any government program—income tax, social assistance—we try to provide as much information as possible, but there is a duty of the individual to follow the rules and avail themselves of the rules. Our workers try as much as possible to inform clients, and when we find out things, we usually inform them right away. I don’t think anyone likes to build up large overpayments like this, but there is a duty of the client to understand the program and to avail themselves of that information.

Mr. Arnott: Do you have any advice that I can pass along to this constituent, in terms of what more they can do?

Mr. Costante: I’m afraid I don’t know how to answer that one. If there are other extenuating circumstances, I guess they could work with the local office. I think our staff try to be as compassionate as possible.

Mr. Arnott: Well, apparently the staff do have the authority to reduce the overpayment recovery on the monthly cheque. Does the minister have the power to forgive these overpayments on a compassionate basis and, if so, has that ever been exercised in recent years?

Mr. Costante: Sorry, I may have to check. I believe that there is authority through order in council to do this but, again, I've been involved with the program since 1993—although I missed three and a half years—and I don't remember an order in council being passed in that time.

Mr. Arnott: I will give you the particulars of this situation, and if you could check it out for me and get back to me, I'd appreciate it very much. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Deputy, you will accept those as questions and do some follow-up with those, in particular—especially the one on the bad-debt writeoffs, which is the area I'd be exploring in terms of if there are ever any from your ministry. I know the Minister of Finance does once a year, and he writes them off for a whole series of ministries; he does it all at once. I think committee would be interested in knowing if there are any from your ministry and what they might be.

Mr. Martiniuk.

Mr. Gerry Martiniuk (Cambridge): Thank you, Chair. How much time do we have, give or take?

The Chair: You've got just under 20 minutes.

Mr. Martiniuk: We have 20 minutes. Okay.

Since we're both new, Madam Minister, perhaps we could explore the ODSP, which we've been dealing with, and in particular the amounts paid and the clawbacks that are taken. As I understand it, there has been no increase in ODSP since 1995, other than the two you mentioned in your preliminary statement, and those totalled 5%, if I'm not mistaken.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Yes, 3% in 2004 and 2% recently, so 5% together.

Mr. Martiniuk: So I think it's fair to say, if we take the rate of inflation even at 2% since 1995, that individuals on ODSP are probably worse off today than they were in 1995.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I believe they are better off because we gave two increases, 5% in total, in three years. They had not had an increase for many years before. So they are better off now.

Mr. Martiniuk: Okay. Are you saying they're better off at the present time from a financial standpoint than they were in 1995?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I'm saying that they have received two increases—a 5% increase—plus other benefits that some are receiving. So there has been an increase, and they are better off because they have received 5%. If the same trend had been in place before, they would be, again, better off.

Mr. Martiniuk: I see. My arithmetic might be a little different, because if we take a rate of inflation of 2% a year for 11 years, that adds up to about 22% and the 5% doesn't overcome that. I don't want to argue with you, but the question was very clear, and it was whether they are better off now or were better off in 1995. You seem to indicate that they are better off now.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Yes, they are better off now.

Mr. Martiniuk: Okay. Now let's start dealing with clawbacks. Could you tell me what clawbacks are

presently taken and whether they're new clawbacks or whether they've been in existence for a number of years?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Would you help me to understand what clawback you're talking about?

Mr. Martiniuk: I'm talking about set-offs against any monies they would be entitled to receive under ODSP. Mr. Arnott gave you an example of a possible set-off of monies received from workers' compensation.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I'm not aware of any clawback for a recipient of ODSP. Perhaps you have an example that you want to give me.

Mr. Martiniuk: Workers' comp.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Workers' compensation is not a clawback, because when they calculate ODSP or OW, welfare, they always take income into consideration. People have to declare their income, and the calculation of what they will be receiving always takes their income into consideration.

Mr. Martiniuk: Okay. So rather than using the word "clawback," we're talking about monies received.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: If there is an overpayment, the ministry will establish a repayment formula—

Mr. Martiniuk: No, I'm not talking about an overpayment. I'm just trying to determine what types of income are set off against their entitlement under ODSP. Workers' comp is one.

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Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Any other income they are receiving is taken into consideration in the calculation; for example, if they are working—because they could be on ODSP and working, so if they're receiving a salary. If they receive a pension, they have to declare it, or any gratuities, tips. Those are examples that I can give you.

Mr. Martiniuk: In particular, what incomes received from the federal government would be set off against their entitlement under ODSP?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: From the federal government? If they are receiving, I would think, unemployment benefits; if they are receiving a pension from the federal government, this will be taken into consideration; if they are receiving the national child care benefits. Those are what I can think of. Do you have another example?

Interjection.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I think those are the examples that I can give you.

Mr. Martiniuk: Can you give me the details on the national child care benefit?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Yes. When an individual is receiving the national child care benefit, this is taken into consideration as revenue. What we have done since we came into power is that the yearly increase in the national child care benefit has not been used to calculate the income of an individual. So that means that a person with, let's say, two children will receive \$600 more a year.

Ms. Lynn MacDonald: With the two rate increases that the minister referred to in 2005 and 2006, the 3% and 2% rate increases, and with the flow-through of the 2004-05, 2005-06 and 2006-07 permanently, I think the

calculation is that families would be better off to the tune of about 15.7%. I can get you the actual dollars for a sample family, if you wish.

Mr. Martiniuk: Good, because I'm really interested in the calculation. I guess they're going to receive other monies from the federal government. Is the avowed policy of this government that in the last federal budget, monies received—for instance, the child care allowance of \$100 a month for children under six, I believe—are not to be taken into account when determining ODSP? Is that correct?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: You see, we have not received any details on that; it's in the recent federal budget. We know that it has been announced, but we have not received any details, so we cannot answer that question.

I have to say to you that the clawback was initiated by your government when you were in power, because the government had a choice: As long as they were using it to deliver services for children, they were entitled, and correct me if I'm wrong. Your government chose to do it. So when we came into power, we decided that the yearly increase will go directly to the parents, without any clawback from the government.

Mr. Martiniuk: You still claw back the original amount, but the increase can flow through.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Exactly.

Ms. MacDonald: I do have the actual dollar numbers for the member, if you wish, sir.

Mr. Martiniuk: Yes. I'm sorry, are you saying that you cannot tell me at this time whether or not you are going to claw back the \$100-a-month allowance that is going to go families with children under the age of six?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I can answer that. We said no, that we will not. Okay?

Mr. Martiniuk: I thought that's what you said. I just wanted you to clarify your answer. That's fine.

If we may now deal with the regional centres, I understand there are three regional centres in Ontario that are closing. What are they? There's one in Ottawa, I believe.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: One in Smiths Falls.

Mr. Martiniuk: Smiths Falls?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Yes. Huronia in Orillia and Southwestern Regional.

Mr. Martiniuk: How many residents have been moved out of each of the three regional centres you've just named since Minister Papatello's announcement that they would be accelerating the closure in September 2004?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Altogether there are 6,000 residents who moved out, and recently there have been 113 residents who have been moved out. The process and the schedule to move the residents out was, I will use the term "slowed down," because there was a court case. So we did not proceed, or we de-accelerated the placement of the residents, during that time.

Mr. Martiniuk: I see. So the answer dealt with the date after September 2004. I understand you're answer-

ing that 6,113 residents have been moved out of the three regional centres since September 2004.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: No. Before the decision, it was 113. I said 6,000 altogether.

Mr. Martiniuk: Yes. So how many residents have moved out of each of the three regional centres since September 2004?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Since September 2004, I'll give you this information.

Mr. Martiniuk: Thank you.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Rideau Regional Centre, 21; Huronia, 48; and Southwestern, 44.

The Chair: Minister, it's sometimes helpful if you can furnish us with a copy of that page, because it probably tells you the base number of residents, how many have been moved to date and how many are projected to move. That would be very helpful to the committee.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Yes, I have the information. In Rideau Regional Centre, there are 396 residents; Huronia, 282; and Southwestern, 207.

Mr. Martiniuk: Perhaps you could provide the committee with that sheet.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Yes, we will.

Mr. Martiniuk: Thank you very much, Madam Minister.

My second question is, how much money has this ministry spent since September 2004 to create new community spaces specifically for the residents of these three regional centres?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: How much money? I don't have the information right now, but we can provide that to you.

Mr. Martiniuk: Can you provide it? Is a time limit usually set, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes. I suspect this ministry will be able to respond very quickly.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Yes.

The Chair: We have a process and this ministry has a very good reputation with the Chair.

Mr. Martiniuk: Thank you, Madam Minister.
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Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: It will be our pleasure to give you the information. It's just that I don't have that at the tip of my finger.

Mr. Martiniuk: Good. Most co-operative, thank you.

How much money has been specifically allocated in this year's budget to create new community spaces for the remaining residents of the three regional centres? I would assume that you might need some time to get that calculation done; is that correct?

Mr. Costante: Yes, it is. There will be both a capital and an operating cost, so we'll get you both.

The Chair: Deputy, you do have the page in the estimates for developmental services, is that not correct? Could you not direct us to that page and then advise the member of the dollars that are committed, and then out of that he's asking how much is committed to community placement.

Mr. Costante: Sorry, I misinterpreted the question, because I thought the member was talking about the amount for the people who were moving from the communities, and I don't have that breakout. I can give him the total amount.

Mr. Martiniuk: The question is very specific: How much was specifically allocated in this year's budget to create new community spaces for the remaining residents of the three regional centres? In other words, those who have not yet moved, I assume.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: We have a number: \$70 million from now to 2009.

The Chair: The question was "this year."

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: This year? OK.

The Chair: Again, I'll ask the deputy if he will direct us to the page in estimates, the page we will be asked to approve in less than six hours, the amount which is earmarked in this year, which is what the member asked.

Mr. Martiniuk: Thank you, Madam Minister. How much did the government spend to fight the court case against the families of residents of the three regional centres?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I will not be able to answer that question, because it's—

Ms. MacDonald: If I may, we haven't fully—

The Chair: Please introduce yourself and wait for the microphone to come on, and then everybody will be able to read this forever.

Ms. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr Chair. My name is Lynn MacDonald; I'm the assistant deputy minister for policy for the ministry. We would be happy to undertake to provide the answer, sir; however, we have not received the final bills from legal counsel. So what we could undertake to do is to provide you with the amount that we have paid to date and then we could update you later when we receive the final accounts.

Mr. Martiniuk: That would be most satisfactory.

Who recommends what facility residents of the three institutions should be moved to when they are transferred out of a regional centre? In other words, this deals with who does the recommendation as to where they go.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: We have a very good process that we have established. The family is consulted as to where they want this individual to move. There is a placement coordinator who works very closely with the family. Of course, it's always the best interest of the resident—like, we have seen sometimes where four residents had been living together in the same quarters for many years and they wanted to move out but together. They may have come from different areas—from northern Ontario or western Ontario—but they wanted to move together. So then the families will respect that. We have a very transparent, a very co-operative way to deal with it. Actually, I'm told that the judge in his decision and his comments was very complimentary to the staff on the way they were doing it. It's a team decision, but the family has to sign on to the process of where this individual will go.

Mr. Martiniuk: Does the placement coordinator have the right to recommend continued residence at the regional centre?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: The placement coordinators don't recommend. They will help the family to reach the decision of where this individual will go. Staying at the centre is not an option.

Mr. Martiniuk: Thank you.

The Chair: One more minute.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I will add that it was part of the decision of the judge that staying at the institution was not an option. So everybody will be placed, but the family has to be very much involved in where individuals will go.

Mr. Martiniuk: Was the process for involving the family and gaining their approval changed at all after the court case?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: The family was always involved, but I think it was confirmed that they need consent. So yes, they were involved, but now it's very specific. They are developing a consent form process.

Mr. Martiniuk: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martiniuk. Mr. Prue—

Mr. Costante: I could answer one of Mr. Martiniuk's questions.

The Chair: We'll do that at the end of the rotation. Part of the process is that you can stack some of the responses and assist the minister when Mr. Prue's 30 minutes are completed. Mr. Prue, we're in your hands.

Mr. Michael Prue (Beaches–East York): Thank you very much. Just before—I do understand this will go over a number of days. Can you tell me approximately how many minutes I would have in total, so that I know how—because this is a very large ministry.

The Chair: There will be four hours remaining, so you can take a third of the four hours left.

Mr. Prue: So at least another hour and 20 minutes.

The Chair: You'll have an hour and 20 minutes—

Mr. Prue: After today.

The Chair: —after today, yes. You'll end up with just shy of two hours, total.

Mr. Prue: Terrific. Then I'm going to start with the area of child poverty. Madam Minister, the other day in the House you said that one child in poverty was too much. That was a pretty good statement. How many children are living in poverty in Ontario?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I can tell you that there are about 200,000 children who are beneficiaries of a parent on welfare or ODSP.

Mr. Prue: A document entitled Putting Children First, from Campaign 2000, estimates there are 443,000 children. One out of every six children in Ontario lives below the poverty line. Would that be wrong?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I wouldn't be able to answer that question because we don't have this information.

Mr. Prue: You only have the information of the children who are on either ODSP or general welfare—200,000 of them.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Exactly.

Mr. Prue: Is that approximately the same number of children who existed in poverty when you came into government?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: When we came into government?

Mr. Prue: Yes, in 2004.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I believe it's less children, but I'll ask staff to verify that.

Mr. Prue: Perhaps if they could, you could tell me how many less, if any.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Yes.

Mr. Prue: My understanding is that the total poverty rate for children is stubborn at around 16%.

The Chair: Mr. Prue, we'll take that as a question. You're looking for statistical information, and if you'd just like to be more clear about the detail, that will go on the record and they will get that to you right away.

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Mr. Prue: If they only have one set of statistics—only those who are on general welfare or ODSP—I will take those. I would like to know the number. Today, it's 200,000. How much was it in 2004? If they have additional statistics on how many children of the working poor or those who are not on ODSP or general welfare—

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I can give you a percentage.

Mr. Prue: Okay.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: In 2003-04, it was 30% of children on both programs, but that doesn't give you the amount. It's just a percentage. So the fewer people on welfare—there may be fewer. In December 2005, it was 28%. So there was a reduction in percentage, but as for a number per se, we'll give you the information.

Mr. Prue: There were some questions you answered about the rate, and I don't think you actually understood Mr. Martiniuk's question, so I'll ask it again. I'm puzzled as to why he asked about 1995, the year that his government came into power, whether children were better off today than they were in 1995. I'd just like you to answer that again because I don't think you understood that. The welfare rate in 1995, before it was reduced by 30% or whatever it was—22%—you couldn't possibly have made that up. I don't mean make it up; I mean, made up the 22% with a 5% increase.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: No. I didn't make the connection of the reduction in 1995 because I didn't know exactly the year it was reduced, but I can tell you one thing: I was the chair of social services for the regional municipality of Ottawa-Carleton, so I know the impact that it had on the community. If the question is, prior to the reduction, I would say no, they were better off prior because there was a 22% reduction and now there is a 5% increase.

Mr. Prue: I just wanted to be clear, because the record definitely said something else. I'm trying to be fair here, too. That might be bizarre.

I'd like to get into that 5%. What has the inflation rate in Ontario been since 2004? There's been three years of inflation in Ontario. Has the three years in total been more than 5%?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: It was about 2% a year.

Mr. Prue: So that's 6%. My question then is, are the people actually worse off than when you took government? If inflation has been 6% and you've given them 5%, are they worse off?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: We gave them 5%, but then we stopped the clawback. That's in addition to the income, and also other benefits that the parents are entitled to. The 2% and 3% increases were not just on social assistance and ODSP but other benefits that they are receiving.

Mr. Prue: I'll get to that in a minute. But if you don't have any children and you are on either ODSP or general welfare, is it fair to say that you're worse off than when you took government?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: If we don't have any children?

Mr. Prue: If the people are on ODSP or general welfare and you've given them 5% and inflation is 6% and they have no children, are they worse off?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Yes, unless they work, but if they don't work, you're right, 1%. But we are trying to remove all the barriers so that they can move to employment without any penalties. If they work, they can keep 50% of their income, to a limit. So they are better off.

Mr. Prue: And what is that limit?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I'll ask the deputy to answer that question because it's to the point where they are off social assistance, so I don't know the limit exactly.

Mr. Costante: The limit will vary by case type. Our reduction is 50%. So somebody, if they were a single individual making \$536, if that was their benefit, would be generally off if they were making twice that amount. If they made a little bit less than that, they might get a tiny bit of welfare plus their single benefit.

Mr. Prue: So if they made \$536 from general welfare and \$200 in the month, you'd let them keep \$100 of it, so they'd go all the way up to \$636.

Mr. Costante: If they made \$200, they would get to keep their \$200, and we would make a \$100 reduction on their \$536. So they'd get \$436 from us and they'd get to keep \$200.

Mr. Prue: So in reality, they're \$100 ahead.

Mr. Costante: Right.

Mr. Prue: Minister, in the last election the Premier and many people, and the Liberal election platform, said that the clawback was "morally wrong"; I think those were the words. Do you still believe that it's morally wrong?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I believe that we need to address the clawback, and that we have started to address it. We wanted to make sure that we improve the situation of the children, so that's why we have stopped the clawback of the increase. I have asked the ministry and my parliamentary assistant to look into how we are going to proceed, what we're going to do for the children. There are different options that are before us. We also have to take into consideration part of the money from the child benefit that was invested for children in treatment centres and other children's services.

Mr. Prue: In the House, figures have been used that it is about \$220 million that the federal government gives for children that your government claws back from welfare and ODSP recipients. Is that a correct amount?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Yes, \$220 million is an amount—I'm going to check, but it sounds right.

Mr. Costante: I can clarify. The latest numbers we have are for 2004-05, and it was \$220 million. The provincial share was \$176 million and the municipal share was \$44 million.

Mr. Prue: Can you explain to me the municipal share?

Mr. Costante: Cost-sharing for both ODSP and the Ontario Works program is 80-20. So if the benefits are reduced, then both the municipal and the provincial treasuries have that advantage.

Mr. Prue: And you forward to the municipality, I guess, the \$44 million that's saved.

Mr. Costante: The municipalities pay welfare directly and we reimburse them, so they would, in effect, pay pass. Then we send them our 80%.

Mr. Prue: Okay, I understand the process.

Madam Minister, is there something you wanted to add?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: What I want to say with regard to the child benefit is that we also have to work with the municipalities, because the municipalities will not receive the amount. So in making our decision we have to work with municipalities, with AMO and AFMO.

Mr. Prue: A great many municipalities, including the bigger ones—Ottawa, Toronto—have passed resolutions asking that the government end the clawback. Is that your understanding?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I know that we received one from the city of Ottawa recently. Perhaps the assistant deputy can answer the rest, but since I've been the minister, I've seen one.

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Ms. MacDonald: We have received a number of municipal resolutions asking that the clawback on the NCB be eliminated. In addition, as one would expect, they ask that the savings that they currently receive continue to flow. They're asking that the clawback be ended and that they not lose the money that they currently receive as a result of the clawback. Because not only are the savings invested provincially through the Ontario child care supplement for working families, children's mental health and children's treatment centres, so too are municipalities reinvesting their savings locally—in different ways in each municipality but always on benefits for children.

Mr. Prue: Is the entire \$220 million that is clawed back spent on these programs?

Ms. MacDonald: Yes, that's my understanding, sir.

Mr. Prue: Can you tell me which programs and how much?

Ms. MacDonald: I've named the provincial programs and I can find out the exact dollars for each of those. Just to repeat the names, they were what's known as the OCCS, the Ontario child care supplement for working

families, and we'll get you the exact amount for that. Children's mental health programs—

The Chair: A little louder into the microphone, please.

Ms. MacDonald: Children's mental health programs is the second major category, and children's treatment centres. We'll get the exact amounts for you.

Mr. Prue: I just want to make sure that I've got this correct. I take you at your word that these are the—it means that the children of families on social assistance or ODSP subsidize or pay for the programs of other children—and maybe themselves too, but other children in those three areas. That's where a good deal of the money comes from.

Ms. MacDonald: Families on social assistance and some families on the Ontario child care supplement for working families, which is administered by the Ministry of Finance—families can benefit from both benefits, both the NCB and the OCCS, the supplement for working families. I couldn't tell you what proportion of families whose children are benefiting from children's treatment centres or children's mental health would also be on social assistance. We may be able to find that out for you.

Mr. Prue: But the poorest of the poor kids are subsidizing kids and the families of kids who may not be poor at all. Is that a pretty fair way of putting it? If you're a middle-class person and your child has some mental health issues, you're getting this service subsidized by the family of a poor child. That's the reality of this program.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I don't think we can talk about a subsidy, because we cannot divide it like this. When we have \$20 million going to children's mental health and \$22 million going to children's treatment centres, I don't think we can say poor children subsidize rich children. I see that \$134 million goes to the Ontario child care supplement for working families, so it's not rich families that use these services. I wouldn't characterize that as the poor subsidizing the rich.

Mr. Prue: Well, the poor subsidize everyone else, because they're the only ones paying it out of the clawback.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: It was an option that was offered by the federal government when they put forward this program. The government of the day decided that was the way they were going to proceed. As I said, we are looking at this issue very carefully. We have other partners with us and we hope that we will find a resolution sooner than later.

Mr. Prue: Is it your plan to eliminate this in next year's budget cycle?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I cannot answer that today.

Interjection.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Pardon? Give me a few months more—

Mr. Prue: I think there's a little bit of coaching from over there.

A few months? In a few months, in September, you'll be able to answer this question if I stand up one day in the House and ask you?

Mr. John Wilkinson (Perth–Middlesex): What estimates are we giving? This year's or—

The Chair: Mr. Wilkinson, please.

Mr. Prue: Is it a plan? Other provinces far poorer than us—New Brunswick and Manitoba—have been able to eliminate the clawback.

Mr. Wilkinson: With Ontario's money—

Mr. Prue: I don't think that Mr. Wilkinson should be answering the question, with the greatest of respect, or is that a heckle?

The Chair: I wouldn't take his comments seriously or otherwise. Please proceed.

Mr. Prue: Okay, I'll ignore them.

The Chair: If it persists, the Chair has options.

Mr. Prue: All right. Other provinces—Manitoba and New Brunswick—have been able to do that. Is it your wish that Ontario do that in the next budget cycle?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I cannot answer that question today.

Mr. Prue: Okay. How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have about six minutes.

Mr. Prue: Then I'd better stay on this one. I was going to go off, but with six minutes—

The Chair: No, it's about eight minutes, actually.

Mr. Prue: Then this will give me time. I'm going to follow the same general format of my colleagues from the Conservative Party. They asked welfare questions and then went into the whole question of the developmental services agencies.

Just a couple of questions to clarify what you had to say when you started that discussion: You made a statement that the policy has been in place since 1987, when the Peterson government announced a 25-year plan for full closure. If my mathematics is correct, that would take that to 2012. Can you tell me why this government has speeded up the process?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I'm not sure. I'm going to turn over to the deputy why we decided to speed up, because the process was well under way.

Mr. Costante: As I understand it, the policy direction back in 1987 was to close them within 25 years, not at exactly the 25-year point. The government made a policy decision to proceed. We wanted to proceed, making sure that we would do a good job in relocating residents. But we also knew that transition is a time of stress, so we wanted to do it trying to balance moving expeditiously with a proper plan that made sure we looked after our residents appropriately. It was decided, in the fall of 2004, that we would do this by March 31, 2009, which we think provided that right balance.

Mr. Prue: So was this a decision of the incoming government or a decision of the bureaucracy? The timing would suggest to me it was government.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: This was the decision of the government. I hope that I don't hear from you that it's not the right thing to do, because there have been many studies done over the years that we should close these institutions. These institutions were opened for a reason, many years ago, when we had orphanages and asylums.

It was the understanding of the time about the way to deal with people with developmental disabilities. Study after study has shown that's not the proper way to treat these people and they should go out—

The Chair: Minister, thank you. You've answered the question. You do have a time after this to respond more fulsomely.

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Mr. Prue: Don't ascribe motives to me. I'm just trying to make sure that if it's done, it's done properly— all parties have supported closing them, including ours— and that it's done in conjunction with what the families want, that they don't end up in court, that the staff is treated appropriately and fairly, and that the people are not subjected to any undue stress. If that's speeded up, I need to know why. It was a government decision and I accept that.

You talked about the new funding being permanent. It "brings the government's four-year funding increase for community-based developmental services to a record \$276 million," which doing simple mathematics is \$69 million a year; you said this year it's \$70 million, so that's about on point. Can you tell me how much of that is going for wages and how much is going for new facilities?

The Chair: Deputy, can you help?

Mr. Costante: Are you talking about wages in the community sector or wages—

Mr. Prue: In the community sector. That takes a great deal of money.

Mr. Costante: I don't think we can accurately answer that. We pay a certain amount to the agencies. They all bargain, themselves, individually. We do know from the annual budget reconciliation that most agencies would spend about 80% of what we give them on wages. I can give you the total amount we will give to community agencies, but the calculation of how much of that would go for wages is a little rough.

Mr. Prue: The reason I'm asking this is that the minister has said, and past ministers have said and past governments have said, that the people who work in the developmental sector do not earn great amounts of money. It is not a highly paid sector: \$12 or \$15 per hour is not unusual for people to earn in that sector. The minister made a statement today that wages are increasing. That's correct; I did hear what you said. I need to know, when the talk is here, how much is going into wages and how much is going into the building of new facilities that potentially will house the people who are leaving the institutions. That's what I'm trying to figure out, where that budget is.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I will say that the money is given to the institutions and they are the ones negotiating collective agreements with their employees. So there is a part that will go to salaries. To tell you exactly how much, I don't think we can answer that.

The Chair: Minister, I'm going to ask the deputy to bring to the attention of Mr. Prue the page in the estimates where your transfers to agencies are and to ask specifically if you have a dedicated envelope for bump

funding, as we refer to it around Queen's Park, dedicated dollars for staff salary enhancement. I guess you've answered that you haven't dedicated those dollars. So could we get a breakdown in the estimates, show us the page, the difference between capital and transfer to the agencies, please.

Mr. Costante: The page for operating for residential facilities in the community is on page 101 and it totals 716,905 in 2006-07. That would be for a combination of group homes and family situations. Some people live in supported independent living—

Mr. Prue: That's \$700,000 you said?

Mr. Costante: It's \$716 million.

Mr. Prue: Okay. I think you said thousands; \$716 million.

Mr. Costante: Almost \$717 million, and if you take my rough rule of thumb, because agencies decide how much goes into wages and how much goes into other costs, for 80% of that, we'd be talking somewhere over \$550 million that would go into wages.

I should mention that included in there this year is \$30 million for agencies; 2% or \$19 million of that is given to them as a lump sum and, again, they can use it for wages, which they primarily will, but they can also use it to offset their other operating costs like the cost of lights or to buy supplies or whatever. Then there is \$11 million in this year's budget that we will work with the agencies sector on to provide an increase to the lowest-paid individuals in the sector. You mentioned earlier there were some low-wage individuals.

Mr. Prue: Do I still have time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes, you do.

Mr. Prue: Madam Minister, you made the statement that you are creating nearly 2,180 new residential spaces, including 1,000 for residents leaving the province's institutions and another 1,180 for those who already live in the community. When are these spaces due to be completed?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: For the ones who are leaving the institutions, from now to 2009.

Mr. Prue: And the other 1,180?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: For the others, it's the same thing, within the next three years.

Mr. Prue: So the money that has been earmarked in this year's budget and potentially in future years' budgets—they are to be built by 2009. How many are under construction or occupied this year? Are there any?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: We don't have this information now, but we can get it.

Mr. Prue: How big is the waiting list? If I can remember the waiting list, 1,180 people would be a pretty small dent in the number of people who are looking for residential care in a group home or a facility. There's a seven-year wait in Ottawa, as I understand it.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: With regard to the waiting list, we have difficulty evaluating that because there are different points of entry. We want to streamline this. I'll say to you that sometimes a family will put their child on more than one waiting list or, because they know that they may have to wait a long time to have a place for

their child, they will put down their name perhaps three, four or five years before they really need it, because they want to make sure, especially those parents who are aging, that they will have a place for their children. So it's difficult to know exactly how many people are on the waiting list, but there is money in the budget this year to address this problem.

The Chair: Final question, Mr. Prue.

Mr. Prue: If it's the final question, then there's money this year to address the problem, that is, to find out how many people are really on the waiting list or to start building the housing? I'm not clear.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Both.

Mr. Prue: So you are going to be finding out and you would be able to tell us by this time next year, if you are called again, how many people are actually on the waiting list in Ontario?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I hope so.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Prue.

Minister, you have about 15 minutes to do any responses to questions or statements made by the official opposition and third party.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I just wanted to talk about what Monsieur Prue raised with regard to the closure of our institutions. We know that it has been difficult for some families, because they felt secure to have their children or their brother or sister in these institutions and they didn't need to worry if something happened to them. However, there have been many studies done over the years, and every study was unanimous in saying that this is not the way to continue to serve these people. That's why, in 1987, the decision was made and supported by every government.

I have to tell you that I met parents and staff in the Rideau Regional Centre last Friday, and I was reassured that the process that they are following is a very good process, that they have compassion. They work very closely with the families and they have the best interests of these residents at heart.

I wanted to assure every one of you that the process will continue, but it will be done in a very compassionate manner.

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Are there any other questions that I should address?

Interjection.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: You have comments? Okay.

Deputy, you have an answer for Mr. Prue's question.

Mr. Costante: Sorry, Minister, it's one on Mr. Martiniuk's questions. It was the total operating and capital that we have in this year's budget to assist people leaving facilities. You will find our total capital budget on page 117 of the estimates; \$24.7 million of that will be used as capital funding to build residence to assist people leaving the facilities.

On page 101 you will find our operating budget; \$12.8 million of that will be used for people leaving the facilities this year to operate residence that we will build.

Mr. Martiniuk: That was \$12.8 million?

Mr. Costante: Correct.

Ms. MacDonald: Also in response to Mr. Martiniuk's question about the absolute dollars for flow-through of the NCB, sir, I've given you the figure of 15.7%, which incorporated the two rate increases, the 2% and the 3%, and the three years' worth of permanent NCB flow-through for the increments. I'd said that amounted to 15.7%.

In absolute dollars, the example I have is that a sole-support parent with two children, on Ontario Works, who is in receipt of the national child benefit supplement, would be better off by \$1,620 compared to 2003-04. That breaks down into \$672 from the 2005 social assistance rate increase, together with the new rate increase that the minister has just announced, as well as \$948 from the government's decision to flow through the incremental federal dollars for 2004, 2005 and 2006. So that was a sole-support parent with two children.

The Chair: We have 10 minutes before our vote. Are there any other comments the minister wishes to make at this time?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: I don't have any comments.

The Chair: Mr. Wilkinson.

Mr. Wilkinson: Mr. Chair, with your indulgence, since we have five minutes, I know our colleague Mr. Parsons is here today. He has one brief question for the minister, as part of the government time.

The Chair: If the minister is willing; it's her time. If she'd like to use it that way, I'm comfortable.

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Yes.

The Chair: Mr. Parsons, if you'd like to ask a question.

Mr. Ernie Parsons (Prince Edward-Hastings): I'd like to ask a question about a part of your ministry that doesn't get as much media, perhaps, but does superb work.

I was about five years old, I think, the first time I saw my father beat up my mother—not the last time. You had a section in your opening statement referring to women's services that probably could be called "women's and

children's services." Back in 1950-51 there was no option available to women other than to stay at home and put up with it. There was nowhere else to go.

I've looked at the numbers that your ministry spends on women's shelters and second-stage housing. I'm just curious, because I think society needs to be aware of the magnitude and the seriousness of the issue: Do you have any sense, if we translate from dollars, how many women and children's lives were changed each year by these shelters and by the second-stage housing and the supports that are provided for families?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: How many children? It depends on what service. For counselling, for instance, we've served 60,000 women and 12,000 children; for transitional housing and housing support, 14,000 individuals; for early intervention, 3,000 women and 5,000 children annually. I can go on, but you're right: There is a lot of need out there, and we need to help these women move from the shelters so that the shelters can serve other women.

As you know, I've been very involved in that area in my own riding. It's always amazing: It could be someone very close to you who needs these services, and you probably don't know about it because it's a best-kept secret. That's why this government put forward more educational programs, and also more eyes on the street to be able to identify children or women in situations of violence. I'm going to talk about the program that we have initiated in schools to train the teacher, the receptionist, the secretary, the bus driver in how you can recognize that a child is in a situation of violence at home or is a witness to domestic violence. So there is a lot that is being done, but there is more to be done.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

This committee stands adjourned until Tuesday, May 16, when we will reconvene in this room to continue with the estimates of the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

The committee adjourned at 1758.

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