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Auditor General:

Ministry of Children, Community
and Social Services

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Wednesday 4 November 2020

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES COMPTES PUBLICS

Wednesday 4 November 2020

Mercredi 4 novembre 2020

The committee met at 1230 in room 151 and by video conference, following a closed session.

2019 ANNUAL REPORT, AUDITOR GENERAL

MINISTRY OF CHILDREN, COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Consideration of volume 1, section 3.09, Ontario Disability Support Program.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Good afternoon, everyone. I'd like to call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order. We are here to begin consideration of the Ontario Disability Support Program, section 3.09, 2019 Annual Report of the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario.

Joining us today are officials from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. You will have 20 minutes collectively for an opening presentation to the committee. We will then move into the question-and-answer portion of the meeting, where we will rotate back and forth between government and official opposition caucuses in 20-minute intervals, with some time for questioning from the independent member.

I would invite you each to introduce yourselves for Hansard before you begin speaking. I will also let you know that committee members have been advised to keep their questions very direct; I would ask that you be very direct with your answers as well, because we have very limited time to explore this chapter. Remember that our goal as a committee is to write a report that reflects the recommendations and what we learn today from you as ministry staff.

You may begin when you are ready. Who will begin? Please introduce yourself as well, before you start to speak. Please go ahead.

We are waiting for either Janet, Keith or Jeff to begin. Janet?

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you. Can you hear me?

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Yes, we can. Thank you very much. Please begin.

Ms. Janet Menard: Yes, thank you.

Good afternoon. I am Janet Menard, Deputy Minister of Children, Community and Social Services. Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to address the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Joining me today are Keith Palmer, assistant deputy minister of social assistance operations, and Jeff Bowen, director of the social assistance performance and accountability branch. They will assist me.

Our social assistance programs have always been critical in helping the province's most vulnerable people access supports, gain stability and move forward with their lives. As you well know, the global pandemic and its impact on Ontario and Ontarians have resulted in need that has never been greater. As many Ontarians find themselves facing the possibility of longer-term unemployment, the social assistance and employment programs must be able to respond to the personal and economic realities of our province.

In response, recently our minister announced plans for a more responsive, efficient and person-centred social assistance system that will both help people get back to work and advance the province's economic recovery. This is critical because there is a risk that those pushed from employment will be unable to make their way back. Our systems cannot allow persons to become marginalized and unnecessarily remain dependent on the social safety net—hence, the importance of our work and this plan. It builds on and accelerates the work our ministry has undertaken in collaboration with various partners over the past few years to modernize the social assistance system.

Before I speak about our work to respond to the Auditor General's value-for-money audit of the Ontario Disability Support Program, I would like to talk about the social assistance transformation in Ontario, because it does come together. This new plan will support Ontarians through the current crisis and help them back into the workforce, while at the same time building the foundation for the future.

We are fundamentally changing how we deliver service and paving the way to longer-term transformation by equipping staff to provide better, faster service to get clients the help they need when they need it; centralizing intake eligibility and key ODSP health benefits; replacing client responsibilities that focus their attention away from life stabilization and readiness for employment with automated and digital solutions; leveraging technology to make the system easier to navigate and government more accountable; enabling staff to specialize and develop expertise in new service areas; and, of course, improving our accountability framework.

Over the course of the ODSP audit, our team, including myself, had discussions with the Auditor General and her

team about how this work could contribute to our transformation plans. As we began our transformation journey, our interest and focus was forward-looking while addressing flaws and building on recommendations previously made regarding the social assistance program construct and service delivery mechanisms. The Auditor General assured us that the work of her team would help us, and indeed, that has been the case.

I am pleased to report that many of the observations and recommendations within the Auditor General's report have been incorporated into our transformation plans. For example, we are strengthening the oversight of our programs by modernizing and automating the tools and processes used to monitor program eligibility. We recently launched a prototype that automates third-party verifications at intake to ensure a consistent process and basis for decision-making. Plans also include the centralization of certain administrative functions that, along with greater automation, address concerns that the Auditor General raised regarding the volume of work on our front-line staff. These changes will allow our teams more time to work with their clients to listen, understand and address their needs.

Employment services transformation, led by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, establishes a new service delivery model that integrates ODSP, employment supports and all other government employment services into one system. Employment Ontario will integrate, stream and put increased focus on employer and job seeker needs and outcomes, a concern raised in the audit. The new model will be supported by a new tool to assess ODSP recipient needs and improved case management system functionality to support the monitoring of client progress. New system elements will allow front-line staff to focus on providing better and more relevant support, and helping people towards employment where possible, while also improving the integrity of our program. They will also include a number of tools necessary to address the Auditor General's recommendations for the Ontario Disability Support Program.

Let me move now to the audit recommendations. As deputy minister, it's my responsibility to ensure that our teams provide or oversee programs and services that are highly efficient and effective in delivering the best possible outcomes for the people they are intended to support. This, of course, is the purpose of the Auditor General's value-for-money audit observations and recommendations. We thank her and accept all of her recommendations. As mentioned, many have or are being incorporated into our transformational reform. Additionally, we are working on those that remain.

The auditor's findings and the recommendations to address them focused on the following things: accuracy vigilance in disability determination, adjudication and ongoing eligibility; ensuring recipients and non-disabled adults receive the employment supports that they need; and effective processes and systems that measure, evaluate and publicly report on ODSP effectiveness. Many of the issues identified in the audit have been a cause of concern

for some time and, quite honestly, the subject of previous audits. We understand that there are barriers to achieving good outcomes in ODSP resulting from administrative burden, issues with program oversight and program design. We recognize that the system needs to change, and we continue to make progress.

Committee members have been provided with copies of the work taken to date. I won't read the detailed list as I want to focus on several highlights of our ministry progress.

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First, we're making progress in improving oversight of the program by adopting smarter and risk-based approaches to determining and monitoring eligibility. The eligibility verification process—we call it EVP—is the ministry's key pace audit process to manage the risks inherent with ongoing eligibility. This process uses consumer credit information and tax data to identify high-risk cases for eligibility reviews. One per cent of ODSP caseload is identified every two months for review. We are continuously improving EVP and have recently refreshed its risk model to improve performance in identifying high-risk cases for review. Currently, approximately 60% of reviews result in a change in eligibility. We have launched an end-to-end lean review of the EVP process to identify opportunities to streamline and increase the number of review completions. I'm pleased to note that as of August, the ministry cleared the backlog of approximately 2,400 outstanding ODSP reviews.

Another important way in which the ministry oversees our programs relies on third-party information sharing. Through these partnerships, we're able to identify and prioritize high-risk cases for review, and respond sooner when changes in individual circumstances are detected. Third-party information sharing is critical to ensuring the integrity of our programs, and that is why we're working to improve our existing information sharing practices, as well as investing in new partnerships.

For example, we're working with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to develop an automated interface to provide the immigration status of a client and when that status changes in real time. We have collaborated with the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services to obtain monthly death registry information, and are working with them to automate the information sharing process moving forward. And we're working with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development to improve access to the OSAP data system.

Third-party data sources will also be leveraged as part of our recovery and renewal plan to implement an automated verification process to support the application process for social assistance programs. This process includes the use of proprietary data sources, such as electronic identity verification, as well as other government sources, such as the Canada Revenue Agency, to corroborate the information provided by an applicant against third-party data. The process will ensure third-party verifications are occurring on all applications, support consistent decision-making and ultimately free up caseworker time to support our clients.

The Auditor General's report highlights several concerns with respect to overpayments, and we agree that we must reduce overpayments to people on social assistance and, better yet, stop them from happening in the first place. There are many reasons for overpayments. As the auditor points out, most overpayments occur because recipients have not reported changes in their personal circumstances soon enough. For example, their living arrangements change, resulting in lower costs, or they start a job, resulting in increased income. By the time they report the change, they have been overpaid.

This is why the ministry is making it easier for clients to report their changes and for workers to quickly detect when changes occur. We have introduced a convenient online service channel, MyBenefits, for recipients to easily report their job earnings and changes in their circumstances. As of the end of October, there are 344,000 users of MyBenefits, and the number is growing daily.

Over the next few months, additional digital tools, such as an easy-to-use online application, which we're actually testing right now, and two-way messaging to support client-caseworker communications, will also be in place. These enhancements combined will make the creation of overpayments less likely.

It is important to note that very few overpayments are the result of fraud. However, fraud is a crime that we take seriously. As the Auditor General highlights, the need to do a better job at investigating allegations in a timely manner is necessary, and we have taken steps to improve our responsiveness. We have enhanced our investigation capacity by hiring more resources to focus on allegations, and we've centralized fraud investigations to improve expertise. We've also initiated an end-to-end lean review of the fraud allegation investigation process to identify efficiency opportunities.

The integrity of ODSP also requires an effective and efficient disability adjudication. As such, we've been strengthening the way adjudication for ODSP is performed. In consultation with medical and disability experts, we recently updated and consolidated the adjudication handbook and triage guidelines, which are vital to the adjudication process. It's intended for use across all adjudication stages and reflects advancements in treatment and science associated with medical conditions. They've also been updated to provide guidance on documenting the rationale behind adjudication decisions, which was also identified as an area of concern. Further, we've developed an adjudication quality assurance process and a process to monitor and investigate significant differences in outcome rates among adjudicators.

As mentioned, aligned with social assistance system renewal, the government is introducing a new integrated employment services system to support all job seekers, including people with disabilities. Effective January 2021, the new service delivery model for employment services will be implemented in three prototype catchment areas: Peel; Hamilton and Niagara, which includes Brantford and Norfolk; and Muskoka and Northumberland, which includes Peterborough and Kawartha Lakes, for a total of nine ODSP offices and municipalities.

Lessons learned from prototype communities will guide the gradual rollout of full implementation across the province. In January, a common assessment tool will also be introduced and used by the nine ODSP offices within the employment catchment areas. This will support referrals to Employment Ontario and determination of life stabilization needs for our clients.

I would like to acknowledge the tremendous work that our front-line ODSP caseworkers do every day in supporting our clients. Unfortunately, the current social assistance system relies heavily on massive amounts of paperwork and resource-intensive effort for both staff, applicants and recipients. There are over 240 income support rates and a web of over 800 rules, making system navigation both confusing and time-consuming.

Caseworkers manage very high caseloads, and we have an obligation and an opportunity to reduce this workload. We must replace paper-based and person-driven administration with better processes, advanced technology and digital solutions so that more time can be spent supporting people. Recently announced recovery and renewal plans will provide more digital, paperless options that will reduce paper and paperwork and replace manual administrations. These changes will make service access for people and supports to clients by staff easier, resulting in better outcomes.

We're also introducing risk-based approaches to caseworkers' responsibilities to improve greater independence and employment outcomes. These approaches—

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): You have two minutes left, Janet.

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you. Risk-based approaches, such as our recently-launched prototype to automate eligibility verification at intake, will use provincial, federal and third-party sources to make financial assistance processing faster, while strengthening program integrity.

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In closing, I would like to thank Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk and her staff for their hard work and observations. They are informing our transformation agenda.

And I would like to thank the members of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. We're excited about the transformational changes currently under way at our ministry and the opportunity to improve processes and the vital services that we provide to Ontarians.

So, thank you, and we welcome your questions.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Thank you very much, Ms. Menard. I was neglectful in not saying that we also have researcher Laura Anthony on the line, as well as, of course, the Auditor General, who is here. Her staff is also on the line. In the room, we have MPP Gretzky, MPP Gélinas, MPP Roberts and MPP Crawford.

This week, we will proceed in the following rotation: 20 minutes to the government side, 20 minutes to the official opposition, followed by three minutes to the independent member, who is also on the line.

Please proceed, government members. MPP Roberts? Please go ahead.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Good afternoon, Deputy Minister. It's good to see you. I wanted to dive in a little bit into caseworkers. We know that caseworkers are the backbone of our social assistance programs. The Auditor General raised some concerns that the wide-ranging responsibilities placed on caseworkers can sometimes affect their ability to deliver some of their client services, which of course are the most important pieces. This is not the first time we've heard this from the Auditor General. This was also raised back in a 2009 audit as well, which raises the question of why the previous government didn't prioritize changes to allow caseworkers to focus on the work that would allow them to connect their clients to the supports they need to build their independence.

I'm wondering, can you speak to the steps that the current government is taking to reduce the hours caseworkers have to spend on paperwork and data entry so that they can focus on that real priority of serving their clients?

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you very much to the member; I appreciate the question. Maybe to comment on your first question about the way we looked at the work of caseworkers in the past, I think our solution to addressing caseload for our caseworkers was really to add more staff to the equation. Of course, that is a costly, and not always the best, approach to dealing with workload issues.

What we have done of late, under this government's transformation agenda for social assistance, is look at how we can make the processes leaner and more efficient, how we can remove unnecessary administrative effort, and replace it with processes that can be automated. Our staff were doing many things that are now being done through automation, including taking applications for people—certainly in the Ontario Works system, where many of our ODSP clients are referred from.

But the whole process of interacting with our clients was very manually driven. That is changing. We are moving the intake process for social assistance to the front end, consolidating it, and making it an automated process. It will be risk-based, so cases that are complex will involve the personal interaction of caseworkers. There are some that are very low risk and, once checked with all of the verification process that will be automated, could flow through very quickly to a decision that will, over time, be checked against risk.

So, it's a combination of understanding what works and reallocating the efforts of our staff to value-added interactions with our clients that will help them identify what their problems are, what the barriers are to getting to employment, work with them to address them, and then, hopefully, move them to the Employment Ontario system, if they need that degree of support, so that they can move quickly to employment and be independent of the social assistance system.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: I appreciate that. Thank you.

I want to build on that last point a little bit. The Auditor General certainly outlined some concerns about the number of folks on ODSP who were getting employment readiness support. Of course, this is so critically important

as we start to reopen the economy, that we get people who are able to work in good-paying, sustainable jobs.

I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what steps the ministry has taken so far to enable and support those non-disabled adults on ODSP who might be able to benefit from some of the Ontario Works employment readiness programs as well. If you could expand on that.

Ms. Janet Menard: I'm certainly happy to. The work that the Ontario Works teams do is important in supporting our non-disabled clients as well. They know it's a high priority for us, but I think the answer to appropriate employment supports for our clients is through the new Employment Ontario system that is integrating all of the existing employment programs into one, which we're prototyping as of the beginning of this year.

Clients in Ontario Works had a different system from clients in ODSP, and those were different from the general public. There were different degrees of capacity and expertise within those systems. The amalgamation into one, more sophisticated system will definitely help our clients, and it will be a central part of the journey that our clients take with us—or that we take with them, is probably a better way of describing it.

They're trying different ways of managing those employment systems in the three catchment areas that I spoke about. We are working very closely with the Ministry of Labour to ensure that they meet the needs of our clients, and the program will incent our clients. The funding of that program will incent high priority to vulnerable clients, and those in particular in our systems.

So I take the point: We weren't getting the uptake that we needed to in the disability program related to employment, but helping families stabilize and addressing their needs will go a long way to starting them on that journey.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): MPP Crawford, would you like to comment?

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Thank you to the deputy minister for being here and for the work you do helping our communities that are in need.

I think we all know that people with disabilities have been particularly hard hit with job losses during the COVID outbreak. I know in the Auditor General's report, she recommended that the ministry explore options to increase the number of ODSP recipients referred to employment supports in order to increase the proportion of recipients who can become more economically independent. I'm wondering if you can speak to the actions you are taking to make this come to reality.

Ms. Janet Menard: We work very closely with our ministry colleagues as well who have responsibility for accessibility, because having access to workplaces is one of the barriers, often, for people with disabilities, among other things. In fact, for the people with disabilities who have been employed, actually, working remotely has really benefited them through the COVID pandemic.

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We've learned a lot about accessibility and access to employment and ways of removing barriers that we hadn't

considered in the past. In the past, we thought about making the employment site barrier-free. Now we're talking about ways of allowing them to work in circumstances where they're not faced by those barriers because they don't necessarily have to go to the physical workplace. So I would say that's one way.

But a lot of our emphasis, as we shift the responsibilities and move to more of a functional role, will be on the building up of the capacity of the Ontario Works system and focusing on life stabilization. There will be identifying of barriers for people with disabilities and also helping them address what those barriers are.

Disabilities take many forms. There are physical disabilities, but there are a lot of mental health and often related addiction issues. Addiction comes with mental health. People who are struggling emotionally and mentally self-medicate, so we often find them in concert. Having the supports that they need through mental health and addictions programs is also part of our approach to supporting people with disabilities, because they form a large component of ODSP.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Okay, thanks. Further with COVID, because that's—I'm just curious to get the impact on both your clients and the operations of your organization. It's had a significant impact on the operations of programs across government. Are there lessons learned about how the ministry can improve the delivery of this program? Can you speak to that as it pertains to the Auditor General's recommendations as well?

Ms. Janet Menard: Yes. Thank you for that question. We have learned a lot. In all of our programs, there are many, many lessons learned as it relates to the social assistance program. Certainly dealing with people electronically, virtually, having people use MyBenefits—the uptake of the MyBenefits program that I talked about, which is an application that lets clients go in and see the status of their social assistance. It allows them to make changes to their address, to their circumstances. Those are tools that were accelerated very quickly in COVID and have worked very well for us.

We also replaced the need for a “wet” signature, as we call it. Our process has always been to get your signature on all the documents that are required to complete an application. We actually changed that process to one of an attestation, which has been highly effective, and so effective in reducing our administrative costs that we have pushed a discussion that we were having with the federal government to allow us to go with a digital signature, a digital process. We have their agreement and are in the final stages of formalizing that agreement so that our clients won't have to come into an office to actually sign documents.

This was a huge lesson learned by the Ontario Works offices across Ontario and one of their high priorities coming out of our lessons learned. There will be many more, I have no doubt, but that certainly was one of them.

Some of our staff were able to work remotely and contact clients. In many of our systems, we've changed from just waiting for our clients to contact us to reaching

out to them, to see how they're doing, checking in with them. It allows our workers to be more aggressive in reaching out and making sure that things are fine, that they're doing well, especially those who are isolated and alone. Those are a couple of examples, but our ability to accelerate the digital process and application process has been eye-opening.

I'll just end my answer with an application that we put in place, a technology that we put in place to process applications for emergency benefits for people who would not necessarily be eligible for other programs during the pandemic. We were able to get that technology and program up and running in four weeks, and it's certainly something that we've built on in our new systems. Many of those people were able to get the federal benefits and withdrew their applications once they had submitted them to us, but the tool works and was processing applications in ways that were very efficient. Literally, the process was set up in the neighbourhood of one month.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Okay. Well, I'm certainly pleased to see the increasing use of technology. I'm happy to see that.

Just one more question related to COVID, and then one other question, and I think we'll probably be pretty much out of time at that point. How has the COVID pandemic affected the number of clients? Have you seen an increase, a decrease, a flat lining? How has COVID specifically, the last seven or eight months, affected the number of people using your services?

Ms. Janet Menard: We have actually seen the cases decline. They've gone down, not by huge amounts, but people who, under normal circumstances, potentially wouldn't have qualified for employment insurance were covered by the CERB, the federal COVID emergency response benefit. As I said, they may have started to come to us, but then they pivoted over to the federal program, which provided \$2,000 a month and has been extended a number of times, and the support—it's a different program, but that continues.

The federal government also expanded eligibility for employment insurance and did some rejigging of the eligibility period so people could apply. So we've actually had a buffer from some of the need that, under normal circumstances, would have come to us. We don't know how long that will last. It's been helpful, and it's allowed us some time to prepare for a surge that we expect will happen at some point in the future when things settle down and level out. We're not wasting any time or taking anything for granted. We're readying for the need as things might change at the federal level.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: So you're assuming then that once the federal government benefits programs run out that people will flock back to this.

Ms. Janet Menard: We are assuming a surge, yes, hence the approach that we're taking in reform, which is to immediately start dealing with people, stabilizing them, understanding what their needs are. To my point, we don't want people falling unnecessarily—

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Two minutes.

Ms. Janet Menard:—and being stuck in the social safety net. Our objective is, if people do come to us, we support them quickly, make the necessary links for them and work with them, whether it's pointing them to re-training or re-skilling or to support in finding employment as jobs return. Our goal is to do that very, very quickly, because we know the longer that you stay on social assistance, the more difficult it is to remove yourself from it.

1310

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Okay. And one final question in the last minute: There are about 2.5% of Ontarians on ODSP. That's higher than any other province. I just wanted to get some colour on why that, in fact, is the case. Do we have looser rules here? Do we have higher proportions of people with disabilities? Or is our program more generous? What are your thoughts on that?

Ms. Janet Menard: I could turn to my colleagues; I'm sure they're anxious to weigh in. Every province has a different system. Yes, the definition of "disability" comes into play, and the processes that we put in place also impact it.

I'm not sure if we have time for my colleagues to weigh in. Would that be Keith or Jeff? Can you speak to the jurisdictional differences?

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Actually, there are only 15 seconds left. So why don't we return to that section when the government comes back and we can answer that question.

Right now, we are going to move to the official opposition. I believe MPP Gretzky has questions for you.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: My first question was going to be that the report shows that almost 40% of ODSP recipients are receiving ODSP due to mental illness. Since this Conservative government cut mental health funding by \$330 million in Ontario, is this having an impact on recipients? Is it taking a toll on their health, making it harder to find work and extending the length of time that they stay on the program? But that question was already answered, thanks to the deputy minister, in comments that she made, where she said that mental health and addictions is a big contributing factor to the number of people and the length of time that they are on assistance.

So I am going to go to the next one, which is that the base rate for ODSP is \$1,169 per month. For most municipalities, especially the bigger urban centres, this is well below the poverty line. Does the ministry know how many ODSP recipients are living below the poverty line in their respective regions?

Ms. Janet Menard: I don't know that answer off the top of my head. I'm going to defer to my colleagues; we might be able to get it.

I can tell you that the numbers of cases on ODSP are in the neighbourhood of 380,000. With dependents, that brings it up to 523,000 individuals on the Ontario Disability Support Program.

It's a difficult question to answer because people on social assistance don't simply rely on ODSP to support them in their lives. You almost have to look at the

composition of family. For instance, an individual on ODSP would get what you quoted. A family would get more than that, and they would get more for their children. But they would also qualify for the Ontario Child Benefit and they would qualify for the federal benefit, the Canada Child Benefit. Both of those programs combined have made a significant difference for families on social assistance. So when you talk about people living relative to the poverty line, you would have to look at all of their sources of income to compare against that poverty level.

I'll be honest, those who are more heavily disadvantaged are single individuals because they don't have access to some of the child benefits. So the question is complicated because you can't just look at rates. You have to look at the other benefits that they're able to access, and that could include support to pay for child care if they're low income, and also support through rent geared to income or rental supplements. So there are other things and tax benefits that come into play when answering that question.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: It's also that those who don't get those supplemental benefits can't find rent-controlled units and such.

My next question would be that, throughout this report, there is a big theme around speculation about fraud. I noticed that the deputy minister had also said early on that there are very few cases, as a result, of fraud when we're talking about overpayments and such. Does the ministry have an answer as to why Ontarians would choose to fraudulently access ODSP when it is an onerous application process and would undoubtedly force them into poverty? What incentive is there for people to defraud the ODSP system?

Ms. Janet Menard: Well, I can only speculate. If someone was defrauding the system, it would be because they're not representing their circumstances accurately. I'm guessing that that supposition or the question is related to people—if they had no other source of income, then they would be eligible for our programs. It's only if they do have a source of income that it would call into question whether or not they're actually entitled to those dollars. We have asset restrictions as well, so if they had assets that were higher than are allowable, that would render them ineligible for assistance. But just applying for social assistance as a means to an end, I don't think we have seen that to be the case. People may think that staying on social assistance a few extra months when they have obtained employment will help them transition into a more stable environment.

By and large, we do get fraud allegations, but the majority of those are ruled out as being unsubstantiated. There are cases that require investigation, but, to the Auditor General's report, most are because information has not been forthcoming in a timely manner, which creates a situation where we're paying in the absence of current information.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Recognizing that my colleague has some questions too, we'll try and get these last two in quickly. There's currently a posting on the Ontario Public

Service careers website from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services social assistance operations division. The posting is for 17 program integrity analysts. Their job is to look for fraudsters, even though the deputy minister has said there are very few cases of fraud. These are 12-month positions for a max salary of \$1,635 a week. To put that in perspective, a single individual on ODSP can max out at \$1,169 in a month. These positions are for \$1,635 per week. These are fraud investigators.

My question is, if there are very few cases that are a result of fraud, why is this ministry spending almost \$1.5 million on fraud investigators when that money could be used to improve people's quality of life during the pandemic? That could be towards recipients, but it could also go to hiring more caseworkers to be able to do the investigative work and the follow-up work that they need to do. Why would the ministry spend that money on fraud investigators?

Ms. Janet Menard: I'm going to pass it over to my colleague Jeff Bowen. To be clear, the investigation is around the allegation. It's incumbent on us to follow up on referrals for suspected fraud. But I'm going to turn it over to Jeff, who's our director of accountability. Jeff?

Mr. Jeff Bowen: Hi. Jeff Bowen, director of the social assistance performance and accountability branch. Thank you for the question.

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The posting and recruitment that we are doing is for, as you mentioned, program integrity analyst. Their job function is more than just investigating fraud allegations. Their job function also includes our monthly eligibility verification reviews. Their responsibility is to undertake those ongoing eligibility reviews, as well as doing that initial triaging and investigating of allegations.

To the auditor's point, we have to do a better job in improving on the number of eligibility reviews that we are doing, and we have to do a better job and take more timely action on fraud allegations. One of the ways we're addressing that is centralizing the eligibility review function and the fraud allegation review investigation function, and increasing our capacity to be able to address the auditor's concerns around the timeliness of investigations, as well as being able to undertake the required number of eligibility reviews. By centralizing this function, one of our goals is actually to remove that administrative work away from the front-line staff and allow them to spend more time working with clients to address their needs and, ultimately, support their outcomes.

As the deputy mentioned, 1% of the caseload is identified every two months for an eligibility review. We need capacity to do that. In addition, in 2019-20, we had over 40,000 fraud allegations that needed to be investigated or triaged. We need capacity to do that, and so we're taking that function, we're taking that work away from the front-line staff and centralizing it and building our capacity to be able to address the auditor's recommendations around timeliness of those investigations, as well as completing the necessary required number of eligibility reviews.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Thank you. One last question before I give it to my colleague; this one should be a pretty fast one to be able to answer. Is the ministry aware of any other efforts in any other ministries to crack down on fraud as a way to reduce expenditures? Is the Ministry of Finance planning to go after tax evaders? Surely, that would result in much more revenue for the government than cracking down on people living in poverty. Basically, my question is: Are you aware of any other ministry where this government has hired somebody or has put a focus on cracking down on fraudsters?

Ms. Janet Menard: Hi. I'll take a stab at that question because, no, I'm not. I have no awareness of anything like that.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Thank you. I'll cede the floor to my colleague from Nickel Belt.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Thank you. MPP Gélinas?

M^{me} France Gélinas: My questions are in a different direction, but I was interested when you said that you had to investigate 40,000 fraud allegations. Where do those allegations come from?

Mr. Jeff Bowen: Thank you for the question. As I said, last year, there were just over 47,000 allegations. They come in through multiple sources. We have a welfare fraud hotline, which is a public line that anyone in Ontario—the public can call in with an allegation. And it's just not a phone line; it could be email or fax as well. We have various information-sharing agreements with other third parties—for example, other provinces—where allegations can be identified through those information-sharing agreements. Lastly, they also can come in locally. So whether it be a local ODSP office or a local Ontario Works office in a municipality, a member of the public or a case-worker can identify a potential misuse or fraud allegation through that mechanism too.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Would you know what percentage of the fraud allegations came from the welfare fraud hotline? You said that 47,000 are—

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): I believe Mr. Palmer may want to—because he's raised his hand a couple of times. Mr. Palmer, we'll turn your microphone on. Perhaps you can answer MPP Gélinas's question.

Mr. Keith Palmer: Thank you. Keith Palmer, ADM for the social assistance operations division. As our director, Jeff Bowen, had alluded to, the three omnichannel approaches that are currently in place specific to fraud allegations—we have somewhere around 6,250 phone calls that come in on our hotline specific to complaints on fraud and/or overpayments. Just to be clear, the folks who are dialling in and providing that information to our office are not completely aware of the full policy and regulations and sometimes believe there is a situation of fraudulent activity when in fact it really isn't. Again, by way of Mr. Bowen explaining the process that we must review somewhere over 42,000 allegations a year, very few times in comparison to that large number do they actually turn into a fraudulent situation. We have somewhere around 20,000 that are coming in through our information-sharing

relationships that we have with third parties, and then we have just under 20,000 contacts that are coming into perhaps local offices where folks are walking into the office and sharing information about possibilities of fraud actions taking place.

M^{me} France Gélinas: And you have a duty to investigate all 47,000 allegations?

Mr. Keith Palmer: I will continue. Our responsibility, absolutely, is to look at those allegations, prioritize those allegations and use a triage process to try to identify the ones that are more serious than the ones that are, really, complaints more so than anything else as a result of folks not quite understanding the legislation specific to our social assistance programs.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Do you keep stats as to how many of those fraud allegations lead to actual findings of fraud by those three great categories that you're giving us: phone call, local office and info sharing?

Mr. Keith Palmer: Yes, I could share that last year, for 2019-20, we terminated or reduced assistance for about 22,000 cases in regard to those allegations, and again, not necessarily as a result of fraud, but perhaps just an issue of an overpayment. We also saw that there were no eligibility changes for about 38,000 cases, and again, this is over the span of a year where some cases might have been a backlog. We referred just under 50 cases to the police to which they were able to apply about 26 convictions over the last fiscal period, and of course, there are about 135 cases that are currently under investigation with our police forces.

M^{me} France Gélinas: All right, thank you. I was just curious once you opened that door.

My question has to do with the process that you use to determine if a review needs to be done in two years, in five years or a condition that is not likely to improve. Could you just clarify for us what adjudicators take into account to make those decisions?

Mr. Keith Palmer: I could take this question as well. Great question, thank you very much. I think what you're referring to is our medical review process that has a two- and a five-year review process that's available that we can utilize. Our adjudicators are, of course, strengthening the way we are adjudicating right now, and what we are using is what we now have, or what we're calling an enhanced handbook for our adjudicators to support them in making the determinations.

What we've also done in the past eight months is create a digital version of our disability adjudication package that our adjudicators will be able to use when they're making those decisions, deciding on if a person is to receive a two-year or a five-year medical review. The approach that our adjudicators are taking is that for clients who are applying for social assistance, specifically for ODSP, we focus on what are the significant conditions that the individual will have specific to their conditions and impairments that could potentially keep them on ODSP for a longer period of time or if they require a two-year or a five-year review. So we look at what's happening in some of the current medical standards, what's happening specific to some of the enhancements in medication, in some of the processes

that are in place to move a person from ailment to betterment, I would say. There are a number of conditions and situations—

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Two minutes.

Mr. Keith Palmer: —including some of our social concerns that are taken into consideration before a medical review is appointed to a particular case.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Do you feel that the standard that you use and the way that the adjudicator uses those standards work?

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Mr. Keith Palmer: Yes, we feel fairly comfortable that the process that's in place—and again, it is a process that we continue to enhance over time. We are on our third edition of our handbook for adjudicators. They have a wealth of experience. They are health care professionals that we do bring on to the team to adjudicate files. There's no question; we can always do better, just like most services specific to this particular sector. But at this point, we feel fairly comfortable, and as we continue to enhance our services and use approaches like digital documentation and tracking some information that is more “trendful” in regard to the decisions that are being made, using some of our quality assurance standards that are currently in place that we've now recently put in place and prioritized—and also looking at the way we triage our cases and pre-triage our cases in a way that we are reducing the amount of numbers folks are seeing in regard to applications up front, reducing that number to a more measurable number. But as we use tools like electronic document management, we are able to actually adjudicate and pre-triage and triage some of those cases in a timely fashion, in a way that does incorporate the enhancements that we've seen in our medical community.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Okay. Thank you very much. That concludes that section of questions.

We'll now move to the independent member, MPP Blais, for three minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Thank you for being here this afternoon. In a similar vein to, I think, the last questions: How often are those medical standards and guidelines reviewed and updated? Is that process rigid, or is there a cost to monitoring of advancements in science and in treatment?

Mr. Keith Palmer: We've been reviewing the handbook annually. What we recognize is that each time things change in the medical sector specific to some of the disabilities our clients have, we have to take that information, package it up and look at the tools that we currently have in place and look at how we can actually enhance or advance some of the tools that our adjudicators are using.

Through the Auditor General's review, we recognize that we should be doing this much more frequently, and as such, this is now part and parcel of our operations moving forward. We have convened a number of adjudication teams that span across our division that includes our policy people, our medical advisory people and, of course, our adjudicators, to make sure that as we continue to adjudicate our files that we are applying integrity, looking at rigour and providing a sense of adjudication that makes

sense to both the clients who are applying for social assistance and of course our adjudicators, who are doing the best that they can.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Sure. If they're reviewed annually, though, how could something like HIV go 15 years without having been updated? There have been significant advancements in HIV treatment over that period of time and we were told that it hasn't been updated in over 15 years. So how does that—

Mr. Keith Palmer: Yes. In fact, our HIV process right now has been reviewed. We're in the process right now of enhancing the adjudication model and adjudication framework for some of our HIV cases. As we review the overall handbook annually, and again, looking at competing priorities, we do have to prioritize some of the cases that we're seeing. We are seeing a huge increase in folks with mental health challenges. We're seeing a lot more cases with schizophrenia and dementia. As we try to prioritize the types of cases that we're getting, which sit somewhere around 40,000 cases a year, we have to really try to balance some of those priority components.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): There are 30 seconds left. I think the deputy minister wanted to weigh in on this. Can you do so quickly, please?

Ms. Janet Menard: Yes, certainly. Thank you. I just wanted to emphasize that through the adjudication process, we're not looking at a diagnosis. We don't approve or disapprove based on the affliction. We pay attention to the impact that that affliction or condition has on various aspects of their lives. HIV is a great example. Many people can live very well with HIV. But if there are barriers, then that becomes the—

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Thank you very much. We'll get back to that topic, I'm sure.

We're now moving to the government side. MPP Crawford, you'll begin 20 minutes.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: I just wanted to carry on, before I pass it on to MPP Kramp: We didn't really get to an answer—we didn't have time—on the jurisdictional differences in different provinces because Ontario, in my understanding, has the highest rate of people on ODSF relative to other provinces. Perhaps you could explain that. I'm not sure who was going to touch on that, but I'll pass it to the witnesses.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Do we know who's going to answer that? Is that the deputy minister?

Ms. Janet Menard: Yes, I did weigh in. My response was related to various program constructs, the differences in program constructs across the jurisdictions in other provinces and territories. Rate structures have something to do with it as well. The higher the rate, the more likely you are to qualify if you're earning income. How we treat income is another factor in whether or not someone qualifies for assistance. If you're allowed to earn money, and deductions in one province that are 100% deducted in another, it would impact the numbers of people who qualify for assistance. So everything from the definition of disability—and in some cases, it's you are or you aren't. In Ontario, we do look at a temporary period of disability

as being a legitimate cause for approval in our systems. I don't know that that's the case, that in other provinces they look at temporary periods of disability, but that could be another contributing factor.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Okay. Is it fair to say that Ontario has the most generous program in Canada?

Ms. Janet Menard: Sorry, I cannot speak to that. I don't know that to be the case.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Auditor, could you please—

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: In our report in appendix 6, we do a comparison of the income support programs across the Canadian provinces. In terms of caseload, which was the number that was talked about, that was the caseload as a percentage of the total population. But when you look at the back of that schedule, we have income support expenditures as a percentage of total provincial expenditures, and Ontario is about 5.3%. There was only one province in Canada at the time we did this that was higher, and that was Nova Scotia at 5.8%. The rest of the provinces are all lower than Ontario.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Thank you.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Okay. MPP Kramp, I think.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Yes. MPP Kramp, can you please unmute yourself? Please go ahead.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Thank you very much. Certainly, every member of this committee and Parliament in general, I would believe, would want to fund and deliver support and services for those who need it, and undeniably, departmental officials want to do the same thing.

I have some questions, but I would like to make a brief comment, though, regarding some of our past progress in relation to the realities of today. Going back to the audits from 2004, 2009, 2018, here we are, déjà vu again. The department has substantially been either unable or unwilling to improve the identified weaknesses. That's really, really challenging because we just cannot allow an ongoing, never-ending saga when the identified weaknesses aren't, I suppose, being acted upon.

I know the Auditor General made 19 recommendations in this one here. What was really disturbing, though, were some of the comments. As an example, there was either (a) little to no progress or (b) it was unclear. So my question to the deputy: Could you provide a written plan? Do we actually have a plan as to where we need to go with this, as to when and how each of these recommendations of the Auditor General will be addressed?

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you. Yes, we do track every recommendation. There are categories, and recommendations have sub-recommendations. We absolutely categorize all of them. We identify the strategies to advance our response to them and our progress against them. We have governance structures; we put in place tables to advise on the best way to accomplish our commitments, but some of them involve other governments and some of them involve other ministries and reliance on technology and collaboration with our partners.

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Mr. Daryl Kramp: Thank you very much. I'm pleased that you do. Just to solidify that statement, can you give us

a written plan so that we can stay abreast of this and, should you or other members before this committee be before this committee down the road—days, weeks, months, years—we can do some assessment of that? I'm wondering, should this committee even consider quarterly reports as to the corrective actions that your department has been able to take? Would that be an onerous burden on you? I ask that to the department officials.

Ms. Janet Menard: Well, we do regular reporting. I think we do quarterly reporting. Perhaps what we provide to the Auditor General would suffice. I'm not sure if she would like to comment on that.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Auditor?

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: In terms of the follow-up process, once the report is written, we do a follow-up in two years. So on this particular report, which was tabled in December 2019, we'll table a report on this in December 2021, where we'll have done a two-year follow-up. Then we follow up on the recommendations every year thereafter for about another five years. If the Standing Committee on Public Accounts makes a report as a result of this hearing and puts out recommendations, we will follow up on those recommendations on an annual basis, and that follow-up of those recommendations will be contained in our annual report as well. That is the work that we do in terms of public information, public presentation.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Fine. Thanks. So then, should this committee decide to take serious consideration on that, we can discuss that internally.

The next question, if I may, then—

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): I'm sorry, MPP Kramp. We did have two, the other staffers—Mr. Palmer wanted to say something to that and Mr. Bowen. Are you amenable to hearing from them?

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Okay, just quickly please, though; I have other questions.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Very fast.

Mr. Jeff Bowen: Just quickly, sir, we do report on a quarterly basis to the government's audit committee. On our action plans: As the deputy said, we do have an action plan, we do report on our progress on a quarterly basis up to the government's audit committee.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Thank you for that, sir. Mr. Palmer?

Mr. Keith Palmer: Actually, Mr. Bowen was reiterating back the point I was going to make.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Okay. Thank you very kindly, then, gentlemen.

The next question, then: Can you assure this committee that you're prioritizing the review of the eligibility verification process to ensure two things: (1) that, obviously, the funds are delivered to the people that need them and want them; and (2) that the controls are in place, because obviously we've had some problems with timing for both?

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Please go ahead.

Mr. Jeff Bowen: I'm happy to address that. Thank you for the question. It is absolutely a priority. I think we've spoken to it a little bit already. The Auditor General is absolutely right: We recognize the fact that we can do a

much better job at completing the required number of eligibility reviews. To that end, we're doing a few things. I mentioned that back in 2019, we centralized this process and this function. We took it away from the front-line local offices and we centralized the function. We are in the process of enhancing our capacity. There was a question earlier that alluded to the current job recruitment that we're going on right now. We're increasing our capacity so that we can do more of these eligibility reviews and meet our expectations.

The deputy, in her opening address, mentioned that we have recently completed a complete end-to-end Lean Six Sigma process review of our EVP process to help streamline the process and identify—

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Thank you, Mr. Bowen. I just have one more quick question, if I may, to the deputy. Over the last 15 years, the number of people on social assistance across this country has increased, obviously, but we've increased by 55%, which is dramatically out of the norm with the other provinces. Why are we so out of step with the other provinces?

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you for the question. The answer is complex. It depends on a number of factors. The situation in each province is different. We're hugely impacted by the employment rate—or the unemployment rate impacts us within Ontario, and that impacts our Ontario Works program, which is a feeder to ODSP. But to be honest, the greatest growth in our caseload on ODSP has been in the disability program. That is where we've seen the growth. Again, that is a combination of factors that I characterized in a previous question as having everything to do from program construct—how we treat income, how we define disability, a number of factors. But that is where we have seen the growth—

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Right. The biggest concern I had is, why the difference from the other provinces? Are they doing something totally different or are we doing something totally different? What are the variances there? But perhaps we can deal with that at a subsequent time, because I'll turn the questioning over to my colleague now. Thank you very much for your attendance today.

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): MPP McKenna, you have eight minutes left. Go ahead.

Ms. Jane McKenna: One of the opposition committee members asked a question earlier regarding current employment listings with the ministry that, once filled, would enable the ministry to increase the numbers of eligibility reviews in order to meet the expectations set by the Auditor General that are currently not being met.

This committee heard that over a one-year period, nearly 22,000 cases had benefits terminated as a result of reviews. We also heard that these terminations were not the result of fraud. Based on these numbers, it seems obvious that the ministry is filling these positions primarily to conduct eligibility reviews. Can the ministry complete these case reviews without hiring people for these review positions and without placing more administrative burden on the case workers, whose first priority

should be helping those who need support under these programs?

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you for your question. Just to be clear, when we talk about review, there are two categories of review. There are those calls or complaints that we get through a number of sources that my colleagues have identified that people provide to us based on their assumption that fraud is happening or something is going amiss. That's a process that we have to go through that is separate and apart from the review that we do as part of managing risk within the system.

All the people who get on the system—every two months, we identify 1% of the caseload that is highest risk. It's based on an algorithm that we update on a regular basis—a combination of an algorithm of risk factors, conditions within a case, that signal the potential change that could impact eligibility—but also the information sharing that we do with other third-party sources. There may be something in the agreement we have with Equifax that highlights something that is inconsistent with our information around the case.

As well, we may find out through a data match around OSAP that money is being received that people shouldn't be getting if they're in receipt of government funding from another source. It's the same with deaths. We are sharing data on people who may have passed away so that we're not in a situation where the family continues to get that benefit.

So we go through a process of identifying high risk. It comes from multiple sources, and then that ends up going to someone who has to follow up. That's the work that my colleagues are talking about: following up on those to potentially identify that yes, the risk assessment that we do—the algorithm and model—is effective, and we then make a determination around eligibility. To my comments, it has proved highly effective. In those that have been reviewed, there's a percentage of 60% that result in a change. It actually could be that we're underpaying them. It could, in rare cases, identify that they should actually be getting more from us. But generally, it identifies if there is an overpayment or absolute ineligibility.

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We call it an investigation, but it's part of our ongoing risk management so that caseworkers aren't following up one-on-one. We're actually using artificial intelligence and information through third parties to assess risk and then follow up.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Okay. I just want to say that the Auditor General would like to respond as well, MPP McKenna.

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: I'll just comment. I understand exactly what the deputy said and I concur. The thing that ties both the fraud and ineligibility together and required more attention was the fact that the program, over the last 10 years, had identified about \$1 billion in overpayments to people who were recipients of ODSP. As a result of identifying that and trying to recollect, they still had to write off \$400 million over the last 10 years. So the attention that I'm hearing the ministry is now paying to looking

at eligibility and looking at complaints and all that is probably focused in a way that will allow for either the overpayments not to occur or, if they recur, to have timely collection. That's the way that that aligns with our report.

It's not specifically just fraud; it's finding out about problems during the beginning, before people get their benefits, looking at them while they're getting their benefits and then responding to complaints that are received so that at the end of the day, there's more money for taxpayers either for this program or other programs. That was our objective when we made our recommendation, which the ministry obviously seems to have taken action with.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Okay. There are two minutes left in this question. MPP McKenna, please go ahead.

Ms. Jane McKenna: So just to be clear, the ministry cannot conduct the reviews of these 1% of cases without hiring people for these positions, recognizing that the last thing we want to do is to place more administrative burden on the caseworkers, whose first priority is and should continue to be helping those who need support under these programs.

Ms. Janet Menard: We need someone to follow up on the cases that have been identified as high risk, so we're centralizing that in a team and removing it from the caseworkers who had responsibility for those cases so they can focus on value-added work with their clients.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Mr. Bowen, did you also want to respond to that?

Mr. Jeff Bowen: I was just going to say that based on our assessment, yes, we need to increase our capacity in order to meet that 1% target as well as to stay on top of the expectations around the timely review for that initial assessment of any sort of fraud allegations that are coming into the hotline—

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Thank you. Mr. Palmer, did you also—does that suffice?

Mr. Keith Palmer: I was also going to add that as we continue to plan the future state of social assistance, we recognize that there is a broad focus on administration currently. Efforts for us to move the administrative type work, which is exactly what some of these—we'll use the term “reviews and investigations”—call for, require us to bring on, number one, a different skill set and of course a different capacity in this space, where we can leave the caseworkers to really function on some meaningful work that is specific to getting folks reattached to the labour market, where that's possible, or to be stabilized when they're having issues around life stabilization. That's one of the reasons why we had to bring on additional capacity.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Thank you very much. That concludes the government side of questioning.

We move to the official opposition now, moving to MPP Gretzky.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Thank you. The former Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, Lisa MacLeod, had announced that the government was going to change the definition of “disability” used for ODSP eligibility to bring it in line with the federal definition. Of

course, we all heard that this would cause a lot of harm among recipients because it was clear that the goal was to narrow the scope of eligibility criteria. It would exclude a lot of people with disabilities from being able to participate in the ODSP program. So, I'm interested to know, is the change in definition still happening? And if so, or if not, why or why not?

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you for the question. No, the change is not planned. We heard the message; we heard the concerns. At this point in time, there is no plan to change the definition of "disability." Our focus, however, is on improving the adjudication process associated with determining eligibility related to the definition of disability, and we've given many examples of how we're doing that. But there is no decision or plan to change the definition.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Okay. Earlier this year, the government announced changes to the Employment Ontario and Ontario Works employment services. One of the corporations selected to manage these pilots, WCG, was actually selected to run a very similar pilot under the McGuinty Liberals called JobsNow. The program was a complete failure, kicking people off ODSP while pushing them into jobs that were not at all appropriate for them.

Have any of the three pilots announced earlier this year produced meaningful results, and when will those results be made public?

Ms. Janet Menard: The point we're at right now—and this is the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development who is the lead on this—is we have gone through a process of inviting interest in participation in the prototype work that is happening in the three jurisdictions that I mentioned. There was a whole competitive process, and the ministry landed on three organizations to prototype the work, one of which, I'm assuming, is the organization that you mentioned. I don't have familiarity with them.

These organizations will be service managers, so they won't necessarily be the deliverer of services. It is their responsibility to look at the local circumstances, the labour market trends, job opportunities and employment rates in those areas, and then put in place a plan that will suitably address local conditions and the needs of people and employers in those jurisdictions. They're in the process—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I'm sorry to interrupt. I'm aware of what their goal is supposed to be. I just want to clarify that you, as the deputy minister, are not familiar with at least one of the companies that the government has given a contract to to be a service manager.

Ms. Janet Menard: No.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: You're not familiar with WCG.

Ms. Janet Menard: No, and what I wanted to say is that we're in the early stages of setting up that system process, that system in the three jurisdictions.

So to get to your question in a long way, we don't have results as yet because the systems are still being developed and established, and are slightly behind schedule as a result of the pandemic.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: So there is no information coming from the three pilots that were put in place.

My next question is going to be around the Social Benefits Tribunal and how people are chosen or appointed to the tribunal. I have my own question but I also have my colleague Jill Andrew's, who is the MPP for Toronto—St. Paul's, who had a similar question. I'm going to read hers because she wasn't able to be here. She would like more information on the criteria for sitting on the tribunal and also for adjudicators. Do these positions include disability advocates, disabled persons or is it just medical, legal and otherwise publicly appointed folks? MPP Andrew, along with our entire caucus, frankly, believes representation from the disabled community is key at all levels of the decision-making process.

So can you tell me if they do, indeed, have people living with disabilities, or disability advocates, appointed to the Social Benefits Tribunal, and what is the process for choosing someone to sit on the tribunal?

1400

Ms. Janet Menard: Well, the process for tribunals, the oversight of tribunals is through the Ministry of the Attorney General. We're not directly involved in that process. Maybe my colleagues who work more closely around adjudication and appeals can weigh in on this, but I will tell you that it is comprised of lay individuals. It is not a medical panel. It is lay individuals that may well have people with lived experience on it. They're certainly not excluded, but the process is managed through I think it's Tribunals Ontario.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Mr. Palmer, you raised your hand. If you can please answer this question.

Mr. Keith Palmer: Sorry, it wasn't allowing me to unmute. The deputy did, at the tail end of her response, actually cover the information that I was going to share, which is exactly that they are lay individuals that participate on that tribunal.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: My next question is again about the tribunal. MPP Andrew shared this question with me. The ministry stated that the Social Benefits Tribunal often overturns the decisions of the ministry; however, what can be said about the nine to 16 months that some Ontarians already living well below the poverty line have to wait to even get a hearing with the tribunal? What are these Ontarians living off of while they wait, in some cases, beyond a year for their hearing? I will build onto that, because I know my colleague from Nickel Belt would like to ask some questions too, so I will just add to mine: Can you also explain, when you explain that, why is it that oftentimes there is not someone from the ministry that is in attendance at these Social Benefits Tribunal? Why do they choose not to attend?

Ms. Janet Menard: Maybe I'll start. Am I unmuted?

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Yes.

Ms. Janet Menard: People who apply for social assistance, if we find them ineligible through the adjudication process, then they do have a right to appeal. While we are making that decision or while they're going through that process, they are able to continue to receive social assistance through the Ontario Works program, where most of

them come from. Many of them come through that program. A decision can be retroactive to a prior date to make up for potentially lost time. But I will ask Keith to weigh in, because Keith has worked more closely with this area.

Mr. Keith Palmer: Thank you, deputy, and a good question. In regard to the case presenting officers attending the hearing, just to be clear, the case presenting officers provide several services to the director that range from attendance at hearings to written submissions that accompany that were provided to the chair of a hearing that supports the directors—being a financial disability decision. For a case presenting officer to not attend a hearing does not mean that the ministry did not provide their case specific to the eligibility determination that's being considered by the tribunal.

In fact, there were somewhere around 4,200 hearings last year to which our case presenting officers physically attended just under 1,900. Of course, it's clear to recognize that there are often competing meetings that are taking place simultaneously and our case presenting officer will prioritize what cases need to be defended. Where they can go physically, they will go, and where they can't, they will also provide a written submission.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Thank you. Just one comment and I'm going to hand it over to my colleague from Nickel Belt. One comment I wanted to get in was the member opposite, MPP Crawford, I believe, had made part of a question implying that we are the most generous program in the country when it comes to ODSP. I would offer that when people are living well below the poverty line, when you're expecting an individual to live off of at most \$1,169—an individual—a month, that is not something that we should be saying is generous. That is something we should be ashamed of.

To the member of Nickel Belt.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): MPP Gélinas.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I wanted to go back to some of the questions from my colleague about contracting employment service providers. In my community, some of the employment providers came to see me because they feel that the system in place, where they only get reimbursed if the ODSP recipient finds a job or keeps a job, means that they will only take what they call the easier case. If a case is hard, then they don't want to incur the money to get that person ready for work, because if it doesn't succeed, they don't get paid. Am I the only place where this is happening?

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Who would like to take that question? Mr. Bowen?

Mr. Keith Palmer: Sorry; it's Mr. Palmer. I apologize.

Great question. If I can start by saying—we've heard this concept before. Being a past director of a municipal organization, we've often heard the term “creaming,” which is where you're probably going with your question. That is something that we recognize is a possibility and with our enhancements to our employment services programs that we're looking at now, and focusing in on some of the contracts and how we create those contracts when we move forward on this—and again, this is something

that our MLTSD college will be focusing in on: applying more rigour in that space, where the outcome process specific to some of the contributions that are being made by the ministry are really reflective of some of the employment attachment objectives of that organization.

So it is not something that is foreign to us. It has perhaps in history been recognized that some of the agencies are going to work with folks who are closer to the labour market than others. But again, this is something through our EST initiative that we are working to address. We'll more than likely see some new and positive changes after our prototype provides a level of information to us.

Mr. Jeff Bowen: I just wanted to add on to ADM Palmer's remarks there that our funding model for ODSP, yes, was a completely, entirely outcomes-based funding model. So we have heard those similar concerns in the past. We just recently made a change to the funding model so that it is a bit of a hybrid funding model; it's an outcomes-based and expenditure-based funding model. That is in response to concerns by providers around meeting outcomes because of the pandemic. But also to more closely align with the Employment Ontario funding model, so it's not anymore a completely outcomes-based funding model; it is more of a hybrid outcomes-and-expenditure-based funding model.

M^{me} France Gélinas: And will that stay past the pandemic?

Mr. Jeff Bowen: The decisions will still have to be made on that.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. I can tell you that in Nickel Belt we have some young people—severely disabled, on ODSP—who would just love to have someone help them get jobs. They are smart. They are driven. They are severely disabled. They want to work, and none of them ever want to pick them up, because they're not going to make any money, because they are hard to find a job for. So this outcomes-based model for people with disabilities—I'm happy you went to a hybrid during the pandemic, but the pandemic will end; their disabilities—the people I'm talking about—won't end. So I'm interested as to what you can do.

Do you ever keep track as to the outcomes of the different employment contracts that you have? Are the not-for-profits usually better than the for-profit ones? Do we have a clear view as to who's doing a good job out there in finding employment for people on ODSP?

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Who should take that? Mr. Bowen, please go ahead.

Mr. Jeff Bowen: We do have a case management system that would be able to track outcomes by provider. Unfortunately, if you're going to ask me today for details about that, I don't have it on hand. But we certainly do have a case management system that does track the

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M^{me} France Gélinas: And is this something that you can share with us, with the committee?

Mr. Jeff Bowen: Sure, yes. I can take that away.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay, thank you.

I'm looking at the Clerk.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): You have four and a half minutes left, and we'll follow up with the request.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Thank you.

In her report, the auditor talked about how the ministry set a target for its adjudicators to review between 20 to 25 ODSP applications per day. The target, the report found, was difficult for caseworkers to meet while making appropriate ODSP eligibility decisions. What has changed since the auditor's report, Deputy?

Mr. Keith Palmer: Thank you. I can take that question, if that's okay. Coming out of the auditor's review and report, we assembled a team consisting of our medical advisory unit and our adjudication management team. We investigated and looked at our existing processes, both, as I mentioned before, our pre-triage and our triage approach, before getting into a full review of a case. We, in fact, identified that as a result of some digital enhancement that we've made, lessons learned coming out of COVID, looking at the end component of our adjudication process, which we've been able to expedite, we've actually been able to reduce that number, from 20 to 25 to 13 to 16. That was made just in the middle of this year.

What we're recognizing is that now adjudicators are finding that they have much more time to review at the triage stage and the pre-triage stage using some of the new handbook and digital tools that we have. The team has also moved to what we call a group approach for adjudicating some of these files where they're able to bounce off information amongst themselves as health care professionals, depending on the situation the client is experiencing, to make those decisions in a more timely manner, where there is no, we'll use the term, stress to the adjudicators upfront by having a triage number as large as 20 to 25.

M^{me} France Gélinas: How much of this do you figure is due to the decreased applications through the pandemic versus systemic changes that have been implemented by your ministry?

Mr. Keith Palmer: Well, interestingly enough, when the pandemic did start, we did have what we call a queue number of adjudicative cases that were sitting to be reviewed, because we had 90 days to review those cases. Of course—

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Two minutes.

Mr. Keith Palmer: —as the onset of the pandemic had begun, we were continuing to receive adjudication packages for review. The pandemic didn't really affect us for the first four or five months, so to speak. But the changes that we made in regard to reducing the triage numbers were as a result of doing an end-to-end review of the adjudication process as it was prior to the Auditor General's report to which we were able to make some of those changes.

We're seeing great uptake. Turnaround time has diminished from under 90 days. I think we're well under 40 days in approving disability adjudication cases as a result of some of these changes and some of these approaches that we've taken.

M^{me} France Gélinas: And you feel that this new timeline of 40 days is something that you will be able to

maintain even if there is a surge after the pandemic and even if business continues as before?

Mr. Keith Palmer: Yes, I believe what we—there are a number of considerations here, and that's a very good question. We have, by legislation, 90 days to review a file, and the faster we can do that, the better for the client. But as we start thinking about new ways of adjudicating our files and utilizing new pieces of technology and digital approaches, we're also going to start looking at new ways of providing a level of support to the clients upfront, where we may be potentially reaching out to health care professionals or doctors in the onset of the application process. Again, this will reduce any need for ongoing internal reviews.

Those are some of the components that we also think about when we're looking at the journey that the client takes when they're going through the adjudication process. When we speak of maintaining the 40-day turnaround time, that's a quick review as a result of some of the enhancements that we've made, but over time we might be able to go anywhere between—

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Thank you very much, Mr. Palmer.

We have three minutes now from MPP Blais, the independent member. Please go ahead.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Thank you very much. I'd like to turn quickly to recommendation 7. I'm wondering what changes have been made relating to medical reviews and documenting decisions made appropriately with evidence and keeping that in the file. Secondly, have you analyzed the decision-making process around that to identify trends for disability type and whether or not those decisions are reasonable on a go-forward basis?

Mr. Keith Palmer: Good question. Thank you very much. The disability-type review specific to MR is being conducted at this time. We should have some information in a short period of time to be able to cross-reference what we're seeing in our adjudicated cases and the medical reviews to see trends and recognize and use that information to build stronger adjudication processes specific to MR review.

With regard to our medical reviews, we have enhanced the handbook, as mentioned before, where adjudicators will be able to use modern approaches to medicine to assist them in adjudicating their files and making those decisions. In fact, our medical review process was reviewed over the last four months, to which we've made some gains and improvements on how we can process those medical reviews in a much more timely fashion, which will definitely provide information to our clients in a more timely fashion. As a matter of fact, we have committed to ourselves that our medical reviews specific to any backlog that we may have should be cleared up in the next 10 months.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Going back very quickly, we heard that something like 80% of applicants are deemed to be disabled for life. I presume that's on intake. Is that being properly documented, that rationale, and how is that being reviewed over time? I know you talked about how there's

an annual review of the guidelines or the criteria, but in real life, how does that work?

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): To respond?

Mr. Keith Palmer: Sorry; I believe I'm unmuted. Thank you.

Again, our adjudicators, with their background in health care, have a fair amount of knowledge in this space. There is rigorous training that is currently involved in training that group up so they're able to provide a level of service that is integral and has a great deal of rigour and integrity. What we've been able to do in the past several months is enhance our quality assurance process, where we are running reports looking at data to identify trends specific to the adjudication process by individual—

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Thank you very much, Mr. Palmer.

Just so everyone knows, we're on our final round of questioning, with 10 minutes to the government, 10 minutes to the official opposition, and MPP Blais will also have a final three minutes.

Going to the government side: MPP Hogarth, can you please unmute yourself? Please go ahead.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you, Chair. Actually, I wanted to go on the same angle as MPP Gélinas, talking about digitally accessible government. Our government is moving to have an easier process for people—your caseworkers but also the clients. How do we improve the ability for the caseworkers to handle the ODSP cases that they're assigned, but also help out the clients, to help stop the backlog, perhaps even look at overpayments or underpayments? How does this help the clients, and what are we doing about that?

The deputy mentioned a process called MyBenefits. I actually looked it up online while we were chatting and I was wondering if that is a mandatory program or an optional program. If it was mandatory, would it help with some of the overpayments?

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you for that question. Yes, MyBenefits is voluntary at this point in time. We started prototyping it, testing it and fine-tuning it to make it as effective and responsive to clients and caseworkers as possible. The uptake, as I said, has been growing exponentially. We're not at a point yet—and I don't know that we'll ever get to a point where it's mandatory, because it also requires that somebody has the technology on the other end to use MyBenefits. It's an application that can be used on your cellphone to access your own information or to change information. The information is connected to our system, so it doesn't have to go through another step with the caseworker. There's an integration of data into the database that is the case management system for our staff.

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To answer your question, it's growing in popularity and it will be an important piece of our technology solution over time, but we do recognize that some people have restrictions related to access to technology, and sometimes it's broadband in outlying areas. Also, if they have disabilities, they may have barriers to using technology because of their disability. We tend to leave options open for

people who have disabilities—that's our approach to supporting them—but all of this does take work that was previously done by caseworkers away from them. It digitizes them, to state the obvious, and frees up their time to have meaningful discussions around what's going on in their client's life, how they can help them and how their lives can be stabilized so they can start moving forward.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): MPP Hogarth, go ahead.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: I'm wondering, how are you measuring your progress in correcting some of the problems, such as overpayment, underpayment or the backlog with the digital system? How do you measure your progress?

Ms. Janet Menard: Overpayments is a very complicated area to get into. As I said, they happen because information gets to us late more often than not.

The challenge with collecting an overpayment from our clients is that if they earn \$200 that should have been deducted from their entitlement and they incur a \$200 overpayment, they spend it. Life goes on. We identify the overpayment and we cannot take the full \$200 back because it would disadvantage them. We have recovery rates that we apply to cases so that we're not reducing someone's monthly entitlement in a way that negatively impacts them. So an overpayment of \$200 could happen in a flash, but it could take several months for us to recover those dollars.

As such, the amount of overpayments increases over time. Hence, we have a growing problem that often, as the Auditor General points out, results in write-offs.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: And how does it help with the backlog? Because we also have to be client-focused. We have people who need the help, and people who need the help immediately. So how does it help with the backlog and how do you measure your progress with the backlog?

Ms. Janet Menard: Backlog of—I'm sorry?

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Your backlog of cases, people waiting to get their benefits.

Ms. Janet Menard: Once people are deemed eligible, the benefit flow is seamless. There is not a problem. If somebody is deemed ineligible or if there is information that is outstanding, their case could go on hold, but the technology will allow the client to understand the status of their case and to be in touch with us if there is a problem. That would include their benefits being on a temporary hold for a reason that they could easily rectify, so it will help in that regard. But once approved, the dollars flow, unless the client advises us of a change in circumstance or it's something we identified through our risk processes.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): MPP Hogarth, Mr. Bowen also had something to comment. Is that still relevant? Mr. Bowen?

Mr. Jeff Bowen: I was just going to echo what the deputy said in her opening remarks.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Okay, so no. If you're just echoing, it's okay.

MPP Hogarth, please go ahead.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you. So this is actually coming from page 537 of the AG's report, and it talks about the physicians. It says that, "For example, we noted that over the last five years, one physician had completed an average of 240 disability applications per year, compared with an average of four per year among all physicians...."

I guess my question is: We need to really strengthen the integrity of the adjudication process to review the appropriateness of applications, so what steps is the ministry taking to look at this and to address this recommendation from the AG?

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): There are two minutes left. Please go ahead, Mr. Palmer.

Mr. Keith Palmer: I can start and then probably Mr. Bowen can weigh in as well. We are looking at a digital process for our application, which will capture much more information and add some rigour to the application process. From that document, we'll be able to ascertain which doctors or which health care professionals are filling out our applications, be able to keep a log, and be able to run some analytics, when that is required, specific to identifying frequency in regard to health care professionals now completing these forms. This is part of our digital adjudication that we're considering.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Anyone else? There's one minute and 20 seconds left.

Interjection.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): MPP Barrett, do you have a quick question? Is MPP Barrett on the line? I think we lost MPP Barrett.

Mr. Toby Barrett: I'm on the line, Chair.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Okay, you have one minute. Please be quick.

Mr. Toby Barrett: I just wanted to follow up on this discrepancy, when you have—as I understand it, physicians across Ontario, on average, refer perhaps something in the order of four people to the disability support program. So many people are deserving of this program, and when you see a physician referring up to 240 people in their community, do we have evidence of where this has bumped deserving people off the list to receive benefits from this program?

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Deputy or Mr. Bowen?

Mr. Jeff Bowen: Just to directly answer the question: No, we don't have evidence, but we do have in our plans to monitor more closely the physicians and the practices of the physicians on the referrals into the disability program—

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): Thank you very much. I'm sorry, the time has ended for that session. We now have 10 more minutes with the official opposition.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Thank you, Madam Chair. I wanted to ask about the pandemic top-up that was put in place for ODSP and OW recipients. Do you know how many ODSP recipients actually applied for and received the top-up benefit and how many either were denied or were not able to even ask for it, who were not aware that there was a benefit?

Mr. Keith Palmer: Thank you for your question. Deputy, I wasn't sure if you were leading in there; perhaps I could just lead out. We do know that there were roughly around 260,000 cases, of which 150,000, roughly, in ODSP had taken part in the benefits that you referred to. That equated to somewhere around \$114 million in payments between March and July of this year. From an operational perspective, that was somewhere around 855,000 payments in that short period of time, so we did see a large intake specific to that benefit. It would be important to add, as a follow-up to your question, that that discretionary benefit still remains. As a matter of fact, over the months of March to July, what the ODSP office was able to do was to provide a level of support to our municipal partners in administering that benefit. The discretionary benefit currently exists and is a benefit that our partner municipalities are able to provide, depending on the discretionary needs of that client.

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Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: But we know that there was a stoppage to the top-up payments. They have not continued right through until now. The government did stop those payments to people. Do you know how many people who qualified for ODSP were not able to collect the top-up for whatever reason—just were not able to collect it, whether that was that they couldn't get a hold of a caseworker, they didn't know about the program, whatever the case may be.

Ms. Janet Menard: Maybe I can weigh in, if I can, on the question of discretionary benefits. To reiterate what Keith said, a discretionary benefit is an integral component of social assistance for people on Ontario Works and ODSP. It's there if a family has an extraordinary need, and there's a list of things that qualify for discretionary benefits. If they have that need, then they can ask their caseworker, and the caseworker will assess the need and issue funding accordingly. It can be a one-time payment or it could be over an extended period of time.

During COVID, we decided to expand that discretionary benefit to people on social assistance as compared to another program that we put in place for people not on social assistance. As a matter of course, all of our clients know, if they have an extraordinary need, they can request and receive that benefit.

People within both programs were able to get additional funding for additional costs related to COVID. To expedite the process—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Sorry to interrupt, but do you know how many people were not able to access that top-up? How many people specifically receiving ODSP were not able to collect that top-up for whatever reason?

Ms. Janet Menard: There were no restrictions on people. They had to ask for it. So your question is a bit awkward. There would have been some people that didn't request—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Allow me to be clearer, then: We have heard from people across the province who were not able to get a hold of their caseworkers because many were working remotely, understandably, and offices were not open, understandably. There were many people across this

province who were not aware that there were top-up benefits available. In fact, the Daily Bread Food Bank had said that I believe it was one in five of the people that came to their food bank that were ODSP recipients were not aware that there was a top-up until it was too late. So my question is, how many recipients on ODSP, whether they qualified for the benefit or not, were able to actually access and receive the benefit during the period that the top-up was available?

Ms. Janet Menard: Well, there are 380,000 cases, and Keith gave you the number, I think, 150,000. So 380,000 cases, and 150,000 received the benefit. But it wasn't a top-up; it was an offsetting of COVID-related costs.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I understand that. "Top-up" is the language that the government used.

In your opinion, knowing that an individual on ODSP could receive \$1,169 a month—that's just an individual—and knowing that that is well below the poverty line, do you believe that a \$100 payment is enough to offset the costs of COVID-related protection measures, for someone with a disability to be able to obtain PPE or to be able to buy appropriate cleaning supplies or the increase in the cost of food, especially as people were being told to stay inside and have food delivered? Do you believe that that was a sufficient amount, and what are your opinions on the top-up having to be requested as opposed to it being automatic? Would that have made it easier for the caseworkers had the payment been an automatic payment?

Ms. Janet Menard: There are a number of questions in there. I think it would have been easier if we had just issued money to every case—then, yes, it would have been easier on the caseworkers. We didn't think it was an inappropriate way of handling requests or handling the covering of extraordinary COVID-related costs, because it's part of the way we interact with our clients on a regular basis. I haven't heard that the \$100 per individual or \$200 per family was inappropriate. Costs vary. It was easier to give a flat amount, but it wasn't limited to one time. It continued for a period of months, depending on—so some would have gotten it for a longer period, depending on when they made the request.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: How much time do I have left, Madam Chair?

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): You have two minutes and 30 seconds.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: So we are back in a position now, after the top-ups—you're calling them a discretionary benefit; the government was calling them top-ups. There was a period during the pandemic when those top-ups stopped. We've seen an increase in the cases of COVID, and yet, we are still back in a position where we have people who are living with disabilities in very deep poverty, having to ask—really, beg—for a measly top-up to be able to afford the extra costs that we are all seeing, frankly, due to the pandemic. So can you explain why the ministry did not move to the model of an automatic payment to all of the recipients since this is a benefit specific to, really, COVID-19 and the cost of COVID-19? Why would it not have been assumed that every recipient

of ODSP would have increased costs and therefore should automatically qualify for this discretionary benefit and have it automatically attached to their cheque rather than them having to ask for it?

Ms. Janet Menard: I would say the answer to that is, because we did not know that to be the case that every single person on ODSP was going to have extraordinary costs associated with COVID. And, as I said, it's a common part of our program, if you have extraordinary needs, to request support from your caseworker. That program has not gone away. If people have extraordinary needs that they feel they can't manage, then the program, as part of the construct of ODSP and Ontario Works, still exists, and it's a discussion that they can have with their caseworker.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I appreciate your time.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): That concludes the questions for the official opposition.

We'll just move to the last and final session with MPP Blais. Please go ahead. You have three minutes.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Just to wrap up, I believe there was some discussion about getting people job assistance in the north. I'm wondering if you can describe more broadly what steps the ministry has taken to refer more ODSP recipients to employment supports, as well as those living with the ODSP recipient.

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you for your question. In the north, for people on social assistance in Ontario Works, we rely on district social services administration boards. There are 10 of them across northern Ontario that provide a range of human and social services on behalf of the government. They represent the municipalities across the north. It's a more efficient way of offering our services in the north.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Excuse me for one second: Could you touch on the other areas of Ontario outside of the north?

Ms. Janet Menard: So the other areas of Ontario with respect to people with disabilities?

Mr. Stephen Blais: Yes, and referring them to employment services.

Ms. Janet Menard: We currently contract with a number of employment service providers across Ontario through ODSP, and the Ontario Works program contracts with employment service providers across Ontario, southern and northern. All caseworkers are able to refer people to those programs. Under the anticipated or the planned change to Employment Ontario, all of those will be amalgamated into one integrated system.

To address a concern that was raised earlier, the structure for funding those providers and those services will incent them to take people with disabilities, to take people who have more challenges and barriers to employment so that we don't [inaudible] a gap whereby our clients on social assistance and those with disabilities are left marginalized and unsupported. So the construct of the new program will favour people with barriers and disabilities.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Okay, thank you. I don't have any further questions.

The Chair (Ms. Catherine Fife): You're also out of time. That concludes our time for questions this afternoon. I do want to thank Ms. Menard, Mr. Palmer and Mr. Bowen for your time.

This committee will now move into closed session for report-writing and discussion.

Thank you, everyone. Have a good day.

The committee continued in closed session at 1441.

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