

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

No. 233B

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

N° 233B

1st Session
42nd Parliament
Tuesday
9 March 2021

1^{re} session
42^e législature
Mardi
9 mars 2021

Speaker: Honourable Ted Arnott
Clerk: Todd Decker

Président : L'honorable Ted Arnott
Greffier : Todd Decker

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House Publications and Language Services
Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400; fax 416-325-7430
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Service linguistique et des publications parlementaires
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400; télécopieur, 416-325-7430
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

ISSN 1180-2987

CONTENTS / TABLE DES MATIÈRES

Tuesday 9 March 2021 / Mardi 9 mars 2021

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BUSINESS / AFFAIRES D'INTÉRÊT PUBLIC ÉMANANT DES DÉPUTÉES ET DÉPUTÉS

Services for children and youth

Ms. Marit Stiles	11951
Mr. Jeremy Roberts	11952
Mr. Faisal Hassan	11954
Ms. Laura Mae Lindo	11955
Mme France Gélinas.....	11955
Ms. Marit Stiles	11956
Vote deferred	11956

ADJOURNMENT DEBATE / DÉBAT SUR LA MOTION D'AJOURNEMENT

Youth justice system

Ms. Suze Morrison	11956
Mr. Jeremy Roberts	11957

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Tuesday 9 March 2021

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Mardi 9 mars 2021

Report continued from volume A.
1800

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC
BUSINESS

SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Ms. Marit Stiles: I move that, in the opinion of this House, the Ford government should establish a child and youth post-pandemic recovery secretariat to develop and implement a youth recovery action plan to help mitigate the pandemic's impacts on children, youth and young adults, particularly those disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Pursuant to standing order 101, the member has 12 minutes for her presentation. I return to the member from Davenport.

Ms. Marit Stiles: It's an honour, as always, to rise in this House and speak on behalf of the great people of Davenport. In this place, we have for the last year been grappling with some of the most important questions of this moment, of maybe a generation: How do we keep our communities safe? How do we truly value and recognize the work of those on the front lines of this pandemic? How do we protect our most vulnerable: our elders, our children, those most impacted? How do we prevent the equity gap from growing against all odds?

Today, I fear we are still very much in the eye of the storm. I hope I'm wrong, but certainly the challenges before us are massive. Speaker, the greatest test of any government in the midst of a disaster of this proportion is to keep a clear focus, certainly, on limiting the impact, preventing the loss of life and on illness prevention, but here is the rub: They have to do that while they're also mobilizing the resources and the expertise to plan forward for recovery. That's why I'm here today, to raise the urgent need for us to centre children, youth and young adults in Ontario's pandemic recovery plans, and to provide a path forward for us to get that done.

Over the last few months, I've been speaking with experts in education, child and youth development and more who have been particularly concerned about what this disruption to learning kids experienced this year is going to mean down the line.

I've also been speaking with many, many young people. It's really the perk of being the official opposition education critic. I have to say, it's one of my favourite things to do. From follow-up calls with individual young people who reach out to me with questions or ideas to

clubs like the Milton District High School student equity group that I met with just last week, the Toronto Youth Cabinet, the students in my own riding at Bloor Collegiate Institute, and post-secondary students from all across this province, they all share many of the same concerns. They are watching and they are hearing from their families and from their friends. They know the toll this pandemic has taken, and they're worried not just about tomorrow, but about next year and the year after that. They're worried about their future. I wish they didn't need to be, but this is a generation that has always been able to look beyond the present. They live in real fear of the ravages that they, or their children, will have to deal with because of climate change, and they are not willing to sit back and wait for adults—all of us—to catch up and take their concerns seriously. They are making change happen.

That's why this motion matters, Mr. Speaker. By establishing a process that can engage young people in all their diversity while valuing real collaboration from experts, front-line workers and more, we can forge a plan that makes their future brighter.

But let's face it: The pandemic has, without doubt, disrupted the life, the learning and the well-being of Ontario's children, youth and young adults. The toll is well documented already, particularly in terms of their mental health and well-being. We see it even in our own families, I'm sure, all of us here.

In their recent report, Children's Mental Health Ontario cited social isolation, removal from school and daily routines, as well as the isolation and loss associated with illness as some of the top stressors that children are facing. Constant changes in school routines and classmates is coupled with the new fear of bringing the virus home. Just think about the impact this has had on youth with pre-existing mental health issues or complex support needs or undiagnosed mental health concerns. It puts them in an even more precarious position than before the pandemic. We know that if you are a child or youth who has been directly affected by COVID-19, whether it's through illness or loss, or if you are in a low-income or a racialized community, you're even more vulnerable. In fact, we've seen the research from SickKids this February, indicating that 70% of youth experienced a deterioration in mental health. We've seen a sharp rise in eating disorders; outpatient treatment increasing by 200%; referrals up 90%; young women, LGBTQ2+ youth reaching out to mental health lines at surging rates.

I speak a lot in this place about the need for our children and staff to have safe schools. Why? Because we know that the priority has always been and will always remain trying to keep our schools open for in-person learning, but

it has to happen safely. The impact of the shift to online learning, the constant transitions are having negative impacts that we're only just beginning to understand. And that's in spite of the heroic efforts of teachers, our EAs, other education workers who have really gone above and beyond.

Studies are showing that the lack of access to in-person schooling, outdoor activities and friends during the pandemic has also meant worsening sleep patterns and diets, less physical activity and more screen time.

Let's be clear: This is around the world. It's not just here. We know that. Younger adults, students especially—we're starting to see the impact, particularly on younger students, on reading levels. A recent study by the Vanier Institute on the potential impact of the pandemic on youth education in Canada concludes we are looking at an increase in the socio-economic skill gap by as much as 30%—30%. How do we even begin to make that up? Let's not forget that many low-income students are primary providers for their families, both students in high school and, of course, working post-secondary students.

This really breaks my heart: 45% of youth say the pandemic has negatively impacted their optimism for the future as they see growing unemployment and feel their education isn't adequately preparing them for their desired careers.

Speaker, Ontario's children, youth and young adults are not asking us to wait and see. They are demanding action. We need a whole-of-government approach as we seek to recover from COVID-19, and we need to acknowledge that young people are the engines behind our future economy, one that has to be fuelled by a creative, healthy, resilient workforce, and that their well-being is absolutely essential to our social progress. We have to address the inequitable impact of the pandemic with intention. We can't look the other way.

It's not debatable whether Black and Indigenous children and youth from low-income families, youth in care, young women and girls, queer, racialized and youth with disabilities have all had to bare a disproportionate amount of risk and hardship due to this pandemic. The data is there, as are the systemic barriers they already faced going into this. They cannot be left behind. They have to be prioritized, and their voices need to be central to the development of our recovery plans.

This won't be a plan that's rolling out over weeks or over months. We need to be prepared to centre young people in this work for years to come. That's why I have proposed this approach. I've received some good counsel, I have to say, from lots of people, but one of them, and he provided a fair amount of guidance too, was the former Ontario child and youth advocate, Irwin Elman. He sent me a note that I want to read a part of. He said: "In the challenge and wake of the pandemic is found the opportunity to ensure that every act we take, we will take together, in order to improve the well-being of Ontario's children.

"Our children are watching."

To all my colleagues here today, I know that we all share the resolve to support Ontario's young people. I hear

it every day. Let's take a step in the right direction. We can work out the details. We might even disagree—I think we probably will—on some of the steps that need to be taken. But one thing is absolutely certain: We must ensure that every child doesn't simply return to life as normal, because life for too many simply wasn't good enough. We must provide them with more opportunity, with more support, to reach their full potential.

1810

We need to put in place the mental health supports, but we also need to address, in a really systemic way, those losses in learning and the impact of this disruption on their job opportunities and training opportunities. That's why, in this motion, I didn't just include children and youth; I included young adults as well: those young people who were stepping out for the first time. They are really essential to our future. We cannot afford to leave them behind as we move forward in recovery. We need to provide them with more opportunities and more supports to reach their full potential.

Establishing a child and youth post-pandemic recovery secretariat, tasked with developing, monitoring and creating an action plan, says something important to those young people. Whether they're four years old or 21 years old, it says, "We see you. We hear you. We know what you've been experiencing. We're willing to put you at the centre of everything we do." Let's do them that honour, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Further debate?

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: I'm pleased to rise today to debate motion 145, introduced by the member for Davenport. I want to thank the member opposite for bringing forward this motion. I know that she has a passion for supporting our children and youth, and I appreciate that she brings that to debate here in this chamber.

Over the last year, COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on all of our communities. Our government moved quickly at the onset of this terrible pandemic, and we have worked tirelessly since day one to protect all Ontarians, but especially those who are our most vulnerable. Vulnerable children, such as those with developmental disabilities or those who live in food-insecure households, and racialized or Indigenous children, have faced unique challenges and setbacks associated with COVID-19.

While I understand and share the desire to ensure that our children and youth receive strong supports, I do not believe that this is best achieved through the member's motion. We already have a Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, with not one but two fantastic ministers who work closely with all ministries to ensure that our government is focused on supporting our children and youth.

I would like to take a moment to share a snapshot of some of the great supports that we are currently providing. Ontario's action plan is a comprehensive, three-pillar plan to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside protecting our health care system and laying a foundation for

economic recovery, our government has been squarely focused on supporting individuals and businesses, including our children and youth.

One challenge presented by COVID-19 that is particularly near and dear to my heart is ensuring that those with developmental disabilities and special needs are able to receive services during periods of lockdown or during the closure of spaces where they would normally be able to access their usual supports. At the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, we worked continuously with children's treatment centres and ministry-funded agencies across the province on implementation of measures to protect clients and staff while continuing services to families, including online where possible.

We've also made changes to programs like Passport, enhanced respite and special services at home that are helping support families when community supports aren't available. This includes expanding eligible expenses to include remote and virtual services. We waived our extended spending, reporting and registration deadlines to make life easier for families and ensure that supports were available to them during this challenging time.

We also introduced our vulnerable persons action plan, and are investing up to \$40 million to support organizations that provide residential services for children, youth and people with developmental disabilities. This funding has allowed these organizations to cover costs for additional staffing, personal protective equipment and supplies, supporting physical distancing and transportation to minimize exposure.

I previously mentioned food-insecure households. Having enough to eat is one of the most fundamental needs, which is why it is an area of key focus for our government as well. We invested \$562 million in the social services relief fund, which is providing direct funding for individuals in financial crisis, as well as funding for municipalities and social services providers like food banks to ensure they are able to continue providing critical services to their clients at this time of greatest need.

To further support children, youth and families during these challenging times, we are also providing \$8 million in funding for Feed Ontario, which assists them in producing and distributing pre-packaged food hampers across the province. We also increased funding for student nutrition programs across the province, and they have adapted their programs to include new, local approaches to meal delivery, including distributing grocery gift cards or delivering food boxes.

But we know that responding to the immediate needs presented by the COVID-19 pandemic is only part of this battle. We must also look to the future and how we can ensure that children, youth and young adults don't just get through COVID-19, but fully recover and thrive. That's why we're laying the foundations for future recovery and success through a number of programs and initiatives.

I've already mentioned how we expanded eligible expenses for the SSAH program to ensure that supports are available now, but we are also increasing funding for SSAH by \$70.3 million over the next three years. This

investment has already allowed us to provide support for 4,800 more children with developmental and/or physical disabilities and their families this year, and we look forward to further expanding access, with an additional 2,100 children entering the program in each of the next two years.

This investment will allow us to continue identifying needs early, supporting caregivers in coping with their day-to-day challenges, and coordinating services so they work more efficiently and get families better results. The result will be improved short- and long-term outcomes for these children and families.

We are also taking concrete action to assist the full recovery of racialized communities who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. We extended the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan for an additional two years and doubled our investment in the program to \$28 million per year starting in 2021-22. As part of this investment, we created a new economic empowerment stream that will strengthen Black communities and businesses and support Black youth in achieving their goals, including a full economic recovery from the impacts of the pandemic.

We ensured that we are hearing from those impacted by establishing the Premier's Council on Equality of Opportunity, bringing together an intergenerational and cross-sector membership group with expertise and lived experience on the economic and social barriers facing young people when it comes to education, skills training and employment. This council will help us hear directly from those who face economic challenges in our province. Part of their mandate is to provide advice on how we can support young people in recovering from the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and achieving long-term success, while addressing the disproportionate impact of the outbreak on vulnerable families and youth.

Speaker, we know that our next generations are trailblazers of change. They know their communities best and the needs of those in their neighbourhoods. To support these change makers, we have the Youth Opportunities Fund, the YOF. YOF invests in initiatives that build the skills young people need to stay engaged in school, advance their skills, build strong and healthy peer relationships, and navigate resources in their communities. We invested over \$13 million in the 2019-20 fiscal year and have made additional investments this year as well. Youth were encouraged to apply to the YOF to bring their ideas to life about how to enrich and uplift their communities.

1820

Speaker, another area that our government is taking meaningful action on is the child welfare sector. It has been said in this House many times, and outside of this House many more, that our current system is broken. It has faced challenges for quite some time and it needs to be fundamentally altered. But we also know that anything as large as the child welfare system takes time to change, so we knew we had to start that work as soon as possible, for the sake of all children, youth and families impacted by the child welfare system.

That's why our Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues announced last July a system redesign focused on community-based prevention services that are high quality, culturally appropriate and truly responsive to the needs of children, youth and families. Our plan is focused on strengthening families and communities through prevention initiatives that better serve those in need. That includes seeking more permanent homes for children and youth in care when they cannot stay in their own homes or communities. It means working in partnership with Indigenous and Black communities and service providers, health and social services organizations, and the child welfare sector to change the culture from apprehension to prevention.

In order to do this work, we released the Children and Young Persons' Rights Resource. It is a web page that uses youth-friendly language to help children, youth and young persons understand their rights.

We also announced \$5 million in annualized funding to enhance access to prevention-focused customary care for Indigenous children and youth. This investment will help more children to thrive, closer to their homes, families and communities.

Early in the pandemic, we saw the impact of COVID-19 and acted. We put a moratorium on youth aging out of care, and I am proud to see that our government has extended that moratorium to September 2022, providing stability to those young people and helping them navigate adulthood.

Further to that, we are working with youth with lived experience to listen and design a more appropriate model for youth leaving care. The overall goal of this model is to ensure that youth would feel prepared and confident before leaving care.

Speaker, I notice that my time is coming to a close, and there are many other things that I could mention. To do a brief highlight, there have been significant investments in youth mental health supports over this past year, and our phenomenal Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions has been working tirelessly on the Roadmap to Wellness, which has included \$94.8 million in ongoing child and youth mental health funding since our government took office. There is much more work to be done there, but many, many exciting mental health initiatives are on the way to support our youth and children who are dealing with mental health issues.

Moreover, within our education system, our government has maintained focus on having a safe school environment for our kids, with significant investments there as well. This work is absolutely critical. We know that youth are our next generation and we need to work together to help ensure their success, and I am proud that our government is doing just that, Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Further debate?

Mr. Faisal Hassan: It's a pleasure to be able to speak today to the motion presented by my colleague from the great riding of Davenport. This motion, entitled *Centring Children and Youth in Post-Pandemic Recovery*, is a timely and much-needed one, as children and youth have

been shamefully neglected and left behind when it comes to this government's COVID-19 response.

As the official opposition critic for youth opportunities, and also as a member of the Black caucus, I have heard many stories of hardship faced by youth as I have met with many groups and individuals throughout this pandemic.

My riding of York South–Weston, and northwestern Toronto in particular, has seen a disparity and inequity of COVID response from this government. COVID-19 has hit our community in a disproportionate way to the rest of the province, but the government's response has not taken those factors into account.

One of our schools, in fact, was the first to have a COVID case in Toronto. Our aging schools with poor ventilation and crowded classrooms do not get the attention and oversight needed to safeguard children. These disparities shouldn't exist, but they do. We have seen Black and Indigenous youth, young women and girls, racialized youth, LGBTQ+ youth, young people with disabilities and those from low-income backgrounds being impacted in a disturbing way.

The mental health and emotional well-being of those young people has taken its toll, and experts worldwide are in agreement that our society and economy is likely to face major consequences for years to come. It is like this government has treated young people like an afterthought and hasn't seriously tried to provide financial and emotional investments needed by young people.

This is a government that cut \$69 million from children and youth mental health services in 2019. Because of years of mental health underfunding by this government and the Liberals, an estimated 28,000 young people are waiting to receive mental health services. Thousands upon thousands of other youth don't know how and are unable to access mental health supports.

This motion provides a major step forward in helping mitigate the impact of the pandemic on young people by creating a child and youth post-pandemic recovery secretariat to ensure government policies and programs supporting the well-being of children and youth are front and centre in our post-pandemic recovery.

Mr. Speaker, this government eliminated the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, silencing the voice of children. Irwin Elman did wonderful work on behalf of young people. I will leave the last word to Mr. Elman as he speaks to this motion: "A post-pandemic child and youth wellness recovery strategy, planned and coordinated through a secretariat reporting to the Legislature mandated with the task is a powerful statement of empathy and hope." Let us support empathy and hope, and pass this important motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Further debate?

Ms. Laura Mae Lindo: I am the very proud chair of the Ontario NDP Black Caucus; I'm the official opposition's critic for anti-racism as well as colleges and universities. This motion from my friend in the riding of Davenport speaks to me, and I'll tell you why.

The member opposite said that the government was laying the foundation, and so I have questions. Are they laying the foundation for youth success by taking seriously the recommendations from *HairStory: Rooted*, where Black and Indigenous youth in care set out exactly what they need, or are they making a decision about what they think Black youth need and what they think Indigenous youth in care need?

Are they laying the foundation, when they create a Black Youth Action Plan or extend a Black Youth Action Plan that, when under the Liberals, never included Waterloo region? The people in my area, in Kitchener Centre, were unable to access that funding. And when the Minister of Education invested some money, probably from the Black Youth Action Plan—I believe it's from the Black Youth Action Plan—for educational navigators, again, Waterloo region was left out of that plan. There are Black youth that live in Waterloo region. There are Black youth that are experiencing intense examples of anti-Black racism in the education system. They have been left out.

Are they laying the foundation when they do not provide direct support for mental health for racialized youth, for Indigenous youth and for Black youth? Because putting mental health funding into mainstream mental health programs isn't going to solve that problem. We need culturally responsive mental health supports. That's what the young people across this province have been asking us for.

Are they laying the foundation for the success of children and youth when they decide that they're going to have folks that have OSAP loans receive repayment letters as late as yesterday, saying that interest is now going to be accrued on their loans? Are they laying the foundation when they release or relieve the moratorium on OSAP during a pandemic? How is that laying the foundation for young people in this province? Are they laying the foundation when they decide that they're going to cut from OSAP? How is that going to lay the foundation and create success for young people in this province?

Are they laying the foundation by ignoring what we've just heard last week from an RBC report on women who have lost jobs during the pandemic, where RBC noted that young people are among some of the most vulnerable people right now, that they are having an uneven recovery when it comes to this pandemic—not just young people, though. They also said newcomers and racialized people across Canada are having an uneven recovery from this pandemic.

1830

If we don't start to invest not just money but also space for children and youth and young people across this province to say exactly what they need, and dedicate ourselves to doing just that, we will never, never, never be able to look at what we've done over the course of this pandemic and say that we invested in children and youth and young adults in this province. We have to do better.

It's not about us, as adults, deciding what these kids need. These kids are advocating to all of us. They were showing up at all of our offices, pre-pandemic, to tell us what they needed. They told us then that they couldn't deal

with OSAP loans. In fact, I've had young people in Waterloo region who were in high school and had to choose to not go to the university they had applied to and they had been accepted into because they couldn't afford to do so with the amount of cuts to OSAP. I have young people in my riding of Kitchener Centre and across Waterloo region who have said to me they've had to stop their degrees midway and leave what they want to do to be able to be successful in this world—and leave with debt and not have a degree at the end—because of the cuts from this government.

So do we need a child and youth post-pandemic recovery secretariat to develop and implement a youth recovery action plan? Yes, we do. We need that because we can't trust—oh, am I allowed to say that? We need that because what we have noticed is that in the decisions that this government has made to date, they are not centring the needs of young people, they are not centring the needs of racialized people, and they need to do better.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Further debate?

M^{me} France Gélinas: It is an honour to support the motion brought forward by the member from Davenport. She has already started to think about what a post-pandemic recovery should look like. To her credit, she focused on an area of post-pandemic that we all know will be overlooked, and this is the children and youth. Why will it be overlooked? Well, people will say quite a few children and youth got the virus, but not too many of them—good thing—were really sick from it, not too many of them died from it; therefore, we will focus our post-pandemic recovery on people who got sick, who died etc.

But what she is bringing forward is important, Speaker. We know that children are at risk of not being able to benefit from the recovery and not having their needs met. Think about it, Speaker. We have a generation of children who have had their lives thrown upside down by a pandemic. We've all had our lives thrown upside down by a pandemic. We're all really tired of this pandemic and we want it to go away, but for children who haven't got the opportunity to look back on their lives and how it was before, simply because of their youth, we need to have a plan specific for them.

We absolutely need to make mental health services available to them, whether they suffer from social isolation, whether they suffer from seeing some of their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts and uncles die from the disease. Their school routine was completely thrown upside down. Some of them were really worried about bringing the virus home to a loved one who was immunocompromised or elderly, and their well-being suffered.

We knew before the pandemic that children's mental health services did not meet up with demand. We had 28,000 youth waiting for mental health services. In my riding, it's an average of 18 months that those kids wait to access mental health services, and yet, all of the statistics show us that—the study in the *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* from last October found that 40% of youth

meet the screening criteria for anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Forty per cent of our youth need access to mental health. We know that the children's mental health system is already overwhelmed and overlooked. We need this post-pandemic recovery with a focus on youth. They are our hope for the future. Don't let an entire generation of youth have to struggle with mental illness without help. This is cruel. This is not acceptable. This is not the Ontario that we want.

This is what the member from Davenport wants us to do. She wants us to make sure that we put a focus on what the post-pandemic recovery will look like for our youth so that they come out on the other side of this pandemic healthy and ready to take on the future.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you to everyone who took part in the debate. The member for Davenport has two minutes to reply.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I want to thank the members from Ottawa West–Nepean, York South–Weston, Kitchener Centre and Nickel Belt for their very helpful comments.

When I started out this afternoon, I started by noting that we are not alone in this. This is something that's happening around the world, and governments around the world are looking to how they can deal with the challenges that we are going to face post-pandemic. There is an opportunity here, which I really was hoping the government would see, to lead the way in this moment.

We heard a lot from the members opposite about what the government thinks they've done already, and I've got to say, I am a little bit disappointed. I understand why, but I'm disappointed to hear that list, that listing out, because I think it's missing the point.

We've seen government after government for decades slap band-aids on cracks in our system, in the roof, in the foundation. But right now, we have a house that's been hit by a tsunami, and all the band-aids in the world are not going to hold that foundation or that roof or that house together while it crumbles. We need a whole government approach, one that empowers and centres our young people, who will by far be the ones who are the most impacted and for the longest time.

I don't remember who said this, Mr. Speaker, but there is a quote that says, "What you do has far greater impact than what you say." Do more. Do better. Think bigger. This moment requires it, and our young people deserve it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The time provided for public members' public business has expired. Ms. Stiles has moved private members' notice of motion number 145. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say "aye."

All those opposed will please say "nay."

In my opinion, the nays have it.

Pursuant to standing order 101(d), the recorded division on this item of private members' public business will be deferred to the proceeding of deferred votes.

Vote deferred.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Pursuant to standing order 36, the question that this House do now adjourn is deemed to have been made.

ADJOURNMENT DEBATE

YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): However, the member for Toronto Centre has served notice of dissatisfaction with an answer given earlier by the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services. The member for Toronto Centre will have up to five minutes to express her dissatisfaction, and the minister or his designate will have up to five minutes to respond.

We turn now to the member from Toronto Centre.

Ms. Suze Morrison: Last week I rose in the House to share the shocking news that this government had abruptly closed 26 youth justice centres across Ontario without prior notice to the families or the children that were in the care of those facilities.

This government secretly removed children, many of them Indigenous, from their communities. Children were put on planes and buses in the dead of night and moved thousands of kilometres away from their families and their support networks. Speaker, some of those children were as young as 12.

1840

This government hid that decision from their families. Local officials weren't even allowed to tell the children what was happening and they weren't allowed to tell the families where they were going. Speaker, this government should be ashamed. They have put these children through an absolutely horrifying and traumatizing experience.

The minister's answer to my question on this issue demonstrated that this government doesn't seem to care about the lives of Indigenous youth and their families. They gave no thought to what these children need to rebuild their lives. They gave no consideration to the support that these children need from their families and their communities. They gave no attention to the importance of remaining close to their culture. Instead, they were put at immense risk by being forced out of their communities and the support systems that they need.

This government was willing to put children through trauma just to save a buck. I have to ask this House, how is that any different from the trauma that was inflicted on children and Indigenous families through residential schools or through the Sixties Scoop?

Speaker, Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler said, "I don't know how anyone can treat a person like that, to send them far away without informing families, without properly creating a transition plan to ensure support for young people and letting them know that this is happening. It was very sudden and I can't imagine the trauma."

Youth in custody at the William W. Creighton youth centre in Kenora were given just hours' notice that they would be leaving. At the same time that they were

informed, staff were not allowed to tell them where they were going and they were not allowed to tell their parents or guardians that they were moving, despite repeated requests from staff and the executive director of the centre to the ministry. At absolutely no point were the needs or concerns of these children addressed by this government.

Many of these centres are in northern Ontario. Indigenous youth housed in these facilities, some often whose territories are as far north as Fort Severn, have been suddenly uprooted and moved to facilities thousands of kilometres away in southern Ontario, including Sault Ste. Marie and as far away as here in Toronto. It's impossible for the families of these children to travel to see their children, most whom are in remote fly-in communities.

The province apparently intends to mitigate the impacts of the displacement of these youth through use of video conferencing. I have to ask the minister how well he thinks that's going to go considering the limited access to Internet in these Far Northern communities.

Speaker, staff at these centres are appalled. Faye Fraser wrote an open letter noting the grave consequences for this government's decision. I quote from Faye's letter:

“Such hasty decisions to uproot and displace children from primary care facilities within their territories inevitably has traumatic impacts. It compounds the intergenerational traumas of institutionalization, exacerbated by the ... systemic and multiple intersections of racial forms of displacement, discrimination and harm. Further, it impacts Indigenous girls in particular, in that the facilities attend to their gender-specific needs including that of northern Indigenous queer youth.

“Relocating youth as far as 2,300 kilometres away from their communities only perpetuates colonial displacement that aids in the disempowering of First Nations youth in their communities by subjecting them to gender-based discrimination.

“At a moment when Canada contends with the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, it is unconscionable that the” Conservative “government would disregard such pertinent connections.”

Speaker, I would like to ask the minister again: In what world is it acceptable to ignore the history of child removal in the province of Ontario and across Canada? In what world is it okay to ignore the history of the Sixties Scoop, to ignore the history of the Millennium Scoop, to ignore the history of the continued removal of Indigenous children through child welfare systems and through the justice system? In what world is this okay? How did your government not stop and think about the trauma that you were causing to the Indigenous youth in these centres? So my question, again, to the minister is, did you not think or did you simply not care?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The parliamentary assistant from Ottawa West–Nepean will have up to five minutes to reply.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Thank you to the member for Toronto Centre for raising this issue. I am pleased to rise

as the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services to speak on this topic.

As our government has worked to develop a comprehensive and sustainable youth justice system, our priority has been and will always be the safety and well-being of youth in conflict with the law. Over the past number of years, a focus on prevention and community-based programming has contributed to an 81% reduction of admissions to custody and detention in Ontario—81%. This means that there are approximately 8,500 fewer youth admitted to custody each year now than there were in 2004-05, a remarkable decline.

As a result, a number of youth justice facilities across the province have been significantly underutilized. In 2019-20, five facilities were empty for a majority of the year, and 13 facilities had an average of only one youth for a majority of the year. This significant underutilization shows the success of efforts of successive governments to keep families together and return youth to the right track, where they can be positive members of our communities, and that should be good news for all members.

That is also why we have taken action to have the right spaces in the right places to address the needs of youth. Reducing the excess capacity in the youth justice services system was a recommendation that has been made by the Auditor General several times since 2012. Last week, a number of underutilized youth justice residential programs and facilities received notifications of these changes and youth were transitioned to remaining facilities.

I appreciate this opportunity to provide additional information on the work ministry staff were doing last week to keep youth and families informed. Youth were transferred to the remaining facilities on the day of notice, to help prevent their programming from being interrupted, and I can confirm that no youth was moved in the middle of night—not one. Probation officers advised the young people of their transition and provided information to them and their parents or guardians about what facility they were being transferred to.

For privacy reasons, it is important that I don't share specific details about the transfers, but in response to the member's question I can share that fewer than 10 youth in northern Ontario were relocated. Youth from northern communities were transferred that day to the remaining facilities in the northern region.

Throughout this process, our priority has been to minimize the impact on youth. Youth will continue receiving the supports they need, including culturally relevant programming, educational programs and mental health services. The transfers included the sharing of all educational achievements and progress to the receiving education program, to help ensure a smooth academic transition.

All youth residing in youth justice facilities across the province have access to mental health supports that are based on their individual needs, including psychiatrists, psychologists, mental health nurses and social workers. Youth also have access to specialist mental health services provided by the Hospital for Sick Children. Our focus is

on ensuring supports like these are available across the system, so youth can receive services closer to their family and communities where they will reintegrate.

Our government is also funding over 400 community-based programs and services, which include 48 culturally relevant programs for First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth in, or at risk of, conflict with the law. I know that this is an issue that the member opposite cares deeply about. This is something that is being acted on.

Youth justice facilities will also continue to support connections to communities and families. In response to public health measures, the ministry has invested in video-calling capabilities to allow youth to connect with family,

guardians and other authorized individuals like elders and positive community mentors. Financial assistance will also be made available for families that have financial need, in order to allow for in-person visits when a youth is in custody for an extended period of time.

Our government is committed to providing youth in conflict with the—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you, and thank you all for your good behaviour this afternoon.

There being no further matter to debate, this House is adjourned until 9 a.m. tomorrow.

The House adjourned at 1850.

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Martow, Gila (PC)	Thornhill	
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Morrison, Suze (NDP)	Toronto Centre / Toronto-Centre	
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