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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Tuesday 23 March 2021

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Mardi 23 mars 2021

The House met at 0900.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Good morning. Let us pray.

Prayers.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ACCELERATING
ACCESS TO JUSTICE ACT, 2021
LOI DE 2021 VISANT À ACCÉLÉRER
L'ACCÈS À LA JUSTICE

Mr. Downey moved third reading of the following bill: Bill 245, An Act to amend and repeal various statutes, to revoke various regulations and to enact the Ontario Land Tribunal Act, 2021 / Projet de loi 245, Loi modifiant et abrogeant diverses lois, abrogeant divers règlements et édictant la Loi de 2021 sur le Tribunal ontarien de l'aménagement du territoire.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I look to the Attorney General to lead off the debate.

Hon. Doug Downey: I'm honoured to rise in the House today to bring third reading of the Accelerating Access to Justice Act, 2021.

This bill, if passed, would improve access to justice for people across the system by modernizing processes and breaking down barriers in the province's courts, tribunals, estates law, family law and child protection sectors. These changes that we are proposing will transform the way Ontarians access justice in the courtroom and beyond. If passed, they would benefit people from across the province by saving them money and reducing the time they spend waiting in court.

These changes support our ongoing efforts to move more justice services online and closer to Ontarians. We want to expand access to justice across the province and provide better services to people regardless of where they live, and especially for those who live in rural, northern, Indigenous and francophone communities. If passed, these changes would help us achieve these important milestones.

Some of the changes proposed in the Accelerating Access to Justice Act are building upon the urgent work that the government undertook in the early days of the outbreak. Many of the others support the delivery of changes that have been in the works since I became Attorney General of Ontario. As we continue to debate this legislation, I want to remind everybody of how far we have

come. The rapid changes we made were remarkable, and we did this alongside our partners in the courts and the broader justice system, including the many lawyers and paralegals and staff who are on the front lines each and every day. I have said it many times before: We have moved the justice system forward decades in a matter of months.

Prior to the rapid change of the last year, our government has been doing the work necessary to bring substantive change to a system that was truly neglected by previous governments. As someone who has held a number of roles in the justice sector over many years and who has seen the antiquated processes leading to backlogs and delays, I have to say, I am still so impressed by the speed of our response last year.

When I say "our response," Mr. Speaker, I mean those on the front lines and our justice partners and those who all did what they do best: worked together and moved in the same direction. Despite the unknown and unprecedented challenges we were suddenly faced with, we moved quickly to uphold the administration of justice.

With a shared objective of keeping people safe, the Ministry of the Attorney General collaborated with our justice partners and public health experts to prioritize the health and safety of the judiciary, jurors, court staff, litigants and the public. It is difficult to describe the scope of the challenges we have faced when we consider the breadth of the justice system and how it is relied on in so many critical ways by Ontarians. The term "essential service" has been at the forefront of conversations throughout the past year, and I would suggest that justice is more than that. It is a value and a right that are the foundation on which life in our province is built.

The pandemic has taught us many lessons, but perhaps what should be the starkest for all of us is that the justice system can't close in the face of these unimaginable odds. At the best of times, keeping this system moving involves work done on the front lines in full sight of Ontarians who depend on accessing justice, as well as behind the scenes as thousands of people contribute their experience and expertise to keeping the wheels of justice turning. During this pandemic, we needed to work together to find new and innovative ways of delivering justice. And that is what we did.

Speaker, I have to say that this would not have been possible had our government not begun the work to right the ship prior to COVID-19. The research, consultation and legislation like the Smarter and Stronger Justice Act, which passed last July, paved the way for the rapid change that occurred during this past year. That is why it is so

important that as we look forward, we continue to drive modernization and accelerate access to justice so that our justice system is stronger, more resilient and prepared to respond to the needs of the people of Ontario as we recover from COVID-19 and beyond.

In response to the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19, we drove modernization across the sector in a number of ways. We worked with the courts to implement remote hearings as they suspended in-person proceedings. That quick pivot; it happened so fast. We went from in-person hearings to remote hearings almost overnight. It is a remarkable shift that involved so many people, just the rules around how things proceed. The chief justices tucked in and brought their experience to bear. The Ontario Bar Association brought Zoom licences. So many people did their part to make the system come together.

We provided new ways to file civil, family and small claims documents online, ensuring that people didn't have to make needless trips to the courthouse to resolve their legal matters. We unveiled a new online court case search tool to provide Ontarians with access to court information from the safety of their homes without needing to travel to a courthouse and line up to use a kiosk. We also implemented an emergency order to temporarily allow the virtual witnessing of wills and powers of attorney as long as a lawyer or a paralegal was present.

The onset of COVID-19 marked a period where many Ontarians were anxious to get their legal affairs in order. This emergency order helped many people resolve these matters efficiently and safely. In hindsight, it's incredible to look back and see how far we have come and how much has changed in the short span of a year. It is impossible to imagine going back. And we won't.

These groundbreaking changes and the work done by our government prior to COVID-19 have facilitated and formed the bedrock of today's proposed legislation, the Accelerating Access to Justice Act. We are determined to harness this momentum and to use today's proposed changes to break down barriers in communities across the province, expand access to justice for all Ontarians and support the justice sector's continued recovery.

I would like to speak more about how we are reinforcing the strength and capacity of the system to ensure it can best respond to the challenges of today and tomorrow. Ontario's COVID-19 recovery requires a strong justice system that works as well as it can to help people resolve their legal matters with as few obstacles and delays as possible. If passed, this bill would reduce the time and money Ontarians spend waiting for their day in court by helping to fill judicial vacancies faster. The changes we have proposed aid in filling judicial vacancies faster, make processes more efficient, and support the publication of detailed diversity statistics so that processes can be even more accountable and transparent. These changes would ensure Ontario's justice system is better equipped to meet the demands of the system as it evolves.

0910

It should be noted that I have been engaged with justice partners and lawyers for almost two years to find ways to

strengthen the system and update it. It should also be noted that these proposals build upon changes that were passed as part of the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act this past July. Changes were made then to the Justices of the Peace Appointments Advisory Committee's composition to make processes more efficient and require the publication of diversity statistics in its annual reports for every stage of the process: who's applying, who's getting interviews, who's getting recommended, and ultimately, who is being chosen.

We are looking to adopt similar changes today for the appointment of Ontario judges. Currently, judges are selected through a recruitment process that can take up to a year for each and every vacancy. That kind of backlog can start to add up fast. We owe it to Ontarians to ensure the system is working as efficiently as possible at all times. As Attorney General and as a member of this House, I believe it is our responsibility to ensure that the system works so that when vacancies—vacancies arise—you see, Mr. Speaker, I'm reading "vacancies" everywhere. But it says "vacancies." When vacancies arise, they can be filled quickly in order to maintain the capacity of the system as close to full strength as possible.

I noted during second reading debate of this legislation that not all members of this House would agree. In fact, I specifically heard from the member from Brampton East. He argued that if something isn't broken, we shouldn't fix it. Well, I'm proud that our current system is a model for others, but it is that type of complacency that the opposition is advocating for which has caused so many other elements of our justice system to stand still and fall behind.

A gold standard is achieved through leadership and a commitment to continuous improvement, and that is the leadership our government is showing today with these proposals. These changes will ensure Ontario's gold standard system is updated for 2021 and endures into the future. This is the responsible thing to do, and I am sure Ontarians are glad that we aren't listening to the advice of the NDP, or following the example of the Liberals, who allowed the justice system to fall behind and cause needless delays and backlogs for people who rely on it. Ontarians are waiting too long for their day in court, and in order to fulfill our commitment to advance the justice system, judicial vacancies should be filled faster.

No matter where you live in our province, the growth and well-being of our communities demands easier and faster access to justice and a system that works for people. As we continue to work together to keep Ontarians safe and support our province's recovery, we are committed to strengthening the capacity of the justice system to help communities overcome the challenges brought on by COVID-19.

As part of the Accelerating Access to Justice Act, we're proposing to address this issue head-on by increasing the minimum number of candidates the committee presents to the Attorney General from two to a minimum of six. This would allow a larger list of candidates to be considered for appointment.

I should add that the list provided to the Attorney General would only include the names of six or more

recommended candidates—candidates who were vetted, interviewed and recommended by the non-partisan, arm's-length committee. This was already part of the process beforehand, and it's an important part as it protects the process and helps keep it impartial. This aspect of the process absolutely will not change.

Here I would like to cite a quote from Allen Wynperle, the immediate past president of the Ontario Trial Lawyers Association, which was one of the legal groups we consulted while considering these changes: "The Ontario Trial Lawyers Association (OTLA) thanks the Attorney General for his continued commitment to consult with interested legal organizations regarding issues of common concern with the justice system. We agree with the minister that the list of judicial candidates he can consider for appointment should be expanded to a minimum of six."

We are also implementing changes to ensure that the membership on the committee itself remains diverse. Currently, the Law Society of Ontario, the Ontario Bar Association and the Federation of Ontario Law Associations appoint their own representative to committee. Under the proposed changes, the Attorney General would appoint the lawyer committee members, selecting from lists of candidates submitted by each organization.

We have heard some concerns discussed in this chamber and at committee about these proposed changes, and particularly towards our proposal to increase the minimum number of candidates from two to six. Allowing a greater number of candidates on the recommended list allows for a broader pool of candidates for consideration, which is a good thing.

One point is absolutely clear here: We're not attracting as many diverse candidates as we could or should be. One way we could achieve this is by having the committee bring forward more recommended candidates for the Attorney General to review. It simply makes sense.

I would like to emphasize that this particular change has support among the organizations that make up the Judicial Appointments Advisory Committee. Charlene Theodore, president of the OBA, told the Toronto Star that the changes allow "for more diverse choices than a list of two." She went on to describe providing more names for her association's representative "as an opportunity," noting the OBA has a diverse and fair-minded membership.

Furthermore, I would add that any suggestion that these changes would politicize the process undermines the professionalism of the Law Society of Ontario, the Ontario Bar Association and the Federation of Ontario Law Associations in selecting their own candidates for this committee. They will still select their own candidates, they will put those candidates forward and they will be chosen from there.

We're honoured to work with these exceptional legal professionals as part of the judicial appointments process, and we rely upon their expertise to inform these important decisions. As a long-time member of the Ontario Bar Association myself, I can certainly vouch for the high calibre and diverse qualifications and backgrounds of the legal professionals amongst its members. Ms. Theodore echoed

this when she told the Star, "We are underestimating the high-quality bar in this province if we imagine that a short list of six will necessarily introduce political bias." I can say that our government outright rejects the implications that these proposed changes would somehow politicize or create bias among these individuals.

Our approach here has also been lauded by the many law associations we consulted with as part of this process. I would like to share a quote from Craig O'Brien, who is the president of the County of Carleton Law Association, a very active and very progressive law association: "The County of Carleton Law Association appreciates the extensive consultations undertaken by the Attorney General towards improving the provincial judicial appointment process. We particularly value the candour and openness shown by the Attorney General and his staff in the collective effort to improve the efficiency and transparency of the process, while ensuring that the independence of the Ontario judiciary is maintained. The CCLA notes that many aspects of our feedback have been incorporated into the Attorney General's proposals and are confident that the modernized provincial judicial appointment process would help to maintain the public's trust in the Ontario judiciary."

More feedback from Tony Loparco, who is the president of the Ontario Crown Attorneys Association: "The OCAA appreciates the Attorney General providing us with the opportunity to consult about the JAAC and JPAAC process"—that's the Judicial Appointments Advisory Committee, JAAC, and JPAAC is for JPs. He goes on to say, "We support the movement towards increased transparency in the selection process."

Speaker, as I have mentioned previously, we've consulted with the chair of the committee, and, as you can see, we've talked to members of various legal organizations in order to weigh these proposals. They've provided their views on the appointments process and what can be done to improve it. These proposals are based on what we've heard and what we understand is needed to make improvements while ensuring transparency and upholding the integrity of the current system. This ongoing dialogue with our many legal partners also propels so many of the items we are proposing today as part of the Accelerating Access to Justice Act.

Another word here about promoting diversity in the judicial appointments process: I would like to mention another proposed change which would help keep us and the judicial appointments committee accountable towards assessing a diverse pool of prospective judges. The proposals would require the committee to publish detailed diversity statistics in their annual reports using information the applicants have shared voluntarily during the application process. By collecting and reviewing these statistics, we'll have a chance to analyze, improve and promote diversity on Ontario's bench. Again, we want to continue to drive improvement and that means ensuring that Ontario's judges should reflect the evolving diversity of the province's communities. By collecting and reviewing these statistics, we will be able to have a proper sense of where improvements can be made.

As I mentioned earlier, we're also proposing a change in the Accelerating Access to Justice Act that will speed up the process to fill vacancies by helping to solve a long-standing issue: that of candidates needing to reapply for similar vacancies in the same year. Candidates often have to reapply to be considered for the same vacancy in the same location they just applied for. If a vacancy comes up in Toronto and they apply for it and they don't get it, and another vacancy comes up, they have to reapply for it in Toronto. It really doesn't make any sense. This process is unnecessarily burdensome and it's a disincentive for many qualified applicants to seek out these roles.

Our proposed change, if passed, would require the Judicial Appointments Advisory Committee to recommend all of the remaining candidates who were recommended for the previous vacancy—just to be clear, I don't get a look at all of the candidates, just the ones who were recommended. If they send me six for the first vacancy, and another vacancy comes open—presumably I've appointed one—they'll send me the five with an update. This way, we'll be able to fill judicial vacancies faster by ensuring candidates don't have to go through the same process all over again.

0920

Furthermore, if there are fewer than six candidates remaining who were recommended for the previous vacancy—because somebody may have made a life choice, moved on to something else or withdrawn their name from the pool—then the committee would look at the other applicants in the pool and determine if any of them could be recommended for the vacancy to bring the list of recommended candidates up to at least six.

As you see, Speaker, a big part of our thinking behind these proposals was, how do we get more applicants? How do we get a broader, more diverse pool of lawyers to apply? And how can we make this process easier and more accessible for them?

As part of our efforts to simplify the process and as part of our government's broader commitment to accessibility, we're also making it easier for prospective candidates to apply by digitizing the application process.

Now, I'm going to talk about the current process; it's already undergone a form of digital transformation over the past year that has greatly improved the way the applications are submitted and processed. Previously, the applicants, if somebody wanted to become a judge, would fill out a 20-page application with materials outlining their case history, cases they've been involved in, their experience, community involvement, and why they believe they would be a good judge. There are a whole bunch of parts to that. So they would fill out those 20 pages. You would think that you fill out your application and you would send it in. But that, in fact, isn't what happens at all. You fill it out and then you photocopy it 13 more times, and then you send that in. So you end up with a ton of paper, and you think, "Wow, that's over 200 pages of material." It's antiquated, it deters qualified lawyers from putting their hat in the ring, and, quite frankly, we can do better. Those pages come in, those 200 pages for each applicant, so you

can imagine the amount of paper. With just 10 applicants, you have 2,000 pieces of paper. You can imagine in Toronto, we get many, many more than that.

But it doesn't stop there. The fun is just beginning, because somebody has to receive all that paper. They have to take those 14 applications apart and make 14 piles of each of the applicants. Then they have to take those piles and they have to courier them to the members of the Judicial Appointments Advisory Committee for them to be able to review. So they receive these couriers and they must—I have never been a member of the JAAC, Mr. Speaker, but I would think that you would get your pile of paper and turn around and look at the filing cabinets in your living room or in your home office, if you're lucky enough to have one, and think, "This paper just never stops." And they don't just throw the paper out afterwards; you either keep it or return it, because you have to have records.

Mr. Speaker, we're talking millions of pieces of paper over the course of the year between the JPAAC and the JAAC. We're talking a ton of paper. Well, in this day and age where I signed for my condo on my phone, it doesn't make any sense to be moving all that paper around, let alone the fact that it's just purely wasteful. That is not something that any of us value: being wasteful of resources and our paper.

Mr. Speaker, we moved quickly over the last year to create an interim electronic application process. We allowed them to do a revolutionary thing, Mr. Speaker. We allowed the applicants to fill out those 20 pages, and we let them do something revolutionary: We let them email them in. That email could be sent out securely to the members of the JAAC, and they could review them online if they chose, which I'm told most do. Then they would have a chance to continue to not have to store paper, not have to receive paper, or even if they're not storing it, not have to shred or return it.

We're continuing to work with the Ontario Digital Service and the Public Appointments Secretariat to refine and improve this process. So we used the tools right in front of us, but we think we can make it better. We think we can make it more efficient and create a system that is meeting the gold standard that our Ontario judicial appointments process is already.

All of these changes are intended to cut down on time-consuming paperwork, as I just said, and would encourage a broader pool of lawyers to consider applying. You say, "Why would that encourage lawyers to apply?" Well, because it's easier. It's going to be an easier process. We want to attract the best. We want to attract people who are best suited to be judges. I'm not convinced—and this is just me speculating. I've been in this area, in the administration of law, for a very long time. I don't have a line of sight into who is actually applying, and I shouldn't, but I have a gut feeling that we're not attracting as many people and as diverse people as we could. I think we can do better. With transparency and diversity statistics and making the system easier to apply and to engage with, I think we will. I think we'll do even better. People will look back and say

we had a gold standard, but we're moving to platinum, because we can improve what we have by using the tools that we have.

The digitization process is quickly becoming a pillar of our justice system's transformation. It promotes accessibility across the system, makes the administration process easier, faster and more effective. It informs so much of what we are proposing today as part of the Accelerating Access to Justice Act. It supports our ongoing efforts to ensure Ontario is best equipped to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow as demands on the justice system continue to evolve.

I cannot thank enough the numerous legal stakeholders who provided written submissions and testimony on the changes to judicial appointments during the public hearing stage. We heard that some clarification is needed to various portions of the proposed amendments, and we made those changes at the clause-by-clause stage. In particular, at committee we moved to strike out section 43(11) of the proposed legislation to clarify that the Chair of the committee cannot, by virtue of statute, unilaterally share confidential information with the Attorney General or anyone else that the committee policies don't otherwise allow for.

Our government has not stopped listening to the people on the front lines or the people at the heart of the process who know how the judicial appointment system works. We know it can be improved. We have incorporated their feedback from our initial consultation and onwards. We heard from judges who had been through the process. We heard from people who had applied and not been selected. We heard from practitioners who had no interest in applying but wanted to make sure that our system was at its best.

I just want to reflect for a moment on the kind of consultation—we're doing things very differently within the Ministry of the Attorney General than we did before. Again, this started back in 2019. It's a different approach to engaging with the legal stakeholders, the people who have an opinion and the general public.

I went out and had a meeting with the Federation of Ontario Law Associations. In the fall of 2019, I said, "Here is something that's on my mind. Here is something that I would like to talk about. I want to talk about our appointments process for judges."

Before this, it's very much a mystery. It's a bit of a mystery box. How do you become a judge? Who knows, right? How do you become a judge? It's a bit of a black box. Everybody thinks they know something. People have opinions: Here's how you can promote yourself, here's how you do this and here's how you do that. Look, there should be no secret here. We want the best to be confident, that they'll come forward, that they'll be considered and many of them will be selected. We need to take the mystery away from some of this. We need to make it more accessible. We need the public to have confidence in the judiciary by knowing that they were promoted or recommended by an independent body, and that will not change. The criteria have not changed. There are a number of

things that really are important. We heard from our legal stakeholders, our legal partners in this. But some things can change and some things are being proposed to change.

In terms of our consultation, again, I mentioned I said it at a podium in the fall of 2019; I said it again in February of 2020 before COVID hit: I'm very open about a policy discussion about a very important area. We shouldn't be afraid to float ideas. It has changed over that course of almost a year and a half. It has changed because we listen to people, because we heard what was important to them. Where we have seen a previous government, who now sits down at the end, be resistant to change, the only reason they were resistant to change, the only reason they wouldn't change things at committee is because it was a point of pride, because they came up with it. We need to be better than that. We need to float ideas. We need to almost brainstorm with our stakeholders to say, "How can things be better?"

Yes, we have a great standard. It doesn't mean we can't touch it. It just means that we should be able to be careful around it, listen to people, take the time, reflect, go back, come up with some refined ideas, re-engage and make this work. That's what we've done, Mr. Speaker. Almost a year and a half, we've been having this active, public, live discussion. I am so happy with what we've landed on, and I'm confident that it will bring the appointment of judges into 2021 and maintain the integral parts that were there when we started.

Now, I would like to speak about something else, about the proposed changes to allowing virtual witnessing of wills and powers of attorney, something many in the justice sector agree with us is long overdue.

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As I mentioned earlier, this particular area of estates law was one that came to the forefront during the onset of COVID-19. We heard from many Ontarians who were seeking to get their legal affairs in order and who were dealing with a lot of uncertainty and anxiety about how to manage this process. We're talking about witnesses meeting lawyers in driveways and in the yards of testators, watching through windows as wills were signed. We heard of lawyers and witnesses meeting in parking garages and watching wills get signed through car windows.

People were doing the best they could, managing in a very difficult situation, but these types of processes don't need to be this difficult or awkward or inconvenient. We got to work consulting virtually with experts across the province and quickly came up with an interim solution with an emergency order to temporarily allow virtual witnessing. This is an example of the speed with which we got things done in the early days of the pandemic, Speaker. It was something truly remarkable.

But of course, we couldn't stop there. This kick-started more conversations about ways to improve the process for witnessing and powers of attorney and ways to update the estates law system overall. This was an area of law that had remained relatively stagnant for nearly 20 years. It didn't need to be this way. We had the right tools at our disposal, and with the support of the estates bar, we had a

lot of ideas on ways to make these processes work far better for people.

There have been some questions coming up regarding why we aren't making the whole process digital. We've seen that British Columbia is moving towards passing legislation to permit digital wills, and similar actions are taking place in the US, in the UK and in Australia. Based on our ongoing discussions with members of the Ontario estates law bar, we believe we have landed in a good place. But of course, we'll continue to monitor the successes and best practices in other jurisdictions and weigh them against the needs of Ontarians in accessing justice here.

Speaker, while we feel these proposed changes support and enhance access to justice, there have been some concerns raised about how virtual witnessing impacts those who do not have access to a computer or Internet services. We've thought about this. We have considered these issues. I want to stress that the proposed virtual witnessing rules would not be mandatory for anyone. They are simply available as an option to help people access these services more quickly and efficiently, while also keeping people safe during these uncertain times. As Minister Bethlenfalvy and others in our government say, it's digital first, but not digital only. In other words, virtual witnessing is just another tool in the toolkit. It's optional, not mandatory.

We expect that lawyers and paralegals will consider the rules around virtual witnessing and the needs of their clients as well as the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 outbreak in determining what is the best approach for them and for their clients. We trust that these partners, including at the Law Society of Ontario, will continue to develop best practices that are most suitable to their clients' unique situations, whether that includes virtual witnessing or not.

In addition to virtual witnessing, we are also proposing changes to other estate matters in the Accelerating Access to Justice Act. Again, these changes are driven by the many valuable conversations we've had with members of the estates bar, and I'll touch on them briefly here. I'd like to add, though, that some of these changes have evolved through my experience practising law for 20 years. Whenever a change comes forward for a proposal and we think about it, I always picture myself sitting across the table from my client, thinking, "What would the client think? How would the client receive this? Is this in the client's best interest?" I don't want to build a system that works for me, the lawyer on this side of the table; I want to build a system that's successful and responsive and resilient for the client who is across the table from me.

Things like virtual witnessing are something that my clients—not all of my clients, but some of my clients—would have wanted. It would be more convenient. They may be rural, and it's a whole-day trip for them to come into town to sit down and give me instructions, only to go away while I draft the will or my assistant drafts the will, and then have them drive all the way back into town again, simply to sign a document, when they're completely Internet savvy, they're more than capable and they're more

than happy to get their business done in real time in a way that suits their lifestyle.

Whether it be somebody who's older and doesn't want to drive in or it's somebody who is a young entrepreneur running their business who just doesn't have the time, but they can make the time in their office to get this done, to get their affairs in order, those are the people who we're targeting. We're opening up the door for them to do their business in a more efficient way.

These changes are driven by those conversations with lawyers who were just like myself, who were sitting across the table from clients or, quite frankly, who were sitting across the table from nobody because the clients were too busy to come in, they lived too far away, and it was too cumbersome for them to get their business done.

Some other issues in the estates area: A lot of people don't know, but when you get married, under the current law, your will is automatically revoked by function of law. There's a long history, and there was a real reason for that in its day. The story that I'm told—and I'm not an academic on this piece, but I'm going to relay what I was told.

The reason that a will is revoked on marriage is because if you go back a couple of hundred years, women couldn't hold property. So when a woman got married to a man, the contract was between the man and the woman's father. If the man had a will in place and he were to get married, it would wipe out the will. It would revoke the will because the new contract would take over. That leads to things like dower, which doesn't exist in Ontario anymore.

There are historical reasons why they did this. It's not appropriate anymore. It doesn't make sense that the will is automatically revoked by function of law in the modern day and age. So we're proposing a change in this bill that would repeal that section of the law that revokes the will upon marriage, leaving in place any pre-existing will unless and until the testator takes action to make the change.

If passed, this change would protect people from being exposed to the risk of predatory marriages, which is a common issue: those situations in which marriage is used in order to disinherit others and to share in the estate. We have an aging population here in Ontario, and we want to protect people who might be vulnerable. This is a concern that was directly conveyed to us by the estates law practitioners on behalf of their clients. That's where this came from. So we're solving two things at once: We're updating the law for reasons that were put in place that don't make sense anymore, and we're protecting people from predatory marriages.

We're also proposing a change in this bill that would exclude separated married spouses from receiving an inheritance when the spouse they have separated from has died with or without a will. This would treat separated spouses similar to divorced spouses and would ensure that the law more accurately reflects the current relationship.

This was another area in the Accelerating Access to Justice Act in which we made an amendment at the clause-by-clause stage. We made a change clarifying what separation means in this instance in order to account for

potential reconciling of spouses. We wanted no barrier to having spouses attempt to reconcile. It was submitted by the chair of the estates subcommittee of the Civil Rules Committee and was supported by a senior member of the estates bar and was supported by other stakeholders. We're grateful for the input they have provided for this piece of the legislation.

Another important proposed change to estates law in the Accelerating Access to Justice Act is to allow courts to validate wills by adding in validation provisions. Currently, wills that do not strictly comply with all of the formal provisions can be found invalid by a judge, and the testator's wishes—the person leaving the will—might not be honoured, even if the non-compliance was minimal. Giving the courts the power to validate wills that do not meet all the formal requirements would help to prevent this from happening and avoid unnecessary delays as a result.

Once again, I want to take a moment to thank the members of the estates bar for their feedback during our consultations last year. Their input has been essential to informing our work with the Accelerating Access to Justice Act and our continued efforts to move justice forward beyond the province's COVID-19 recovery.

These types of changes open doors to further progress in our system. They give us even more opportunity to adapt, to update the way we do things and to ultimately evolve. Modernization is one of the many steps in helping us actualize an efficient legal landscape that makes it easier for people to manage their legal affairs. This is what accelerating access to justice is all about.

Now I'd like to turn to adjudicative tribunals. They play a critical and important role in our justice system as they resolve many types of disputes that can significantly impact the lives of Ontarians, while allowing individuals to avoid the lengthier and more complex processes in our court system. When we speak about access to justice in Ontario, we really can't get far before mentioning the critical importance of adjudicative tribunals and the many Ontarians who interact with tribunals each day to resolve their legal issues.

Part of our commitment to accelerating access to justice in this province involves proposing changes to this system to ensure it works the best that it can. Just to give a sense of scale, there are about 150,000 tribunal files per year in Ontario. It spans everything from landlord-tenant to social benefit to tribunals you have never heard of, Mr. Speaker, because they're fairly discrete and very focused. Then there are a series of land tribunals. As part of the Accelerating Access to Justice Act, we're proposing to consolidate the five land tribunals into a single entity called the Ontario Land Tribunal.

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Last July, the government created the Ontario Land Tribunals cluster to bring the five land tribunals under the leadership of a dedicated executive chair, Marie Hubbard. She's had tremendous success in streamlining the tribunals' processes and significantly reducing the backlog left over by the previous government. These tribunals include

the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal, known as LPAT, formerly known as OMB, formerly known as OMB2—it has had different names over time, but it's currently known as the LPAT. We also had the Environmental Review Tribunal, the Board of Negotiation, the Conservation Review Board and the Mining and Lands Tribunal. I think if I was to ask the members of the House to tell me the five land tribunals, even having just read them, they probably couldn't repeat them. There are many of them and they do a lot of things that overlap with each other, so we brought these five land tribunals together as an operational cluster last July, but they remain separate entities. Some, like the Environmental Review Tribunal, work to ensure that environmentally sensitive lands can remain protected. Others, like the LPAT, support the creation of new and affordable housing across the province while ensuring development proposals are consistent with provincial and municipal plans and policies.

These tribunals operate as well as they can, but, as you know, Mr. Speaker, land disputes can be complex. Some users currently need to appear before more than one of these tribunals to resolve any particular dispute. This process could work better, and so we vowed to improve this process to make it even more efficient and effective for Ontarians. That's why we're proposing to consolidate the five tribunals into a single tribunal called the Ontario Land Tribunal, as part of the Accelerating Access to Justice Act.

This single tribunal would have a single intake process and case management system which would help to reduce bureaucratic red tape and reduce the unnecessary overlap between cases. The proposed consolidation would not reduce or eliminate the hearing or appeal rates before the tribunal. We are also proposing changes to the expropriations process, and I would briefly like to explain what these changes would mean and how they would improve the system, if passed.

Non-binding hearings of necessity sometimes occur at the beginning of the expropriations process. The purpose of these hearings is to determine whether or not expropriation of an owner's land is "fair, sound and reasonably necessary." I should be clear here: These hearings do not make judgments on the overall wisdom of any particular infrastructure or any project. They simply exist to make recommendations back to the body approving the expropriation, and very few of them take place each year. The hearings are conducted by inquiry officers appointed by the Ministry of the Attorney General. They are assigned to conduct hearings by a chief inquiry officer, who, in recent memory, has also been a lawyer from my ministry. Under our proposed changes, this function will be moved into the new Ontario Land Tribunal. Tribunal adjudicators, who are independent, appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council following a competitive and merit-based process, will be assigned to conduct the hearings as necessary, instead of a member of my staff.

Elsewhere in the Accelerating Access to Justice Act, we're also proposing to allow the Lieutenant Governor in Council to create an alternative to these inquiry hearings

for any and all expropriations to which the act applies. If the bill is passed, regulations could then be made to establish and govern a process for owners to provide comments respecting a proposed expropriation and for the approving authority to consider those comments and make a final determination regarding an intended expropriation. This would provide for greater efficiency while ensuring fairness for owners and giving them a meaningful opportunity to be heard. We're committed to consulting with the sector on these regulations in due course.

Additionally, we are proposing to remove minister's appeals from the tribunal decision-making process. I'm going to say that again: We're removing the minister's appeals from the tribunal decision-making process. Currently, certain decisions of the Environmental Review Tribunal and the Mining and Lands Tribunal can be appealed to the minister. These appeal rights are rarely used, but, more importantly, they jeopardize the integrity of the administration of justice. They are not arm's length from the government, and they should be.

Tribunals are established to provide expert, impartial decision-making that is independent of the government. Allowing an appeal to a minister from a decision of a tribunal would detract from that and would be inconsistent with the objectives of a modern administrative justice system. Appeals to ministers also often unnecessarily prolong disputes and delay their final resolution. So not only is it a bad idea, it doesn't work very well.

Such appeals can also create issues around tribunal independence and expertise, efficiency and certainty. The proposed change would not prevent parties from appealing final tribunal decisions to the court on a question of law as is currently the case.

On the issue of ensuring that the adjudicators continue to have the necessary expertise to consider the matters before them, it's important for me to be clear here, Speaker: All tribunal members, including those currently on the Environmental Review Tribunal and the Conservation Review Board, would continue as members of the new tribunal when the change takes effect. This would ensure tribunal expertise is maintained on all types of land-based matters.

As is the case for adjudicators who presently serve on existing tribunals, appointments to the new Ontario Land Tribunal will still be governed by the Adjudicative Tribunals Accountability, Governance and Appointments Act, 2009, which sets out minimum selection criteria for adjudicators including experience, knowledge or training in the subject matter and legal issues dealt with by the tribunal. The chair of the Ontario Land Tribunal would be mandated to ensure that the most qualified individuals with the highest personal and professional integrity are recommended for appointment as adjudicators. The chair would be in the best position to assign adjudicators to cases before the tribunal, to ensure that they have the right mix of subject matter and legal expertise for particular matters.

Speaker, we have the appropriate checks and balances in place to ensure that the expertise of tribunal members

will continue to be held to the highest standard after the land tribunals are consolidated. These changes I am proposing as part of the Accelerating Access to Justice Act support our government's commitment to ensuring the tribunal system works as fairly and as efficiently as possible for Ontarians.

Elsewhere in the tribunal space, I would like to mention an investment we have made as part of our justice accelerated strategy which we announced a couple of weeks ago. This is a multi-year strategy which will mark the next chapter of our ongoing efforts to break down barriers in the justice system and speed up access to services remotely, in person and online. As part of the launch of the justice accelerated strategy, we announced a \$28.5-million investment in developing a tribunals case management solution for Tribunals Ontario that will help reduce delays and backlogs for Ontarians.

The new system will go far beyond just an online filing system. This is an end-to-end-digital solution that includes digital case management, document management, mediation, online dispute resolution and a public-facing self-help tool. It will serve two functions. Firstly, it will serve as an online resource that provides free public information to help users understand their issues, provide advice and assist in moving their disputes forward towards resolution. Secondly, the new system will provide a solution that includes the ability to schedule, automatically generate key documents and provide opportunities for early resolution and online dispute resolution.

We have been working hard with Tribunals Ontario to get this system up and running, and I'm pleased to say it will be implemented first by one of the busiest tribunals, the landlord and tenant tribunal, as early as this summer, and will be introduced in phased implementation for the other tribunals to follow. We've based this system on a similar model in British Columbia, which is well recognized and well respected for the success they've had in the digital transformation of their own justice sector. We'll benefit from their experience and build on their lessons learned.

I'm watching the clock, because I have a few more things that I would like to cover, but I just want to touch on tribunals in general. We'll hear the opposition, and we've heard them at committee, and we've heard them in the House, with concerns about doing things in tribunals: "What are you up to?" and, "Why would you do that?" Well, Mr. Speaker, we have to do something, because it's been ignored for 15 years by the previous government. Quite frankly, what we inherited needed a lot of attention. It's something that I feel strongly about.

When I became the Attorney General—I'll give you just one example. I have said before I came to government and I had a file folder of things that I wanted to tackle, and tribunals was one of them, Mr. Speaker. I can tell you the Ontario Municipal Board, as it was then, the OMB—I had a file. I don't like to change government based on one file; this is not a unique situation. I had a file, an OMB file, somebody that wanted to sever some land and got municipal support, got county support, was dealing with the province, was dealing with all of these—it's going to shock

you, Mr. Speaker. This file went on for 10 years—10 years—in the OMB.

This was an individual who had a small business with 100 acres of land that wanted to hive off a couple of acres so he could sell the business to a successor for a service in a rural area that was needed. I don't want to give too many details, Mr. Speaker, or I could get myself in trouble, but it was a totally logical thing, and the municipality supported it, the county supported. The province didn't support it. They had—well, I wish I could tell you the reason; it is so ridiculous, Mr. Speaker. Ten years; this poor individual. That's why we have to do something about tribunals, because that's not happening just in what was the OMB and what became the LPAT. People's lives are on hold, if issues are held up—whether it be the landlord or tenant or otherwise—if those delays exist, people are not getting their day in court. The matters get worse, and they don't get worse incrementally, they get worse exponentially, Mr. Speaker. If somebody's in a situation that could be resolved in 90 days and it's being resolved in nine months, the problem is that much greater; I think we all know that. That's why we need to focus on tribunals. That's why we need to make it work better.

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To have five separate land tribunals operating in silos really made no sense. We brought them together administratively last July, and if the bill passes we will bring them together functionally to work better for the people who are trying to access the system. I can tell you, under the leadership of Marie Hubbard—she is a force of nature, Mr. Speaker; I can't even begin to describe it. She's very efficient. She's a real taskmaster with the adjudicators, making sure that hearings happen, that decisions get written, that people get their day in court and they get their decision so they can move on. She's just doing a wonderful job.

I would be remiss if I didn't talk about another part of our legislation being proposed—it's another very important part—and it's going to make it easier for French-speaking Ontarians to access the justice system in the province. As I previously mentioned in the House, there are a lot of differences in provincial legislation when it comes to access to justice in French, including the right to file documents in French. There is more to do, but there's a lot being done. We are proposing to harmonize these differences by expanding and guaranteeing the ability of francophones to file documents in French at all court-houses in Ontario for all matters, including civil and family. The changes would also ensure that French-language rights are upheld across the province no matter where francophones are accessing the court system.

Our proposed changes would add to Ontario's work to increase access to justice for francophones, which also includes an exciting new action plan in North Bay. The North Bay Action Plan to Enhance Access to Justice in French builds on the success of partnerships with the Superior Court and Ontario Courts of Justice in Sudbury and Ottawa, and it's designed to help develop new practices that can be implemented in North Bay and then

across the province. These French-language action plans are powerful examples of how systemic change can take root and start to flourish more widely over time.

By expanding this work across Ontario, we're laying the groundwork for a major shift in the way justice services are offered, especially in French-speaking rural and northern communities—and, Mr. Speaker, it's long overdue. These are proposed changes that were supported by my advisory committee on access to justice in French, and we have engaged with AJEFO as well. The changes proposed in the Accelerating Access to Justice Act, if passed, would be key to supporting the long-term well-being and development of the francophone community in Ontario. This is an important step forward in making our services more inclusive and accessible for everyone in the province.

Now I would like to take a moment to talk about some of the family law sector, Mr. Speaker. The government is proposing changes that would allow the Office of the Children's Lawyer to produce reports on specific issues, set out the views of the children or produce a report following a more comprehensive investigation. The office provides legal representation to children and youth across Ontario in court cases involving decision-making authority, parenting time and contact with children, child protection, civil litigation, estates and trust—quite a wide range, Mr. Speaker. They also provide clinical reports for children involved in custody and access disputes. One of these reports is the Voice of the Child Report, which ensures a child's views and preferences are heard as part of family law proceedings. Making all of these reports admissible would give children a stronger and more prominent voice in the court process.

We've also heard from parents and guardians that the monetary threshold for guardianship applications for children's property was too low, forcing parents and guardians to take on additional legal fees to access relatively small amounts of funds. Our proposal under the Accelerating Access to Justice Act will amend this threshold so it would apply to money payable to a child under a court order, or a court judgement or intestacy—that's without a will. If that amount is under the monetary threshold, these changes would allow a child's money to be paid directly to a parent or guardian to hold for their child.

Another exciting part, Mr. Speaker, and this is something, again, that I came to government and am happy to be in a position to do something about. I want to take a minute to talk about the Public Accountants Council. Now, not everybody gets excited about accountants and accounting, but I am a lawyer and I get excited about things that others don't get excited about. This is another change that has been long overdue in the accounting profession. We are proposing to dissolve the Public Accountants Council and transfer its functions to the Chartered Professional Accountants of Ontario, also known as CPA Ontario.

In 2014, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario, the Certified General Accountants Association of Ontario and the Certified Management Accountants of

Ontario merged into a single body known as the Chartered Professional Accountants of Ontario. I'm just going to say that the CAs, CGAs and CMAs all became CPAs, Mr. Speaker; they came together. It's kind of like what we're doing with the land tribunal; we're bringing them all together. That happened in 2014. CPA Ontario requested that the Ontario government create legislation to support the merger, and so, at that time, my ministry launched consultations with CPA and other accounting bodies, and they also engaged the Office of the Fairness Commissioner. Then, in 2017, the Chartered Professional Accountants of Ontario Act was passed, which recognized the merger and the legal authority of CPA Ontario to regulate CPAs in Ontario, which seems logical.

To turn the page on these changes and write this final chapter, we have proposed these changes that will remove unnecessary duplication and streamline the oversight of this important profession. We're going to make sure there is only one regulatory body instead of two.

Speaker, this bill is a part of a broader effort to move justice forward, and something that we've been grappling with during COVID. The justice accelerated strategy is something that is very important. It's important to continue to drive change, to meet the expectations of Ontarians. We have built a multi-year strategy and will build a more accessible, responsive and resilient justice system. The justice accelerated strategy is our government's plan to break down barriers in the justice system and speed up access to services in person and online by:

- implementing new technology and processes to meet modern expectations in 2021 and beyond;
- delivering the courthouse of the future;
- breaking down barriers to justice in rural, northern, and Indigenous communities; and
- driving innovation to address long-standing and novel challenges.

Earlier, I spoke briefly about our investment in a tribunals case management system that will revolutionize the way we manage matters online and in person. This is an example of the investments that justice accelerated will make possible. The justice accelerated strategy also includes continuing the modernization drive in our courtrooms across the province. This includes growing capacity for remote hearings in courts across Ontario. We're investing in digital hardware. We're investing in the deployment of additional audio and visual conferencing equipment in more than 70 additional courtrooms by next spring.

This new strategy will also deliver the courthouse of the future to Ontarians. This involves a shift in how we look at courthouse facilities that focuses on using state-of-the-art technology to manage demand and reduce the need for in-person visits as much as possible, and it involves using the spaces we have more effectively, and thinking smarter about how we build new courts in the future. In order to achieve this, Speaker, we need to keep giving the courts the tools they need to continue hearing these matters efficiently and safely.

Speaker, this is just a short overview of our justice accelerated strategy. With the courts and our other justice

partners, we have developed so many exciting new ways to drive innovation in the sector, and there will be many more updates to highlight and share in the days and months to come. We will continue to deliver on the promise that we are not going back; we are moving forward. We will continue to demonstrate through unprecedented collaboration and innovation that justice accelerated is justice delivered.

I can see that I'm reaching the end of my time here, Mr. Speaker. Before I close, I would like to thank the stakeholders whose input provided the driving force behind so many of the proposals in the accelerating-access-to-justice legislation I shared today. I'm going to list a few of them, although it is not all of them: the Ontario Trial Lawyers Association, the Ontario Bar Association, the many regional law associations in the Federation of Ontario Law Associations, the Law Society of Ontario, the Ontario Crown Attorneys' Association, AJEFO, the Assemblée de la francophonie working group on access to justice in French, the Office of the Children's Lawyer and the Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee, along with many other legal organizations and members of the bar.

Mr. Speaker, although I said I haven't thanked all of them, it was very exciting to join for a brief visit with Jordan Atin's law class at Osgoode and talk to them, the next group of lawyers coming forward into the system, about the innovations happening and what's going to be there for them. They're not even going to know; they're going to read in history books about what we were doing a year ago because we've changed the system so much.

All of these people I have mentioned participated in the consultations, and I would be remiss if I didn't mention the chief justices, all three of them: Chief Justice Maisonneuve, Chief Justice Morawetz and Chief Justice Strathy, who have done yeoman's work in their areas to move the judiciary along with us while we built and changed the system. Their efforts and their collaboration, positively working together, are really, really remarkable. Although I have talked to every former Attorney General since I've been appointed, so I have some perspective—but I can tell you that the collaboration that I have experienced with the chief justices is absolutely remarkable. I really appreciate it.

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Everyone participated in the consultations throughout the last year on ways we could make the long-overdue improvements in the area of estates law, as well as promote diversity and transparency in our provincial judicial appointments process.

I'd also like to thank the many partners in the justice system who are working with my ministry to respond and adapt with remarkable swiftness in order to address the challenges brought by COVID-19. Again, I really want to thank not just the chief justices but their teams as well, who demonstrated an unprecedented openness to solving both long-standing and emerging obstacles. Their collaboration continues to be invaluable, and I look forward to continuing to work together with them.

I'd like to thank you again, too, for the opportunity to discuss this important legislation, Mr. Speaker. Today's

proposed changes, if passed, would move more justice services online, reach more communities across Ontario and ensure the system works better than it ever has before.

If passed, the reforms in the Accelerating Access to Justice Act would ensure that judicial vacancies are filled faster so Ontarians can get their day in court with fewer delays. They would help our land tribunals work as efficiently as possible to resolve land planning disputes that address the housing supply across the province while balancing the needs of environmental protection and conservation. They would ensure that people looking to resolve their estates matters can get their important documents signed and witnessed while staying safe. They would unify and clarify the regulatory process for public accounting in this province and close the book on changes that have been years in the making. They would support access to justice in French in communities right across Ontario. And these changes would help protect the best interests of children during stressful family law matters, ensuring the parents can spend less time and money in the courts and more time supporting their kids.

If passed, the Accelerating Access to Justice Act would break down barriers to justice, making our system more accessible for everyone, regardless of where they live and work in the province. Thank you, merci, meegwetch.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We do have time for questions.

Mr. Joel Harden: Thanks to the Attorney General for his speech. I have a question, because there was one thing I didn't hear my friend say in the speech, and that was legal aid. It strikes me that the income limit right now, even though it was increased a year ago for legal aid in this province, is \$18,795 for an individual. Speaker, I just want to point out for the record, that is 70% of what a minimum wage worker in this province earns in a year.

I would love to see my friend entertain an amendment to this bill so we would have a big increase to legal aid, so we could get legal aid coverage to minimum wage workers, many of whom we called heroes in the pandemic—grocery clerks and people delivering the takeout to our doors.

My question to the Attorney General: Would he consider a massive increase in legal aid? I'm hoping we can hear that at the budget this week. Will you go to bat at cabinet for that?

Hon. Doug Downey: I thank the member for the question from a different speech I gave about six months ago. This is about making the system work better for everybody. This is about changing family law. It's about protecting children's voices in the system. It's about land tribunals. It's about a lot of things. It's about making the system operate differently. As we engage in change, we've actually created muscle memory on how we engage with our stakeholders. We have changed how change happens in the justice system.

We're open to talk about any number of things. It does not surprise me that the NDP member wants to throw money at something and that's the solution. That's not the solution to everything. Structural change, rule change, system change, investing in the tools to make it accessible for

everybody is the kind of change that we're bringing forward with this bill. I hope that the member will see the good reasons to support it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: I want to thank the Attorney General and his parliamentary assistant for the work they have done on this legislation. I know they have both been consulting widely as to why this is important.

Something I know both of you had talked to me about is that a lot of people are waiting for their day in court because there's a significant backlog. A lot of that is because there needs to be vacancies filled so these people don't have to pay endless money just waiting and they can just have their day in court imminently. Can the Attorney General expand on what he's doing to fill some of those vacancies?

Hon. Doug Downey: Judicial vacancies come about for a variety of reasons. They can come about because of a retirement, and that is the easiest one to manage. The Chief Justice knows who's likely to be retiring, gets an early heads-up, and can plan judicial resources accordingly. She's very good about getting the right judges in the right place, and of course, you don't want to dislocate families for no reason or have judges working too far afield to cover gaps.

But the retirements are the easy part. If somebody falls ill or, in good news, somebody gets promoted to the Superior Court—and actually I should say shifted, because it's not necessarily a promotion; they're different courts with different things to deal with. If they get shifted, that creates a vacancy. If it takes us six months to a year to fill that vacancy, that's a courtroom not operating.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

M. Guy Bourgouin: J'apprécie le discours du procureur général. Le dépôt des documents, c'est excellent. Mais tout récemment, nous avons appris qu'une juge unilingue anglophone remplacera le seul juge bilingue du district d'Algoma et que ce poste se transférera à plus de trois heures, à Sudbury. Croyez-vous que cette décision aura un impact négatif sur l'accès aux services de justice en français dans la région d'Algoma?

Hon. Doug Downey: I appreciate the question. We have spoken of this before in terms of the judge in Algoma, the position in Algoma. I undertook in question period, one or two weeks ago, to raise it with the Chief Justice. The deployment of judges, as I have just said in the previous question, is under the purview of the Chief Justice. I don't assign judges to particular locations. That is an active discussion, and I hope to bring some resolve back for the member shortly.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Good morning, Speaker. Great to see you, as always. I want to thank the Attorney General and his hard-working parliamentary assistant for their efforts to improve the face of the justice system and to make sure that it's more reflective of our province's

diversity. Constituents in my riding would welcome the opportunity to see the bench better reflect the diversity of our community. I'm wondering if the minister would share more about how this bill would ensure that judicial appointments become more reflective of Ontario's diversity.

Hon. Doug Downey: I've heard some commentators, during this year and a half of consultation, say, "But we have the most diverse bench. The Ontario Court of Justice has the most diverse bench." That's great. We're a gold standard. We all agree we're a gold standard. But is it diverse enough? I would say no. We can do better. We can update for 2021, and that's exactly what we're proposing.

If you can't measure it, you can't change it, Mr. Speaker. That's why I felt strongly about putting in measures that were not only brought to the desk of the Attorney General but were transparent to the public. That will create a dynamic that I think will help address the lack of full diversity on the bench. I look forward to being able to receive those numbers publicly and have others be able to opine on them as well. Again, taking a gold standard, updating it for 2021.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Mr. Gurratan Singh: My question is as follows: The government has put forward the suggestion that the judicial appointment process, which is considered the gold standard for judge selection across the world, needs change to improve diversity. I'm looking here at a Toronto Star article where racialized lawyers, including Black, Asian, South Asian and Muslim lawyer associations, have come together to say that this is actually not a step that's going to increase diversity. It's instead described as a power grab. To quote lawyer Nader Hasan from the Muslim lawyers association, "We see this as a power grab dressed up in the very thin veneer of purported diversity."

Racialized lawyers did not ask for these changes to the judicial appointment process. Instead, they are ringing the bell, saying this could open the doors to a further partisan appointment of judges. How does the Attorney General respond to these racialized lawyers and their very valid claims that this could actually open up partisanship?

Hon. Doug Downey: I don't recall those groups coming forward and asking for change to the law practice program that Ryerson put forward as an alternative to articling. I was the lead on that for the Ontario Bar Association, along with Chris Bentley, who was the former Attorney General at that time. So I spent a lot of work on that. It had the effect of creating pathways for people who might not otherwise have pathways.

1010

I don't understand the member's point that in collecting diversity statistics—how that's going to give me some political opportunity to do something, Mr. Speaker. Look, we have to measure it to change it. That's what we have to do. That's exactly what we're proposing to do—and not just measure it to be put in a report on the desk of the Attorney General, but measure it so the public can see it. That's how we make change.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question?

Hon. Michael A. Tibollo: My question is obviously for the Attorney General. It relates to the recommendations of the working group on access to justice in French. As you can appreciate, as the minister responsible for mental health and addictions, the stress, anxiety, and depression that are caused when someone can't have those types of services in their own language obviously put a great deal of pressure on them. I'd like to understand a little bit better how the legislation builds on the recent announcement of the action plan to improve access to justice in French in the north.

Hon. Doug Downey: I really appreciate the question from somebody who is very knowledgeable in this area, not only as a practising lawyer but as the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions. We know that it's a very stressful time when you're engaging in the court system, regardless of the reason you're engaging. It is even more difficult if you can't engage in the language of your choice.

We've made it possible to file in family and civil documents at any courthouse across Ontario. We've made it possible to receive counter service at any courthouse across Ontario. That is really a basic thing. I'm really surprised that the previous government didn't take hold of that. When we do that, it allows people to operate in the language of their choice and takes away some of the stress that they're encountering as they move into the court system.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question—and it has to be very quick, and a very quick answer. The member from Thunder Bay–Atikokan.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: All right. It's a quick question: Landlords and tenants have had experience with the new digitized program and a regional approach for the adjudicators that—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Ask your question, please.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: The question is: What are you going to do about making sure that people have access to the Landlord and Tenant Board—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The Attorney General for a quick response.

Hon. Doug Downey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're going to fix it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. You did have a little bit of time, because we're a little bit early for members' statements. That's where we're going to turn now.

Third reading debate deemed adjourned.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Mr. Jeff Burch: Yesterday, I had the honour of joining Community Support Services of Niagara to deliver food to

local seniors participating in the Meals on Wheels program. CSSN is a critical contact for seniors, families and caregivers. Thanks to them, families can go to work and rest assured that their loved one is cared for. By offering these supports, seniors are choosing to live in their homes longer and report better outcomes.

Just two weeks ago, volunteers delivering meals to a senior noticed their health had begun to deteriorate. The agency was able to connect with the family and suggest supports. Within a week, the volunteers noticed a remarkable turnaround.

At the height of the lockdown, CSSN doubled the amount of people using their services and the numbers of meals delivered. Despite the demand, Community Support Services of Niagara and other community support organizations have not seen increases to their base funding in over a decade. On a little bit of faith and a lot of determination, they've been able to respond to the doubling demand for their Meals on Wheels services and even expand to create a program to deliver groceries to seniors.

Speaker, incredible organizations like CSSN want to devote all of their energy to serving the community. As a consequence of chronic underfunding, more and more time is spent on fundraising.

COVID exposed the issues in our current practices, but it also highlighted the importance of others. I hope this Legislature uses the opportunity of this budget to properly fund Community Support Services of Niagara and help our seniors stay in their homes for longer, with more comfort and dignity.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: Last week, I had an opportunity to speak to many of my constituents in Barrie–Innisfil. Something they had talked a lot about is post-COVID recovery and what we are doing to get through it so that more people can be employed and they can have the dignity of a job. Time and time again, they're sick of seeing handouts. They want to see a hand up. So, I was proud to tell them and discuss with them, and I want to update them in this Legislature today, what this government is doing on the skilled trades front and getting people back to work.

As you may be aware, we put in a COVID-19 Recovery Assistance Skills Plan, which includes retooling our Second Career program to support laid-off workers and investing in micro-credentialing, employment services and training programs, including apprenticeships. We're dedicating funding through Employment Ontario skills training so that more people can get jobs that match their skills and that, of course, they can upgrade any skills they need. We're also supporting workers to acquire in-demand skills through micro-credentialing, and that will be done through an online portal. Of course, those students who are young and are looking to apply their OSAP money towards micro-credentialing can now do that.

But that's not it, Speaker. We're also simplifying the system. We're investing in the tools grant so more people

can get help with those tools they need. We're investing in the corrections system so more people can be employed in public safety services and, of course, investing in more PSW training and supporting them through that and, for our young people, our future generation, investing in the skilled trades they're going to need for their future jobs.

Speaker, by giving every person in Ontario the opportunity to reach their full potential, the province's recovery will be swifter and more robust, setting Ontario on a path to a strong economic rebound.

TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

Mr. Peter Tabuns: This morning I asked the Associate Minister of Transportation to meet with my constituents who are represented by the group Save Jimmie Simpson. Since late February, my constituents who live along what will be the above-ground section of the Ontario Line have been trying to secure a meeting with the associate minister to discuss the impact of the line and their dissatisfaction with Metrolinx's feeble consultation process.

If consultation with Metrolinx were real, vigorous and resulted in improvements to the line that made it more compatible with the community, then the residents in my community would not be trying to meet with the associate minister, but that is not the case. So my constituents, through their group Save Jimmie Simpson, wrote the associate minister asking to meet to discuss their concerns.

This is a democracy. When people are not happy with the decisions or actions of bureaucrats, they know they have to go up the chain of decision-making to talk to the elected decision-makers. So far, they have simply been told to go back to Metrolinx.

They wrote, "We call upon you to consider our urgent fears for the health and well-being of our community. We would welcome an opportunity to meet virtually with you to discuss our issues and seek your advice as to the best ways to ensure our concerns are heard by the appropriate decision-makers."

Speaker, in a democracy, citizens need to be able to meet with elected decision-makers. I ask the associate minister to meet with the citizens.

RÉPONSE À LA COVID-19

COVID-19 RESPONSE

M^{lle} Amanda Simard: Les gens de Glengarry–Prescott–Russell ont été absolument extraordinaires durant cette période difficile, et j'aimerais prendre ce temps pour sincèrement remercier nos gens et tous ceux et celles qui continuent de travailler sans relâche durant cette pandémie.

Tout d'abord, à ceux qui ont perdu un être cher, je suis de tout coeur avec vous et votre famille.

À nos communautés—de Rockland à Bourget, à Hawkesbury, à Alexandria, à Marionville, à Maxville—merci. Je suis inspirée par le travail acharné et le

dévouement de tant de personnes dans nos communautés. Vraiment, incroyable.

À tous nos premiers intervenants, médecins, infirmières et à tous ceux qui travaillent dans le domaine de la santé, merci.

À nos enseignants et travailleurs en éducation, merci.

À nos propriétaires de petites entreprises, merci.

À tous nos héros méconnus, nos chauffeurs de camion, nos employés d'épicerie, tous ceux et celles qui font évoluer notre économie et ont un impact sur notre train de vie de tant de façons, grandes et petites, merci.

Et à nos médecins hygiénistes, le D^r Paul et la D^{re} Etches, merci de constamment nous informer et de veiller à notre santé et sécurité, souvent de façon créative et avec beaucoup d'humour, pour nous remettre le sourire au visage.

The last year has been extremely difficult. Physical distancing, not being close to our loved ones, our family, our friends, takes a toll on us. Human interactions, real live ones, are essential to our mental health. But we will get through this.

Ce sont des mesures difficiles, monsieur le Président, mais nous avons vu ces mesures fonctionner. Même avec l'arrivée des vaccins, ces mesures sont de mise. Continuons d'être vigilants, de porter nos masques, d'appuyer nos petites entreprises, nos commerces locaux, et de socialiser virtuellement, tout en utilisant ce temps pour planifier nos sorties excitantes, une fois permises.

GREEK INDEPENDENCE DAY

Miss Christina Maria Mitas: I'm thrilled to be able to rise in the House and speak today in celebration of the bicentennial celebration of Greek Independence Day.

Every year on March 25 since 1821, Greeks around the world commemorate this day. This year is extra special for us as it marks 200 years since we liberated our country out from Ottoman rule by rising up in a war of independence.

1020

This year, we celebrate with more fervour and passion than ever before—a very impressive feat if you are familiar with the passion and zest for life, the kefi, that Greeks have on any given day. We are so proud to come from a long line of fighters who stand up for their country, their culture, their religion, their way of life, and above all, for freedom.

In 1821, we committed to freedom or death—eleftheria i thanatos—and we meant it. This fighting spirit has stayed with the Greek people, both those living in Greece and those like me who are part of the diaspora. This day reminds us of our people's accomplishments and encourages us to continue to stand for freedom, both in Greece and around the world. Not everyone lives in a free country; in fact, many don't. Greek Canadians are especially proud to live in a strong, democratic country such as Canada.

I honour my ancestors today, and I commit to follow in their footsteps and do everything I can to safeguard the freedoms that we hold so dear. While Greece is free, and while Greeks around the world proudly and loudly stand

for freedom and against tyranny and oppression, all people and countries can dream of freedom too.

Remarks in Greek.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Miss Monique Taylor: Regeneration Community Services provides services for people with complex mental health and addictions issues. The workers there are CUPE Local 4891. These are the residential support workers, mental health workers, addiction case managers, peer and housing support workers, maintenance, kitchen and house-keeping staff who keep the place running. Unfortunately, these workers might go on strike.

To keep up with the cost of living, these workers need the 1% wage increase allowable under the terrible Bill 124. Regeneration simply doesn't have the funds to provide this modest increase and is asking for a three-year wage freeze. Staff can't afford to keep falling behind.

In the aftermath of this pandemic, Speaker, we are going to see the need for mental health services rise in every community across Ontario. Experts are already calling it the fourth wave. This government must provide community mental health organizations like Regeneration the funds they need to ensure that they have a stable workforce and can deliver the much-needed services.

Ontarians will need mental health supports in the aftermath of this pandemic. The government must ensure that they are available by adequately funding these community mental health services. I have already provided the Ministers of Health, Labour and Mental Health a letter to explain this. I hope to hear back soon.

PRORESP

Mr. Rick Nicholls: Recently, I met via Zoom with two key individuals from ProResp, a community respiratory therapy organization. I would like to thank Kim Johnstone, regional manager west, and Jennifer Demars, manager of the Chatham branch, for their valuable input. Both are registered respiratory therapists, also known as RRTs.

ProResp is celebrating their 40th anniversary this year. They are an essential service, with a staff of over 300, including 85 RRTs and 26 RT managers in 27 locations in the province.

What amazes me is the number 1,000. That's the number of Ontarians who suffered from COVID-19 whom ProResp brought home from the hospital to recover in the safety and comfort of their own home. They know their clients are more susceptible and even more fearful of COVID due to their chronic respiratory illness. By working alongside the overworked doctors, nurses and respiratory therapists in hospitals across Ontario, patients can go home safely, thus lightening the load so others can focus on the most severe cases.

Through this pandemic, ProResp continues to conduct in-home respiratory assessments and conduct wellness phone checks of their clients while maintaining strong relationships with their in-home clients, long-term care,

physicians, hospitals, retirement homes and hospices throughout Ontario.

Their motto remains, “We never stopped caring, and we never will.” Thank you, ProResp, and again, congratulations on celebrating 40 years of serving Ontario.

HOME CARE

Mr. John Vanthof: I’d like to take this opportunity to make the House aware of the state of home care in certain parts of the province, especially Timiskaming–Cochrane.

I’d like to tell you a story about Jaqueline in Iroquois Falls. Jaqueline is in her eighties, and she qualifies for 15 hours a week of home care, but it’s actually not for Jaqueline; it’s for her son. He’s 60, and he has been bedridden for the last 20 years. Jaqueline takes care of her son. She qualifies for 15 hours a week; some weeks she gets one, some weeks she gets two, and when our office intervenes she gets a bit more—the reason being, the for-profit company cannot find PSWs, and as a result, Jaqueline is in crisis. So now Jaqueline has taken it upon herself to hire PSWs herself, from her pension and from her son’s pension. And do you know what? The PSWs exist—because Jaqueline pays them a living wage.

That’s something we could learn from. The people who qualify can’t get it, and they have to pay for themselves—because they pay a living wage. Why doesn’t the private home care company do the same?

LUNAR NEW YEAR

Mr. Billy Pang: In February, I had the pleasure of co-hosting a virtual lunar new year celebration in my riding of Markham–Unionville with our member of Parliament, Bob Saroya. Lunar new year symbolizes prosperity and good fortune and is one of the most significant holidays celebrated by many Canadians of East Asian and Southeast Asian descent. Although we were not able to celebrate like in previous years, I was happy to co-host this virtual event with MP Saroya to bring our community together from the comfort of our own homes.

At this event, we were joined by over 300 attendees and honourable guests, including Senator Victor Oh; the leader of the official opposition of Canada, the Honourable Erin O’Toole; the Premier of Ontario, the Honourable Doug Ford; and fellow MPPs. I want to thank everyone who attended and made that night unforgettable.

Mr. Speaker, while most Ontarians welcome multiculturalism and respect one another, I want to recognize the rise in verbal harassment and physical attacks towards Canadians of East Asian and Southeast Asian descent, which significantly rose in our province and across Canada since the beginning of the pandemic. These actions should not be tolerated and should not be bypassed.

Our province was built on the backs of Ontarians from different cultures and backgrounds. And no one should walk down a public space in fear.

As a government, we will always condemn any form of racism, and we will continue to confront and stand against these hateful crimes.

JOURNÉE INTERNATIONALE DE LA FRANCOPHONIE

M^{me} Natalia Kusendova: Je suis très fière de prendre la parole aujourd’hui devant cette Assemblée pour célébrer la francophonie dans cette province. Samedi dernier, le 20 mars, a marqué la Journée internationale de la Francophonie, une occasion de reconnaître la place importante de la communauté francophone ici en Ontario et partout dans le monde.

La communauté franco-ontarienne fait partie de cette province depuis plus de 400 ans et il y a maintenant plus d’un million de personnes qui parlent français en Ontario. Ces communautés ont fait de grandes contributions au développement culturel, social et économique de cette province, aidant à créer le merveilleux Ontario d’aujourd’hui. C’est pour cette raison que le drapeau franco-ontarien flotte maintenant tous les jours fièrement devant de nombreux édifices en tant qu’emblème officiel de l’Ontario. Nous pouvons tous trouver de petits moyens similaires de reconnaître la francophonie chaque jour. Petit à petit, l’oiseau fait son nid.

Je suis particulièrement fière de mes collègues francophones et francophiles dans cette Chambre, ainsi que de tous ceux et celles qui s’investissent à apprendre la langue de Molière. Continuons à travailler ensemble chaque jour pour soutenir l’épanouissement de la francophonie en Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): That concludes our members’ statements this morning.

1030

SHOOTING IN ATLANTA

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I’ve been advised that the Leader of the Opposition has a point of order that she wishes to raise, and I’ll recognize her.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: I bring forward a motion to have a moment of silence because of the recent tragedy that occurred in Atlanta. It’s just the latest in a disturbing rise of anti-Asian racism that has only grown over the course of the pandemic.

Unfortunately, Canada has also seen an increase in anti-Asian racism. People are looking for us, as leaders, to stand with them in the fight against hate. I was really happy to hear the government member speaking about this very issue a minute ago.

I seek unanimous consent for the House to observe a moment of silence for the victims of the recent mass shooting in Atlanta, to condemn the disturbing rise of anti-Asian racism and hate crimes across North America, and to convey our collective commitment to aggressively fighting anti-Asian racism here in Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Leader of the Opposition is seeking the unanimous consent of the House to observe a moment of silence for the victims of the recent mass shooting in Atlanta, to condemn the disturbing rise of anti-Asian racism and hate crimes across North America, and to convey our collective commitment to

aggressively fight anti-Asian racism here in Ontario. Agreed? Agreed.

I'll ask members to rise.

The House observed a moment's silence.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. Members may take their seats.

QUESTION PERIOD

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Speaker, my first question this morning is to the Premier. We have heard, disturbingly, that almost a third of seniors over the age of 80 in Ontario have yet to be vaccinated.

My question is, what is the government's plan to make sure every senior over the age of 80 who wants a vaccination is able to get vaccinated?

Hon. Doug Ford: Through you, Mr. Speaker: Speaking to the table the other day—we're doing everything we can. We're already at 71%. We booked over 190,000 appointments yesterday, which is a new record. Our goal is to make sure that we reach out to every single senior 80-plus to make sure we fill that gap. We also have mobile units going to areas which have a tremendous amount of seniors right across this province. We're going to continue making sure we hit that threshold of 100% very, very shortly.

Everyone is doing a great job out there, doing the testing, so thank you.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question?

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Speaker, the reality is that there are many, many seniors who are either unable to go to a mass vaccination site or are fearful of going to a mass vaccination site.

We're hearing some pretty tragic descriptions of what folks are going through, and I'm going to share one with the Premier this morning. This is from Peter Trainor, the grandson of Susan Rochlitz: "My grandmother, Susan Rochlitz, a 96-year-old Holocaust survivor who is housebound and struggling with dementia, still hasn't been vaccinated against COVID-19 because she can't go to a vaccination centre. Somehow," Premier "Ford [has not] figured out how to provide her with a vaccine at home, despite having had more than a year to figure out how to vaccinate disabled, housebound seniors."

There has been a lot of time to plan for this eventuality. There has been a year that the government had to plan to vaccinate seniors. How can it be that seniors like Ms. Rochlitz are still unable to get vaccinated in Ontario?

Hon. Doug Ford: Through you, Mr. Speaker, we've vaccinated over 1.6 million people, 300,000 people—again, leading the country, bar none—over 80 with their double dose of vaccine. We're going to continue on moving forward on this. We're doing everything we can to make sure we get into the homes and provide people

with transportation as well, getting from their home over to the vaccination site, or the other option is the mobile units. I have all the confidence in the world we'll have this up to 100%, hopefully in the next short while there.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The final supplementary.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Well, mass vaccination sites and confusing booking systems simply don't work for most seniors—or for many seniors; let's put it that way: for many seniors. As a result, we have literally thousands upon thousands of seniors who have been unable to get vaccinated here in the province of Ontario.

We have heard the science table, a while back, recommend mobile units to the government. We've seen family physicians jump on board as well for the mobile units. The Premier claims that there are mobile units on the roads, when we know that seniors aren't getting those vaccines in their arms in a convenient and safe way at home.

So when will this government finally get its act together and make sure seniors over 80 get the vaccines that they need when they are wanting those vaccines?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Health to reply.

Hon. Christine Elliott: In fact, the government has planned for seniors and everyone else in Ontario to receive vaccines in a variety of ways: through hospitals; through mass vaccination clinics, mobile clinics, specialty clinics and also by primary care; and in some cases, if they're homebound, by their home and community care nurses that are coming into their home. So that has been planned for. That has happened.

We have started the rollout in our primary care settings in Hamilton, Peel, Peterborough, Simcoe, Muskoka, Toronto and Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph. That is going to be rolled out further because we know that there are many seniors who have underlying health conditions, people over 80, who feel more comfortable going to their primary care provider in order to receive their vaccine and to understand, with their underlying health conditions, whether that's safe for them.

As we increase the volumes of vaccines going into primary care centres, we will see more seniors going in to receive their vaccines there or, if they're homebound, to make sure that a home care nurse will be able to deliver the vaccine to them after they have had a conversation with their primary care provider.

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Andrea Horwath: My next question is also for the Premier. But I have to say, we started receiving vaccines in this province at the end of the year last year. It is now near the end of March, and we still have many seniors over the age of 80 who have not received their vaccines. Shame on the government for not being ready to get those vaccines into the most vulnerable people's arms in our province.

But my question is actually about another problem that we have with the COVID-19 pandemic, and that is the backlog of surgeries and the backlog of procedures that

exist in our province. Last week, BC announced that, in fact, their backlog will be cleared by May of this year. It will be cleared by this summer.

When is the provincial government here in Ontario going to be able to announce that our backlog of surgeries and procedures has been cleared?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: We're certainly aware of the backlogs of surgeries and procedures that had to be postponed during wave 1 and, in part, during wave 2 of COVID-19, but we have been dealing with that. Notwithstanding all of the pressures of COVID and the capacity levels in our hospitals, we have been working on those backlogs.

We have also invested up to \$283 million to support additional priority surgeries, including cardiac, cancer and orthopedic surgeries, to allow for operating rooms to be able to operate and open during weekends and evenings. We've also invested more than \$351 million for more than 2,250 new beds at 57 hospitals. We've initialized a centralized wait-list to be able to make sure that in every hospital, we can take advantage of any extra space they have.

So we have put considerable time and energy and money into dealing with this, and we will be able to ramp those up once more people have received the vaccinations and once the variants of concern have diminished. We'll be able to do that even faster, but we are working on those backlogs now.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Well, almost a year ago now, back in May of 2020, is when British Columbia announced their plan for getting rid of the backlog of surgeries and procedures. In fact, they funded it very, very well. They hired something like 44 extra surgeons and, as I said, they put timelines together; they announced the goals that they have.

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We have none of that from the provincial government here in Ontario. In fact, this government waited until the second wave was upon us before they even acknowledged that we had a problem with surgeries and backlogs. It's really a big concern, Speaker, and now we hear from this minister that there are no targets, there are no timelines, and the amount of money that the government is talking about is wholly inadequate for the backlog that exists.

How long is it going to be before the people of Ontario have a clear plan of when that backlog, how that backlog is going to be dealt with by this government?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Well, of course there are targets and timelines to be met here, but we also have to recognize the fact that we are dealing with variants of concern that are putting more people into hospital because it's much more transmissible, needing more intensive care beds and resulting in greater care than some of the other patients. So as we are trying to deal with the volumes of surgeries and backlogs, we also have to recognize that competition for that space. We need to take care of the people with COVID as well.

So it's not possible to give a specific timeline, but I can certainly advise the member opposite, through you, Mr. Speaker, that we are working on that. We have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in creating over 3,100 more beds since this time last year. That's six community hospitals. We've amped up the space and capacity. We have a centralized wait-list now to be able to make sure that we can take advantage of any space that's available in any hospital, and we've invested hundreds of millions of dollars in allowing for extra time for these surgeries and procedures to be conducted. We are working on this, because as difficult and sad as it is for a family to lose a member due to COVID, it's equally sad to lose someone due to cardiac or cancer lack of care, and we are very cognizant of that—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. The final supplementary.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Speaker, what we need to recognize is that there are thousands upon thousands—hundreds of thousands—of Ontarians, some of whom are waiting with pain, with anxiety, with cancers that are spreading through their bodies, for some kind of signal from this government that they have a handle on the backlog crisis when it comes to surgeries and procedures. In fact, a bare minimum is a figure of 277,000 patients who are waiting right now.

One cancer patient said this to Citytv: "It's frustrating, it's terrifying." Of course it is. And what is even more terrifying is that this government is not putting out any clear plan, no clear funding, no clear target about when these surgeries and procedures are going to be addressed. When will the government make a clear announcement and put the necessary investments in place to clear the backlog of COVID-related procedures, cancer surgeries and other health requirements?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Well, as the leader of the official opposition indicates, people are feeling frustrated. They're very concerned. We certainly understand that. We know that many people have been waiting long periods of time for cardiac, cancer surgery, orthopedic procedures as well, and we want to make sure that they can receive those surgeries and procedures as soon as possible. We have spent over \$2.8 billion in keeping Ontarians safe, planning for future waves of COVID-19, which is in order to deal with both COVID but also to deal with people who are waiting for those other surgeries.

Now, I think it's important to note, Speaker, that people who have had very serious, life-threatening situations have been assessed and have been assessed every step along the way, so that if they need surgery immediately to save their lives or to prevent things from worsening very quickly, they are receiving those surgeries. But for other people, we are investing hundreds of millions of dollars in order to speed up those surgeries so that people can get on with their lives.

MEMBER'S CONDUCT

Mr. John Vanthof: My question is to the Premier. Last week, a group of anti-lockdown protesters gathered in

Sarnia in defiance of local public health rules and called on the government to overturn local COVID restrictions that were put in place to save lives and keep people safe. In response, the member for Sarnia–Lambton said he applauded the protestors. He applauded them. Despite COVID numbers spreading like wildfire in his community and pleas from the mayor and council for more support, the local member seems to be cheering on protesters.

My question to the Premier: Does he agree with his backbench member? If he doesn't, will he ask the member from Sarnia–Lambton to apologize for the confusion that he has caused?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The question will be responded to by the government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member for Sarnia–Lambton has been a strong member of this Legislature throughout the COVID pandemic. He has been very forceful in assisting us in making sure that this House is safe, that this Legislature is safe, that we bring forward legislation to keep the people of the province of Ontario safe.

I think all members, at some point in time, support people who want to protest, even if that protest is an incorrect protest in my opinion. Look, I have great faith in everything that the member for Sarnia–Lambton has done. I know that the member opposite knows that the member for Sarnia–Lambton is an honourable member who has served with distinction in this chamber. I know that he would probably appreciate that, and despite the fact that he's been forced to ask this question about the member for Sarnia–Lambton, I know that he knows how good a person he is and how hard he has worked throughout the pandemic.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: I'll unshackle you later, John.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question.

Mr. John Vanthof: It was an interesting wink I got from the House leader there.

Last week, as the local Conservative member was cheering on anti-maskers and anti-lockdown protestors in his community, the mayor of Sarnia wrote to the Premier pleading with the government to increase their access to vaccines and supports.

The Sarnia–Lambton area is currently in an active outbreak and is desperate for help, but the only response from the Conservatives—Mayor Bradley said he was surprised he hasn't heard back from anyone in the Premier's office yet. He even marked his letter "Urgent," which made it even more confusing.

Speaker, he's now sent another letter. Can the Premier confirm that he's going to answer Mayor Bradley in his call for support?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Premier to reply.

Hon. Doug Ford: First of all, I want to thank the member for the question. What I recollect and what I've been told by the 444 municipalities—or mayors, I should say, and wardens—that I'm the only Premier in the history of this province who has given their cell number to every

single one of them. There's not a day goes by that I'm not talking to a half a dozen to a dozen mayors or wardens around this province. I'll make a point of making sure I call the mayor down there and provide any support.

But in saying that, any mayor knows—and I've said it numerous times on calls with them—that they can give me a call, send me a message and I'll guarantee I'll get back to them. But I'll make a point of getting back to him personally.

LONG-TERM CARE

Mr. Michael Parsa: My question is to the Minister of Long-Term Care. After decades of neglect in which the previous government was unable or unwilling to add meaningful numbers of new spaces to long-term-care supply, I was pleased to see the Minister of Long-Term Care and the Minister of Finance taking a major step forward in long-term-care development in their announcement.

Speaker, I'm proud to be part of a government that is moving forward to repair and rebuild long-term care in Ontario. The investment of \$933 million, on top of the \$1.75 billion already committed, in 80 new long-term-care projects will lead to thousands more new and upgraded long-term-care spaces across the province.

My question to the minister is: What impact will this announcement have in my riding of Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill?

Hon. Merrilee Fullerton: Thank you to the member for Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill for his question. These 80 projects will lead to an additional 7,510 new and 4,197 upgraded long-term-care spaces across the province. That's major progress.

In the honourable member's riding, this allocation alone has two new projects moving ahead. Mon Sheong long-term care has been allocated 288 new spaces to create a net new home through the construction of a new building in Richmond Hill as part of a campus of care. Mon Sheong provides culturally sensitive care to the Chinese community.

Chartwell Aurora has been allocated 128 upgraded spaces. This project will result in a 192-bed home through the construction of a new building in Aurora and will replace ward rooms with ones built to modern design standards in a new building.

I thank the member opposite—or the member here, right next to me, for his good work.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mr. Michael Parsa: My supplementary is also to the incredibly hard-working Minister of Long-Term Care.

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That's great news in my riding, Mr. Speaker, and I'm sure my constituents are going to be incredibly pleased to hear it. After decades of neglect, it's heartening to see our government being the one to fix the problem of long-term care in our province.

Addressing capacity and sorely needed upgrades is long overdue, and we all saw the dangers ward rooms pose during the pandemic. As the Financial Accountability Officer found in a 2019 report, the previous government built 611 net new beds between 2011 and 2018, so it's crucial we catch up on this important work.

I'm wondering if the minister can tell us again: What will be the impacts of these new constructions and upgraded beds in York region?

Hon. Merrilee Fullerton: The good member is correct when he notes the previous government's record. While the Liberals were content to build 611 spaces province-wide over seven years, our government will build 608 new spaces in this member's riding alone. The projects across York region will create net new capacity of 2,974 spaces.

After years of neglect and indifference from the previous government, it will be this government that repairs and rebuilds long-term care in Ontario. The neglect of the previous government is stunning and set the stage for what we saw in this pandemic.

These new spaces and homes will give Ontario residents confidence that they can receive the care they need when and where they need it.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: My question is for the Premier. Last week, Dr. Janet DeMille, our public health officer from Thunder Bay District Health Unit, called for Thunder Bay to become a COVID-19 hot spot.

My constituents are upset and angry, and they want this government to do something. Small businesses that have been shut for months are desperate. People are frustrated by the lack of vaccine appointments available.

Through you, Speaker: Will you, Premier, declare Thunder Bay a COVID-19 hot spot to get this situation under control?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: I thank the member very much for the question.

In fact, Thunder Bay has been a hot spot in the past, and we have allocated significant resources to assist in order to get the numbers down. There are now 30 assigned provincial case managers there who were sent to assist the public health unit in order to do the case management and contact tracing. We now have 90% of the cases are reached within 24 hours and 87% of cases reached within—sorry; within 24 hours, yes. The number of cases has gone down significantly, from 32 on Saturday to 27 on Sunday to 16 cases most recently.

So the numbers are coming down, putting Thunder Bay in the situation where they are, with respect to being in the grey zone, has been very helpful—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Response.

Hon. Christine Elliott: —with the assistance that has been provided by Public Health Ontario and others to help keep those numbers under control.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question?

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: My question is again to the Premier.

Everyone wants hope. But for months, the COVID-19 crisis in Thunder Bay has been building. We had an outbreak in our local correctional facility that spread throughout our community, and now our jail is being packed again.

While our local health care front-line workers are keeping us safe, they are overworked and exhausted and need this government to do more.

With our regional hospital's limited capacity, it makes sense to vaccinate as many people as possible. And yet, people over 60 are able to get vaccines in Toronto but not in Thunder Bay.

What is this government going to do right now to help the people of Thunder Bay?

Hon. Christine Elliott: In addition to the additional 30 case and contact managers who have already been provided to Thunder Bay, there has been a total of \$2.7 million which has been invested in the Thunder Bay hospital, which has helped to add over 30 new beds.

I can certainly advise that we are planning to roll out the vaccine plan as we receive additional doses. We have not had significant volumes of doses until quite recently. We did receive 466,830 doses of the Pfizer vaccine yesterday. Those are going to be sent to the public health units based on their population and based on their need. So if there's still a significant need in Thunder Bay, there will be additional volumes of vaccines that will be sent there.

They are available at mass vaccination clinics. They are going to be available through pharmacies. We have approximately 325 pharmacies right now in the Toronto, Windsor and Kingston areas. Those are going to be doubled across Ontario in the next short while. Anyone who is over 60 years of age can now receive the AstraZeneca vaccine at a pharmacy, and anyone 75 and older can receive the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine at a mass vaccination clinic. There will be other clinics—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much.

The next question.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. Roman Baber: My question is to the Minister of Education. Of all the harms inflicted by this government through COVID response, the greatest harm inflicted is on Ontario's children. The minister forces kids to remain silent during lunch. The minister is making kids wear masks outdoors. Kids are afraid to cough in class because a teacher may report them. This government makes kids scared with daily TV commercials that if they hang out next to another child, someone may die.

Last week, I met with two parents from Etobicoke North. A Catholic school in the Premier's riding has Plexiglas around the desks. At recess, each class is confined to a 20-by-50 box drawn on asphalt. From time to

time, the teacher walks around with a two-metre stick, enforcing distancing. Kids who aren't distancing lose their break and are told to go back inside for re-education. This is pure evil.

My question to the Minister of Education: Does he actually believe he is keeping kids safe? Or will he take responsibility for the harm he is inflicting on Ontario's children?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: The greatest harm we inflict on children is when we close schools, which is why the Premier has been so decisive in keeping them open in this province.

Mr. Speaker, 99% of schools are open. We're proud that we have leaned into and followed the public health advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health. We're also pleased to see students in schools socializing and learning—for their own development and for their mental health, which I think is something that all members in the House would accept is a metric which we need to continue to be concerned about and focused on.

We've put in place a protocol with full investment, fully supported by the Chief Medical Officer of Health, with the aim of keeping schools safe; and I'm pleased. I think perhaps we would agree, the member opposite and I, that schools have been safe places for learning, contrary to the alarmist rhetoric of the members opposite. The fact is that 99% of schools are open today while we deal with the variants of concern; 99% of staff and students do not have an active case. The fact is, in our asymptomatic testing the positivity rate remains low. We'll continue to follow the facts, the science, and keep these schools open in this province.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mr. Roman Baber: I think the minister rehearsed an answer to a different member opposite. I'm saying that kids are not safe from this government in school, and we have not heard an answer from the minister.

Over the weekend, the Minister of Education was busy taking selfies while "catching up with seniors," all while families of loved ones are denied visitation rights by his government. Shame on this government. But in last Friday's news release, the government said that it will work with health officials to determine measures for "outdoor activities where the risk of transmission is minimized."

Study after study is telling us that, with few statistical exceptions, kids are almost at no material risk of COVID. And even though the minister tries to take credit for everything under the sun, credible studies are telling us that children spread the virus far less than adults. I invite the members to read yesterday's article in the HuffPost on this topic.

So my question to the Minister of Education: If the risk of transmission is minimized during outdoor activities, then why does he force school children to wear masks outdoors? Will he commit now to repeal this requirement?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We have followed the best medical advice with the aim of keeping schools open. That is why we have adopted the recommendations of the

medical community. There is a consensus in the country; we're not the exception to the rule. We happen to be the first in the nation to have adopted these protocols, to be fair, in the context of masking. All the provinces have a similar approach. In the context of outdoors, we have asked where distancing cannot be maintained, then masks can be worn. At the end of the day, what we're trying to mitigate is the potential transmission of COVID.

Now, the truth is, as the Chief Medical Officer of Health has said, when we talk about cases per day "in schools," the overwhelming majority, over 90% of those cases, have come from the community in the school. They were not transmitted in the school community, and therefore, it underscores that schools have been safe.

We're proud of the fact that 1.5 million children are physically in a school. The remainder, the next half a million, are learning remotely online. Our province has set up a system of quality education both in-school and online, and that will continue under this government.

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CHILD CARE

Mr. Michael Parsa: My question is to the Minister of Education. Earlier this month was International Women's Day, a day where we all celebrated the achievements of women. It was also a day that highlighted the effects that the pandemic has had on working mothers and families, as well as the importance of having accessible and affordable child care. Providing care for children has statistically fallen on women more than men, leading to a reduced involvement by women in the overall labour force.

Would the Minister of Education explain how child care will be more affordable and accessible for working mothers and families to ensure they can truly be part of the economic recovery?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I want to thank my colleague from Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill for the question, and yes, we do believe child care is critical to the restart of our economy. The government, the Premier and my colleague the Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues have been absolutely focused on ensuring that we create a system that is more accessible and more affordable, especially after 15 years of the former Liberal government where Ontario became the most or second-most expensive jurisdiction in the country for child care. That's unacceptable for working people. That's why the province has initiated a program called Support for Learners where we put money directly in the pockets of parents—\$900 million in the pandemic alone—to provide immediate relief to families who need it most.

We've also allowed affordable before- and after-school programs that, before, under the former Liberal government, were prohibited from operating after three hours. We now have given them an extension to operate well beyond that to provide affordable care. We've also ensured the child tax credit, providing children under seven years old with relief of up to \$6,000 per child, children seven to 16 with \$3,700, in the pockets of families,

because we recognize child care is expensive. We're going to continue to focus on affordability and accessibility for parents in Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): And the supplementary question.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Thank you to the minister for that informative answer.

Speaker, it's clear that the priorities for parents regarding child care are affordability, flexibility and accessibility. Now, it's also important to recognize that each family is different and that there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to caring for their children.

We've certainly made progress by announcing the addition of 1,770 new child care spaces since the start of the pandemic. In 2020, our government invested over \$2 billion, as well as enabled access to \$234 million in federal funding as part of the Safe Restart Agreement, to support additional costs incurred by child care providers. With all that in mind, my question to the minister is—

Mr. Roman Baber: It's federal money.

Mr. Michael Parsa:—what more can be done to meet the priorities that parents have when it comes to child care?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I thank the member again for the question. In this province, under our government and the Premier's leadership, \$1 billion has been allocated to build 30,000 new child care spaces within schools over the next five years—30,000 spaces in addition to the 16,000 that were created in this province last year alone.

When we speak about the federal government—I think I heard a member opposite remark that it's federal dollars—the federal government contributes precisely 2.5% of Ontario's child care budget. They speak a big game, but when it comes to putting money into the pockets of families and to the province, 2.5% of the total contribution—whereas the provinces and the parents of this province bear 97% of the costs.

We want the federal government to provide flexibility, we want the federal government to provide more investment, and we welcome them to deliver on the aim of this province to make child care in Ontario more accessible, more affordable, more flexible for the families of this province.

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Mr. Joel Harden: My question is for the Premier. I suspect it will be answered by the Minister of Education—I hope it will. Joanne Lowe, vice-president of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, recently told the media that there has been a 30% increase in the need for youth counselling and addiction services, and a staggering 60% increase in reported youth eating disorders compared to last year. We know public schools are crucial places for youth to receive the support they need, but instead of investing in mental health supports and smaller class sizes, we've learned from the minister's ADM recently that the

COVID money that had been invested this year will not be renewed for the fall.

Speaker, our office has been inundated with sincere appeals from families that want this minister to commit that that \$1.6 billion that was in the system this year is going to be there in the fall, because we are going to be dealing with the residual impacts of a mental health crisis with teenagers and staff. We don't want to hear spin. We want to hear a commitment that that money is going to stay in the system for kids and for staff.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions.

Hon. Michael A. Tibollo: Mr. Speaker, our government takes the health and well-being of all Ontarians very seriously, especially when it comes to children and youth. The Roadmap to Wellness specifically deals with children and youth and making investments to ensure that their mental health is looked after.

When it comes to eating disorders, this is something that has become more prevalent as a result of COVID-19. In terms of what our government has to do to help children and youth who are having these kinds of mental health disorders, our government has done and is doing a great deal to assist them with providing additional investments. I was proud to recently announce an additional \$24.3 million being invested, and that includes \$3.7 million for a new eating disorders program and another \$800,000 to support the creation and operation of eating disorders Ontario. That is only the beginning of what we are going to do to ensure that the children and youth—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. The supplementary question.

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you, Speaker. Actually, through you, I feel bad for the member having to answer the question the way he did, because what that money has meant for Ottawa is an additional three beds in our eating disorders unit at CHEO—three beds. A 60% increase in reported cases; three beds.

This is a serious question. This is a party that is in government. You're not in sales; you're in government. Families want to know: Are you going to recommit that \$1.6 billion that was supposed to be continuing forward? Because we are going to be dealing with the residual effects of a mental health crisis, particularly among teenagers, this fall. We want to know, in Minister Bethlenfalvy's statement tomorrow, is that \$1.6 billion going to continue flowing to schools or not, yes or no? Please answer the question.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I will again remind members to make their comments through the Chair.

The associate minister to reply.

Hon. Michael A. Tibollo: Thank you to the member opposite for that follow-up question. As I mentioned, the health and well-being of all Ontarians, especially the children and youth of this province, are extremely important to our government. As indicated in the Roadmap to Wellness, if you took the time to read it, you would see that the lifespan of the individual, including children and

youth, is clearly delineated. For the first time, a government is taking real action to ensure that investments are made that are directed to that period in the lifespan of the individual.

If you want to talk about what kinds of investments, \$24.3 million in targeted investments to make it easier for children, youth and their families to access the mental health supports they need. That's in addition to the money that was invested through the Ministry of Education to ensure that we had additional mental health care workers in the schools. In addition to that, and the \$176 million we're investing and the other \$174 million we're investing, almost \$60 million went to support mental health for children and youth.

When you take a look at what we've invested, \$94.8 million in ongoing investments for children and youth—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much.

The next question.

LONG-TERM CARE

SOINS DE LONGUE DURÉE

M^{lle} Amanda Simard: Ma question s'adresse au premier ministre. All members in this House know the great sacrifices and immense strain Ontario's health care workers have endured throughout this pandemic. The majority of these workers are women. La majorité de ces travailleurs sont des femmes.

In fact, many of them are here today outside the Legislature right now. We can hear them from this chamber. They're asking this government to recognize their value in our society by taking concrete action, including turning part-time work into full-time jobs with benefits, providing guaranteed paid sick days, ensuring access to the appropriate PPE and making the pandemic pay increase permanent.

Quand est-ce que le premier ministre va commencer à respecter, protéger et payer ces travailleurs essentiels qui ont pris soin de nous durant cette pandémie?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I'm glad the member raised the question. It highlights again, further, the 15 years of neglect from the previous Liberal government, which she is now a member of.

We understand fully how important women are and have been in combating and defeating this pandemic. We need look no further than this Legislature. In addition to the brave people out front, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Long-Term Care, the Leader of the Opposition, the member herself—strong women who have helped guide us through this pandemic. We will all work together to ensure that those heroes, whether they are PSWs, whether they're the moms who are at home with their families or those taking care of elderly parents—there is more work to do, absolutely. I completely agree with the honourable member. It is why this government

has been so focused both on building up an economy and taking care of problems that we inherited from the previous Liberal government. She is absolutely correct: This is one of them and this is one of the areas that we'll continue to focus on to make even better.

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The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question.

M^{lle} Amanda Simard: Ce n'est pas une réponse définitive, mais on va continuer à poser la question.

Back to the Premier: The CBC reports that one third of long-term-care workers have not received their COVID-19 vaccine, despite being eligible since December. Why? Many don't get paid sick days and can't afford to miss a shift and be docked pay. That's simply not right.

For over a year, women have borne the brunt of this crushing pandemic. We have seen first-hand how important they are to the health care system, especially in long-term care. Providing full-time work, paid sick days, access to PPE and permanently raising their wages will stabilize the sector, something that we all know is badly needed.

Will the Premier commit to these reasonable requests to ensure staffing sustainability in our long-term-care sector?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, I appreciate the member's question. It really does highlight just how bad the situation was that we inherited from the previous Liberal government.

She is quite correct: For far too long, after 15 years, there was no staffing strategy with respect to PSWs, there were no investments in long-term care, there was no ability for us to turn around PPE very quickly.

It is through the hard work of the Minister of Health, the Minister of Long-Term Care and the minister of women's issues that we were able to do that. We were able to provide sick days through co-operation with the federal government—that's up to 20 sick days—and the recent investments by the Minister of Long-Term Care with respect to the largest build-out of long-term care in the province's history will go a long way, in addition to the other investments that we made.

But the member is quite correct: It is shameful that over 15 years the Liberals didn't focus on this. We are, and we'll get the job done.

ANTI-RACISM ACTIVITIES

Mr. Stan Cho: Last week's anti-Asian attack in Atlanta, Georgia, has left my community members shaken and is a stark reminder that racism and hate remain an unacceptable presence in our society. Racist attacks like these cause unimaginable physical, mental and emotional harm.

Willowdale is one of the most multicultural places in the world. I've heard from many constituents, and they're really worried that what happened in Georgia might happen here. They're worried about the increasing amount of hate speech being shared, not just in person but online.

They're worried about the safety of their kids, their friends and their family.

We must stand united in condemning these acts and the attitudes that allow them to thrive.

My question is to the Solicitor General. What can Ontarians do to stand up to racism and hate in our communities?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: Thank you to the member from Willowdale for raising this important issue. I think it is something that we can all universally agree needs to be dealt with quickly.

Let me begin by being absolutely clear that racism, hate and discrimination in all its many forms has absolutely no place in Ontario. We know that Ontario and Canada are not immune to racism. According to Stats Canada, in 2017 police-reported criminal incidents in Canada motivated by hate jumped by 47%, and, unfortunately, the largest provincial increase occurred here in Ontario, at 67%.

Standing against hate-motivated crime takes all of us, both as a government and individuals. In my supplementary, I would like to share some of the things that we've been able to do as a government.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mr. Stan Cho: Thank you to the minister for her answer. I know it will mean a lot to the people of Willowdale and this province.

In addition to my own riding, I've heard from people across our country that they are concerned. I've personally witnessed and experienced racism here in Ontario. I've heard disgusting language being shouted at my immigrant parents. I've seen discriminatory practices targeted against minorities.

Speaker, I think we can all agree that racism is never okay and that immigrants are a vital part of our Canadian society and our identity. They contribute so much to our communities. It's extremely sad to hear that racism continues to negatively affect the lives and livelihoods of the people of this province, and it is heartbreaking to hear that people of Asian descent are being attacked by bigots and racists.

Through you, Speaker: Minister, can you share with us what actions Ontario is taking to combat anti-Asian racism in our community and ensure that hate has no place in Ontario?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: We know that racism exists. So let's talk about and share what we are doing. We are working together with our partners across government and with community organizations throughout Ontario to build spaces that are anti-racist and inclusive for all.

Earlier this year, we announced the local recipients of the Ontario Safer and Vital Communities Grant, designed to partner community organizations with local police services to tackle discrimination, foster greater inclusiveness and address the increase of police-reported hate crimes. Through this grant, we've supported projects launched by groups such as the Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Toronto and the Heritage Skills Development Centre, with a specific focus on tackling hate that targets

anti-Asian hate. This funding will also be complemented with Ontario's new \$1.6-million Anti-Racism and Anti-Hate Grant, which is currently being designed in collaboration with community groups across Ontario.

Thank you for your interest in this matter.

SMALL BUSINESS

Mr. Jeff Burch: Speaker, through you to the Premier: Businesses in Niagara and across the province are desperate for appropriate supports, including consistent and clear directives from the provincial government.

I spoke with Fred Davies, owner of Breakwall brewery in Port Colborne. Fred has done everything he can to follow all of the guidelines. Now, he faces a third wave. Fred and other business owners across my riding have said that the current government's programs are not enough to support businesses. They're difficult to access and frequently don't offer enough to compensate for the time putting the application together.

Small businesses are struggling, and this government has made things harder with the lack of support, unclear directives and eleventh-hour announcements, making it difficult for them to plan. When will the Premier listen to small businesses and provide them the support they need to survive COVID-19?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Associate Minister of Small Business and Red Tape Reduction.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: I thank the member opposite for the question. We understand the immense challenges that have been faced by small businesses across the province, and I've had the ability to speak to many of them and host over 130 round tables since the start of the pandemic.

Two months ago, our province put forward one of the largest support programs to help support small businesses, the Ontario Small Business Support Grant, which gave grants of up to \$20,000 to eligible businesses. As of today, we have 97,000 businesses that have applied and been accepted, with over \$1.3 billion paid out to support.

There is still a lot of work to be done, and we'll continue to have those conversations and support those small business owners across the province who continue to be the backbone of this economy and businesses that we'll continue to support.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Speaker, businesses in Niagara are frustrated after applying for nearly every government program. Ryan Nava, owner of Tailgates Bar and Grill in Welland, spent months attempting to access the commercial rent subsidy when his landlord was being difficult. He applied and was approved for the small business grant two months ago and has still not received funds or any indication of when he will receive them. Ryan tells us that every week it's a struggle to see if they will make it to the next.

Ian Goodwin, owner of Niagara Air Tours in Thorold, applied for the same grant two months ago. There's still no word if he's been approved.

While small businesses struggle, this government caters to big box stores and talks about serving booze at 7-Eleven. Will this government, in its budget, ensure that small businesses get the same support they give big box stores, corporations and the Premier's friends?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: This government will always have the backs of small business owners, as we have done since the start of this government. We understand that there have been some businesses that haven't been able to get a quick-enough reply, but we have hired over 100 people to help sort through those applications. Today, we have over 97,000 applications that have been paid out.

This government has put forward other support programs. I understand the member mentioned the commercial rent relief program. We are in conversation with the federal government as well to help support businesses that are trying to access that program. We also have 100% of energy costs and property tax rebates that businesses can access in lockdown and red zones. We have the \$57-million Digital Main Street program that we have also put forward to help support businesses to come online.

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Mr. Speaker, there is still a lot more work to be done. We look forward to continuing to work with small business owners in designing programs that they can access, like the Ontario Small Business Support Grant, which has paid out over \$1.3 billion to small business owners.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Mr. Mike Schreiner: My question is for the Premier. Reports released by the Ontario Nurses' Association have revealed that front-line health care heroes are suffering from a mental health crisis. Speaker, 60% of nurses in long-term care are experiencing symptoms of PTSD. And 67% of all nurses don't have adequate access to mental health supports.

The stress of staff shortages, lack of PPE, burnout, low pay, and the tragedy of witnessing elders die alone are placing an unbearable burden on front-line heroes. These heroes need support now, not four years from now.

So will the Premier make a commitment to these heroes in tomorrow's budget to provide increased funding for LTC staff this fiscal year and accelerate support for funding mental health services?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions.

Hon. Michael A. Tibollo: Thank you for that question.

First off, I'd like to begin, on behalf of our government, on behalf of all of us, by thanking all of our front-line workers for the incredible job they're doing day in and day out, putting their own lives at risk, not knowing what's going to happen when they get home at night, and also looking after our most vulnerable—people in the hospitals, people in the long-term-care homes. The list goes on and on and on.

We recognized early on that there was a huge cost associated with the work these individuals do each and

every day. As a result of that, we turned very quickly within the Roadmap to Wellness to create the virtual supports needed to help individuals.

We started off with Internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy, which now is serving, between that and the other programs, over 62,000 people in the province of Ontario.

We specifically focused one program to help people who are our front-line workers. At this point, there are over 2,600 people who are taking advantage of those virtual services. But this is just the beginning of what we're doing for our front-line workers.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: With all due respect to the associate minister, the statistics contradict that answer.

I also want to point out that our youth are also experiencing a mental health crisis. McMaster reports their eating disorders program increased admissions 90%. The number of youth in hospital for suicide attempts tripled. SickKids—

Mr. Roman Baber: All on you. All on you and your government.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for York Centre will come to order.

I apologize to the member for Guelph.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thank you, Speaker.

SickKids is reporting a 25% increase in youth seeking help.

The bottom line is, everything is not okay. Soothing words will not solve the crisis.

I'm asking the government to cancel things like Highway 413, get their priorities straight, and commit to providing \$4 billion over four years in mental health funding instead of extending it over 10 years—because the crisis is happening today.

Hon. Michael A. Tibollo: We have to remember that mental health was a concern in this province long before the pandemic came to us.

We're in a situation now where we are doing and investing—the first time, by the way—an historic amount of \$3.8 billion in the mental health and the well-being of individuals. Yes, it's being invested over 10 years. But let's stop for a moment—

Mr. Roman Baber: It's \$200 million a year.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm going to ask the associate minister to please take his seat.

I'm going to ask you to stop the clock.

I'm going to ask the member for York Centre, one last time, to come to order.

Start the clock.

The associate minister.

Hon. Michael A. Tibollo: Thank you.

We have to stop and ask ourselves, where did we start three years ago? I can tell you for a fact, because I've been in this sector for over 10 years, that we started with no system. You want to talk about broken? You want to talk about lack of access, fragmentation? Well, it existed everywhere. And our initial investments—the minute we

got into government, we had to start to build the system, and that system is going to take time to build. You cannot undo the lack of effort over 15 years in just two short years. We will fix the system, and we're focused on doing that as a government.

TENANT PROTECTION

Ms. Suze Morrison: My question is for the Premier. Over the last year, thousands of Ontarians have lost their jobs through no fault of their own. Tanesha, a constituent from my riding, lost her small business because of the pandemic. Back in November, she asked her corporate landlord for either a rent reduction or just simply the option to break her lease without penalty so she could leave. Her landlord refused. Tanesha took out a loan to pay for her rent in December and January, but by February, she simply couldn't pay. She was out of money. Now, Tanesha's landlord is threatening to evict her.

Why won't this government step up and provide tenants like Tanesha the supports they need to stay in their homes?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, we certainly understand that. That's why we have been working so very closely with our federal partners to put in place a series of programs to protect people like Tanesha. For a number of months, there was an eviction freeze across the province of Ontario, including an extended one in some of the grey lockdown zones.

But as the minister of small business has highlighted, there are a number of supports that have been put in place for small businesses. As the Minister of Education has talked about, there are supports in place for parents. Is there more work to be done? Absolutely, but tomorrow, the Minister of Finance will highlight additional measures for the people of the province of Ontario, things that I'm sure Tanesha and all Ontarians can look forward to.

We have been through a very difficult year. We're still fighting our way through this COVID-19 pandemic. We have done a great job, the people of the province of Ontario together. There is more work to be done. We recognize that, and we will get the job done.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question?

Ms. Suze Morrison: Respectfully, back to the government House leader: The eviction ban is over, and your government just yesterday voted against rent subsidies for tenants in Ontario. You are currently doing absolutely nothing to keep tenants housed in the province of Ontario.

Immigrant, Black, Indigenous and racialized communities have been hardest hit by COVID-19. A lot of these folks have lost their income due to the pandemic because their jobs are precarious. That's not their fault. Many now have outstanding arrears and are at risk of being evicted at LTB hearings—which is the Landlord and Tenant Board—and these hearings are lasting as little as 60 seconds. People are being evicted in less than a minute.

Yesterday, this government voted against an NDP motion calling for rent support that would have prevented tenants like my constituent Tanesha and thousands of families across the province from being pushed out of their homes into poverty or homelessness. Why is this government continuing to put lives at risk and refusing to take action to stop COVID evictions?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I thank the member for the question, but the member will know that not only have we put significant resources into assisting people through COVID-19, working in close co-operation with our federal partners, who focused on transfers to individuals such as the CERB throughout this, but there was an eviction ban, as the member highlighted—a ban that was extended throughout the grey lockdown zones, including through the city of Toronto at the time.

We are going to continue to do more, not just to support tenants but to ensure that there is an ample supply of affordable housing in the province of Ontario. But I ask this member—this is a member who has protested and has been fighting against additional affordable housing in her own riding, housing that would support people like Tanesha.

We are going to continue to focus on the people of the province of Ontario and people like Tanesha who need our help. They're looking for a hand up. Tomorrow, the Minister of Finance will highlight additional measures to do just that.

HIGHWAY CONSTRUCTION

Mr. Stephen Blais: My question is for the government. The government seems intent on spending billions of dollars to put our environment and our children's futures at risk. After spending hundreds of millions to cancel clean energy projects, they're now continuing to pursue a \$6-billion mega-highway that nobody wants. It won't save commuters time. The municipalities it will serve don't want it. It will destroy 2,000 acres of prime farmland. And it will impact watersheds that flow into Lake Ontario. Worse, they've spent all of this money threatening to darken our children's futures when it could have been spent making their futures brighter. It could have been spent modernizing schools, improving ventilation, improving broadband connectivity. It could have been spent building the best schools in Canada.

1130

My question: Will the government put our children's futures first? Will they cancel Highway 413 and, instead, put that money into building the best schools in Canada?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Minister of Transportation to reply.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I thank the member opposite for the question and the opportunity to talk about the GTA west corridor.

There is a strong case for moving forward with the GTA west corridor. By 2051, the population of the greater Toronto area will be approximately 15 million people and our road infrastructure needs to keep up. We need to take

action to alleviate congestion; commercial traffic will not just go away.

The Liberals abruptly paused, cancelled the environmental assessment process without any plan to accommodate future population growth. We want to get this right. That's why we are fully committed to the consultation and study process, a comprehensive environmental assessment process, to determine whether or not we should proceed with the GTA west corridor, to determine whether it is the right project for York, Halton and Peel regions.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): And the supplementary question?

Mr. Stephen Blais: Six billion dollars would certainly build and modernize a lot of schools. It would be the most ambitious construction and renewal project in generations.

Progressive Conservatives like Bill Davis used to understand that investing in education was the key to building a brighter and more prosperous tomorrow. Unfortunately, this modern Conservative movement chooses to darken that future by attacking teachers, cutting funding and pursuing reckless environmental schemes that will only do damage for generations.

The government would rather spend \$6 billion on a mega-highway that nobody wants and that will only save these future commuters 30 to 60 seconds. They want to spend \$6 billion destroying farmland that feeds our families, watersheds that flow into our sources of drinking water, and they want to spend \$6 billion making it harder for our children to adapt to climate change in the future.

Mr. Speaker, why is the government continuing on this course of recklessly endangering our children's future? Why won't they simply cancel 413 and invest that money in schools instead?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: It is truly ironic to hear the Liberals boast about their plan against highways and in favour of education.

Let's consider Highway 407 east, for instance, which was planned and constructed while the Liberals were in government for 15 years. That 43.4-kilometre-long highway affected 100 hectares of forest, 30 hectares of wetlands, which were removed during the construction of the highway, and approximately 330 hectares of greenbelt were paved. The cost of that highway: \$3 billion. The Liberals, when they had the chance, could have invested in school repairs and construction, but they didn't. When they had the chance, they didn't.

Mr. Speaker, I will not take any lessons from the Liberals on highway construction and environment protection.

DEFERRED VOTES

TIME ALLOCATION

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): We now have a deferred vote on government notice of motion 104 relating to allocation of time on Bill 257, An Act to enact the

Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021 and to make other amendments in respect of infrastructure and land use planning matters.

The bells will now ring for 30 minutes, during which time members may cast their votes. I'll ask the Clerks to prepare the lobbies.

The division bells rang from 1135 to 1205.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The vote on government notice of motion number 104 relating to the allocation of time on Bill 257, An Act to enact the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021 and to make other amendments in respect of infrastructure and land use planning matters, has been held.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Motion agreed to.

LEGISLATIVE REFORM

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): On February 17, 2021, Ms. Khanjin moved government notice of motion 101, referred to in government order number 60, regarding amendments to the standing orders.

On March 11, 2021, Mr. Calandra moved the following amendment to government notice of motion number 101, that the motion be amended as follows:

That the words "for the duration of the 42nd Parliament" be deleted; and

That the following be added:

"Standing order 77(d) is amended to add the words 'the government House leader,' before the words 'the minister';

"Standing order 120 is amended by adding the following clauses:

"120(d) Where the Chair of a standing committee is a member of the party forming the government, the Vice-Chair shall be a member of a recognized party in opposition to the government or an independent member; and where the Chair is a member of a recognized party in opposition to the government, the Vice-Chair shall be a member of the party forming the government.

"120(e) Failing the appointment of a Vice-Chair pursuant to clause (d), any other member of the committee may be appointed as a Vice-Chair."

The bells will now ring for 15 minutes, during which time members may cast their votes.

Interjection: Same vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote? Same vote.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Are the members ready for the question on government notice of motion 101, as amended?

Ms. Khanjin has moved government notice of motion 101, as amended. 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 ayes have it.

A recorded vote being required, the bells—

Interjection: Same vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote? Same vote.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Motion agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): There being no further business at this time, the House stands in recess until 3 p.m.

The House recessed from 1208 to 1500.

REPORTS BY COMMITTEES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I beg to inform the House that today the Clerk received a report on intended appointments dated March 23, 2021, from the Standing Committee on Government Agencies. Pursuant to standing order 111(f)(9), the report is deemed to be adopted by the House.

Report deemed adopted.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

HEALTH INSURANCE AMENDMENT ACT (LINGUISTIC IDENTITY AND FRENCH DIACRITICS ON HEALTH CARDS), 2021 LOI DE 2021 MODIFIANT LA LOI SUR L'ASSURANCE-SANTÉ (IDENTITÉ LINGUISTIQUE ET SIGNES DIACRITIQUES DU FRANÇAIS SUR LES CARTES SANTÉ)

Mr. Bourgouin moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 264, An Act to amend the Health Insurance Act respecting the collection of data respecting linguistic identity and to require health cards to display French diacritics and confirmation of linguistic identity / *Projet de loi 264, Loi modifiant la Loi sur l'assurance-santé concernant la collecte de données concernant l'identité linguistique et exigeant, d'une part, sur les cartes Santé, l'affichage des signes diacritiques du français et, d'autre part, la confirmation de l'identité linguistique.*

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? Carried.

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Would the member care to explain his bill?

M. Guy Bourgouin: Ce projet de loi modifie la Loi sur l'assurance-santé. Le ministre de la Santé et le directeur général du Régime d'assurance-santé de l'Ontario sont tenus de recueillir des données concernant l'identité linguistique des assurés et la mesure dans laquelle les assurés ont besoin de communiquer en français lorsqu'ils demandent de recevoir des services assurés. Ces données doivent être recueillies afin de la planification des services de santé.

Enfin, le ministre doit veiller à ce que la carte Santé soit rédigée sous une forme qui indique les assurés ont besoin de communiquer en français ou en anglais lorsqu'ils demandent de recevoir des services assurés. Le ministre doit également veiller à ce que la carte Santé soit sous une forme qui permet l'utilisation des signes diacritiques du français, comme les accents et les cédilles.

EXECUTIVE COUNCIL AMENDMENT ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 MODIFIANT LA LOI SUR LE CONSEIL EXÉCUTIF

Mr. Calandra moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 265, An Act to amend the Executive Council Act in respect of attendance at Question Period / *Projet de loi 265, Loi modifiant la Loi sur le Conseil exécutif à l'égard de la présence à la période des questions.*

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? Carried.

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Would the government House leader care to explain his bill?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker—I do. This is really just a minor amendment to modify the Executive Council Act with respect to lessons learned during COVID-19 with respect to social distancing and cohorting in the chamber. I'd like to also take a moment just to thank the opposition, who have played an instrumental role in helping us come to a cohorting agreement over these many months, which has allowed this Legislature to continue on in a safe fashion. This bill just recognizes that and puts in place measures, should this occur in future as well.

SUPPORT WORKERS PAY ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 SUR LA RÉMUNÉRATION DES PRÉPOSÉS AUX SERVICES DE SOUTIEN

Mr. West moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 266, An Act respecting minimum pay for support workers / Projet de loi 266, Loi concernant la rémunération minimale des préposés aux services de soutien.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? Carried.

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll invite the member to explain his bill.

Mr. Jamie West: The Support Workers Pay Act is an opportunity to permanently resolve the poor working conditions and inequalities that many PSWs face on the job. Instead of temporary PSW pandemic pay raises that only apply to some PSWs and that eventually will expire, my bill would permanently raise the wage floor for all PSWs, regardless of the sector.

As well, the bill would require that they are paid per kilometre while travelling to worksites. My bill also calls on the Minister of Long-Term Care to develop programs to provide training, education and professional development for all support workers and long-term-care staff that provide care.

Also, the Support Workers Pay Act requires the ministry to recruit and retain the number of support workers required to deliver adequate and appropriate care and to ensure support workers are paid while learning on the job.

Finally, Speaker, it would establish a support workers wage review commission to ensure that personal support worker wages do not slip backwards and that PSW wages and travel expenses are reviewed and evaluated regularly.

WORKPLACE SAFETY
AND INSURANCE AMENDMENT
ACT (ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH
SUPPORT FOR ESSENTIAL
WORKERS), 2021

LOI DE 2021 MODIFIANT LA LOI
SUR LA SÉCURITÉ PROFESSIONNELLE
ET L'ASSURANCE CONTRE
LES ACCIDENTS DU TRAVAIL
(ACCÈS DES TRAVAILLEURS
ESSENTIELS AUX SOUTIENS
EN MATIÈRE DE SANTÉ MENTALE)

Miss Taylor moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 267, An Act to amend the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997 to establish a presumption for certain workers respecting chronic or traumatic mental stress in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic / Projet de loi 267, Loi modifiant la Loi de 1997 sur la sécurité professionnelle et l'assurance contre les accidents du travail afin d'établir une présomption de stress mental chronique ou traumatique chez certains travailleurs en lien avec la pandémie de COVID-19.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? Carried.

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll invite the member to explain her bill.

Miss Monique Taylor: Currently, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997, provides that a worker is entitled to benefits under the insurance plan for chronic and traumatic mental stress arising out of and in the course of the worker's employment. The bill amends the act to provide that chronic or traumatic mental stress of certain individuals is presumed to have arisen out of and in the course of the individual's employment. The presumption applies to any individual who at any time during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario worked for a business that the government of Ontario listed as essential in an order under the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act or the Reopening Ontario (A Flexible Response to COVID-19) Act, 2020, or who was otherwise considered essential, including the individuals listed in the bill. The Lieutenant Governor in Council is given the power to prescribe additional individuals for the purpose of the presumption. Transitional matters are provided for.

1510

STATEMENTS BY THE MINISTRY
AND RESPONSES

JOURNÉE INTERNATIONALE
DE LA FRANCOPHONIE
INTERNATIONAL DAY
OF LA FRANCOPHONIE

L'hon. Caroline Mulroney: Monsieur le Président, chers collègues, je suis très heureuse de prendre la parole aujourd'hui devant cette Assemblée pour souligner la Journée internationale de la Francophonie, qui a été célébrée ce samedi 20 mars 2021, et la Semaine de la Francophonie, qui mobilise l'ensemble des francophones et francophiles de l'Ontario, du Canada et du monde entier.

Cette année, de multiples événements festifs virtuels ont eu lieu en Ontario et à travers le monde dans le but de mettre à l'honneur la langue française et la richesse de la culture francophone. Dans le contexte actuel de la pandémie, je tiens à saluer l'esprit solidaire des francophones du monde entier, ainsi que l'engagement des Franco-Ontariennes et des Franco-Ontariens en particulier, qui, encore une fois, font preuve de résilience, de détermination et de ténacité.

Aujourd'hui, notre province compte plus de 1,5 millions d'Ontariennes et d'Ontariens capables de s'exprimer en français, dont plus de 622 000 Franco-Ontariennes et Franco-Ontariens. Sur la scène pancanadienne, notre francophonie ontarienne entretient des liens étroits avec l'ensemble des francophones du pays, dont nos voisins du Québec, un partenaire de premier plan pour l'Ontario.

À titre de ministre des Affaires francophones, j'ai des échanges réguliers avec mon homologue du Québec, Sonia LeBel, ministre responsable des Relations

canadiennes et de la Francophonie canadienne. Ces échanges visent à resserrer les liens entre nos deux provinces et nos communautés francophones respectives. Par ailleurs, vous le savez, nos gouvernements respectifs se sont engagés à accroître le commerce entre nos deux provinces lors du dernier sommet Ontario-Québec, et la mise en valeur de notre francophonie économique augmente les opportunités pour les entreprises ontariennes.

L'Ontario travaille également de très près avec nos partenaires des autres provinces et territoires, notamment au sein du Conseil des ministres sur la francophonie canadienne, pour appuyer l'avancement des communautés francophones et acadiennes à l'échelle du pays. Et sur la scène internationale, l'Ontario continue à être membre observateur de l'Organisation internationale de la Francophonie.

L'OIF représente 88 états membres, répartis sur cinq continents, qui forment un espace culturel de 300 millions de francophones et un marché économique de plus de 900 millions de consommateurs à travers le monde entier. D'ailleurs, l'Ontario a déjà des liens économiques avec 46 états membres de l'OIF, représentant 15,8 milliards de dollars d'importations et 3 milliards de dollars d'exportations. Grâce à au moins 17 000 entreprises francophones qui s'activent dans une grande variété de domaines, l'Ontario détient une base solide pour faire avancer la coopération économique au-delà de nos frontières.

En cette semaine de célébration de la francophonie internationale, notre gouvernement affirme haut et fort l'importance de la francophonie ontarienne et notre engagement continu à lui fournir le soutien nécessaire pour surmonter les défis de la crise sanitaire actuelle et participer pleinement à nos efforts collectifs de relance. Notre gouvernement a favorisé, au cours de la dernière année, la mise en oeuvre d'initiatives clés visant à soutenir les organismes et les entreprises qui dynamisent la communauté franco-ontarienne. Il s'agit de :

- la création de la première Fédération des gens d'affaires francophones de l'Ontario;

- l'établissement d'une plateforme de promotion des biens et des services des entreprises franco-ontariennes;

- le lancement du Fonds de secours pour les organismes francophones sans but lucratif suite à la COVID-19; et

- la continuation du Programme d'appui à la francophonie ontarienne.

Toutes ces initiatives s'inscrivent dans une démarche globale visant à soutenir l'entrepreneuriat et l'innovation, à créer des emplois de qualité, tout en facilitant le développement d'une main-d'oeuvre bilingue, qualifiée, et à rehausser la visibilité des produits et services de sources franco-ontariennes dans le cadre d'une mise en marché élargie.

Alors que nous célébrons la Francophonie, je suis aussi heureuse de pouvoir travailler de près avec mes collègues au sein du gouvernement et ainsi souligner leur propre

engagement envers la communauté franco-ontarienne. Je me permets de citer certaines avancées récentes :

- l'augmentation du nombre de nouveaux arrivants francophones, lesquels représentent maintenant 4,1 % des immigrants de l'Ontario que l'Ontario a accueillis en 2020, soit le pourcentage le plus élevé depuis l'établissement de l'objectif de 5 % il y a une décennie;

- l'introduction des caractères de langue française, comme les accents, sur les permis de conduire et les cartes-photo de l'Ontario, une demande de la communauté qui perdure depuis des décennies;

- le dépôt du projet de loi visant à accélérer l'accès à la justice qui, s'il est adopté, garantirait une plus grande présence du français au sein de l'appareil judiciaire ontarien. Il permettrait, entre autres, à toutes les Franco-Ontariennes et à tous les Franco-Ontariens de déposer des documents en français auprès de tous les palais de justice de la province;

- en matière de soins de longue durée, l'annonce récente d'un financement dédié à la formation accélérée de 216 préposés francophones aux services de soutien à la personne, lesquels pourront travailler au sein de ce secteur dès l'automne prochain;

- enfin, un investissement par le gouvernement dans sept projets de soins de longue durée qui desserviront spécifiquement la population francophone de l'Ontario.

Ce ne sont là, monsieur le Président, que quelques exemples, et il y en a bien d'autres : en éducation élémentaire et secondaire, en éducation postsecondaire et encore, en formation menant au marché du travail.

Enfin, dans le contexte symbolique des célébrations de la Francophonie internationale, c'est avec beaucoup de fierté que je salue le drapeau franco-ontarien, emblème officiel de l'Ontario qui déploie maintenant toutes ses couleurs et flottera avec dignité devant Queen's Park.

Au nom du gouvernement de l'Ontario, je souhaite à l'ensemble des francophones, ainsi qu'à toutes les francophones et tous les francophiles une très belle Semaine de la Francophonie, à la fois symbolique et festive.

Monsieur le Président, chers collègues et membres de l'Assemblée, merci de votre attention.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Responses?

M. Guy Bourgoin: Il me fait plaisir de me lever pour souligner la Journée internationale de la Francophonie. Pour commencer, j'aimerais vous parler d'un article publié par M. Maka Kotto dans le Journal de Montréal. M. Kotto se pose la question suivante au sujet des Franco-Ontariens : « Ils résistent... mais pour combien de temps encore? » La question de M. Kotto est plus pertinente que jamais.

On résiste. Résister, c'est l'histoire de la communauté franco-ontarienne, monsieur le Président. On se bat depuis des générations pour survivre. Et alors, quand j'entends madame la ministre parler comme tantôt, ou quand je lis que pour la ministre, « la francophonie ontarienne est plus forte que jamais », je ne peux que me demander si les membres de ce gouvernement vivent dans un univers parallèle.

Qu'il s'agisse de santé, de justice, d'éducation, des lois, on voit que c'est de la broche à foin. Tout est vite fait et sans consulter les Franco-Ontariens sur le terrain.

Par exemple, en éducation, on fait face à une pénurie de main-d'oeuvre sans précédent. Alors que les libéraux ont coupé des programmes en éducation en 2013, le ministre de l'Éducation s'est rendu compte qu'il avait un problème au mois d'octobre dernier. Entretemps, les enseignants quittent le milieu. Comme une enseignante m'a dit : « Guy, on est en train de tuer notre passion pour notre profession. On n'est plus capable. »

1520

En éducation postsecondaire, on voit le même parcours. D'un côté, on voit une université sauvée par les manifestations publiques de la communauté franco-ontarienne et par de l'argent fédéral; de l'autre côté, on voit la Laurentienne qui coule comme le Titanic au fond de l'océan, avec des programmes en français et des centaines de postes en français en péril sans que ce gouvernement ne bouge un doigt. Je me demande si ce manque d'action est à cause d'un manque de volonté ou simplement que ce gouvernement ne comprend pas qu'une université n'est pas une usine à diplômes, mais plutôt un bien par, pour et avec la communauté.

Si on parle de santé, on peut dire qu'en pleine crise sanitaire les francophones, particulièrement les aînés, ont été doublement touchés, faute de manque d'informations en français. Je viens tout juste de déposer un projet de loi pour mettre en lumière le fait que la santé en français n'est pas un caprice, mais un besoin. J'espère que la ministre le regardera avec attention.

Aussi, l'année dernière, la ministre nous a dit qu'il y aurait des services de santé en français dans les régions désignées, mais on manque d'encadrement législatif pour le faire et les entités de planification n'ont pas été restructurées selon la nouvelle structure en santé. Bref, comme une amie m'a dit cette semaine : « Guy, on n'a jamais l'impression qu'on avance. »

En parlant de législation, ça fait déjà 30 mois depuis que la ministre nous a annoncé en grande pompe son intention de moderniser la Loi sur les services en français. Alors qu'on attend de ses nouvelles, je rappelle à la ministre que ça fait 16 mois depuis que mon projet de loi pour moderniser la loi est en purgatoire législatif.

Le bilan de ce gouvernement en matière de justice, c'est la cerise sur le sundae, monsieur le Président. Quand on parle de francophones en situation de vulnérabilité, l'offre active en français dans les tribunaux décisionnels demeure une utopie. Parmi les 80 membres de la Commission de la location immobilière, seulement trois membres peuvent offrir des services en français. Si on parle du Tribunal de l'aide sociale, les familles ayant demandé une audience en français peuvent attendre jusqu'à 18 mois.

Pour finir, on fait face à des échecs systémiques qui ne seront pas corrigés par des projets pilotes avec des drapeaux dans des bureaux provinciaux. Au contraire, la situation va empirer à cause de la décision de ce gouvernement de remplacer le seul juge bilingue

d'Algoma par un juge anglophone et de transférer le poste bilingue trois heures plus loin à Sudbury.

Pour revenir à la question de M. Kotto, je suis certain que nous résisterons. Mais il faudra regarder ce gouvernement dans le blanc des yeux et il faudra rappeler que le maintien et l'épanouissement de nos droits ne sont jamais acquis, mais le résultat des combats des Franco-Ontariens pour garder notre patrimoine pour l'avenir.

M^{lle} Amanda Simard: Ce mois-ci, cette semaine, on parle de Francophonie. Comme vous le savez sûrement, l'épanouissement du français, de la langue française, est très important pour moi, non seulement chez moi à Glengarry–Prescott–Russell où le français est présent à majorité, non seulement dans notre superbe province de l'Ontario, mais d'un océan à l'autre chez nous au Canada et partout à travers le monde.

Ici en Ontario et au Canada, puisque nous sommes en contexte minoritaire, c'est particulièrement important de continuer à soulever les enjeux, les défis, le travail à faire, mais aussi de célébrer les accomplissements, les succès, les victoires.

En tant que Franco-Ontarienne—et je sais que mes collègues franco-ontariens comprennent, donc les députés de Nickel Belt, d'Algoma–Manitoulin, de Timmins, d'Ottawa–Vanier, d'Orléans, de Mushkegowuk–James Bay et de Thunder Bay—je pense souvent à comment grandir et vivre en français en Ontario nous rend plus forts et résilients. On pense au règlement 17, à Montfort, à la crise linguistique de 2018, mais ce ne sont que les grands événements médiatisés. Ça ne compte pas les micro-attaques qui s'accumulent au quotidien, et qui nous forcent à nous défendre, à lutter et à toujours être prêts pour tout.

Oui, il y a nous, les députés franco-ontariens, naturellement très sensibilisés et conscients des réalités et enjeux.

But over the last three years, I got to know so many of my colleagues here in this chamber who have been so wonderful, engaged and supportive of our community that I consider them part of it. They are the francophiles. They are incredibly valuable allies, and words can't express how important their support is to me and to the community. No matter the party, we work together.

Peu importe le parti, on travaille ensemble, on jase d'enjeux, on a un dialogue constructif, on se respecte. Vous n'avez aucune idée à quel point je l'apprécie, et que je vous apprécie.

Et quand le gouvernement se contente de décorer des bureaux de ServiceOntario de drapeaux ici et là mais ne touche pas aux priorités, n'aborde pas les enjeux cruciaux, ensemble, on remet les pendules à l'heure, et on rappelle ce qui doit être fait, concrètement. Nos interventions, nos interactions, notre pression : nous sommes dans le processus décisionnel. Nous devons maintenir la pression.

Alors, monsieur le Président, en cette Semaine de la Francophonie, je demande au gouvernement des changements, des réformes substantielles qui auront un impact concret sur la vie des francophones en Ontario et sur toutes les familles et individus désirant vivre en français dans notre belle province.

Continuons le dialogue, non seulement cette semaine, la Semaine de la Francophonie, mais dans les semaines et mois à venir. Continuons de travailler ensemble pour l'épanouissement du français en Ontario, au Canada et partout à travers le monde.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Responses?

M. Mike Schreiner: Ce samedi passé, le 20 mars, on a marqué la Journée internationale de la Francophonie. Cette occasion fête la longue et riche histoire de la langue française autour du monde et célèbre la coopération diplomatique des nations francophones au quotidien, dont le Canada a un rôle éminent.

Ontario is home to 1.5 million francophones—obviously, I'm not one of them—the largest population of French speakers in Canada outside Quebec. The francophone culture is an important part of the heritage of this province, and this resilient community continues to make vital contributions to our economy and our culture. However, the francophone community has too often been overlooked and continues to face challenges in accessing French services such as in education, health and in the justice system.

In order to ensure the proper inclusion of Ontario's French speakers, it is crucial that the government work to reinstate the French Language Services Commissioner to protect and serve our province's francophone communities, and to invest in French-language services to uphold our obligation to ensuring equitable access to government services in French.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Simplement, pour conclure, je voudrais dire que je suis extrêmement fière du soutien unanime pour intégrer le drapeau franco-ontarien au sein même de l'Assemblée législative. Je crois que c'est une belle affirmation du caractère unificateur de notre belle francophonie ici en Ontario, au Canada et dans le monde.

PETITIONS

EDUCATION FUNDING

Ms. Marit Stiles: It's a pleasure to present this petition on behalf of my community of Davenport. It reads as follows:

"Do Not Cut Education Funding. Fully Fund the Equitable Education System Children, Families, and Education Workers Deserve.

"Whereas since July 2018 the Ontario provincial government has cut millions of dollars from public education funding including: \$100 million in funding allocated for school repairs; cancelled curriculum writing sessions to incorporate Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into school curriculum; removed the 2015 health and physical education curriculum from kindergarten to grade 8, reverting to the 2010 version; launched a web-based 'snitch line' for parents to report on teachers they suspect are not following the outdated curriculum; cut education programs ... for at-risk youth,

including Indigenous and racialized students by \$25 million; cut funding for autistic children and students; and

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"Whereas the Ontario provincial government has announced a hiring freeze and significant class size increases from grades 4 to 12, mandatory e-learning and other detrimental changes to our public education system;

"We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to oppose these damaging cuts and implement:

"—a fully funded public education system that includes low class caps, excellent needs support, no mandatory e-learning and well-maintained buildings;

"—funding that provides equitable enrichment opportunities across the system and reduces the burden on school-based fundraising;

"—an inclusive curriculum and respect for the diversity of our students and educators."

I support this petition fully, Mr. Speaker, and I'm happy to affix my signature and table it with the Clerks.

OPTOMETRY SERVICES

Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos: This is a petition on behalf of Save Eye Care in Ontario, from my constituency of Oakville North–Burlington.

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas the Ontario government has underfunded optometric eye care for 30 years; and

"Whereas optometrists now subsidize the delivery of OHIP-covered eye care by \$173 million a year; and

"Whereas COVID-19 forced optometrists to close their doors, resulting in a 75%-plus drop in revenue; and

"Whereas optometrists will see patient volumes reduced between 40% and 60%, resulting in more than two million comprehensive eye exams being wiped out over the next 12 months; and

"Whereas communities across Ontario are in danger of losing access to optometric care;

"We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

"To instruct the Ontario government to immediately establish a timetable and a process for renewed negotiations concerning optometry fees."

I'd like to affix my signature.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Ms. Jill Andrew: I would like to put forward these petitions on behalf of the #ODSPoverty activists group in St. Paul's and across the province, Liza Butcher, Shady Rofaael and others. These petitions are reflective of the over 44,000 petitions that have been signed online. The petition is called "Raise ODSP/OW shelter and basic needs allowances now....

"Whereas the COVID-19 crisis means that more people than ever are relying on support from the government to help pay rent and keep food on the table;

“Whereas most people in Ontario who receive social assistance aren’t eligible for the new, \$2,000-a-month Canada Emergency Response Benefit—they’re expected to get by on as little as \$650 a month; and

“Whereas affordable, subsidized, rent-g geared-to-income housing is unavailable at this time and may be unavailable for the next 10 to 20 years due to a huge waiting list and zero vacancies; and

“Whereas clients need to eat, as well as pay rent, and since clients would still have to dip into their basic needs allowances to cover rent because even doubling the shelter allowance still won’t cover all of the rent at today’s prices, needed meds and other things not covered by the MSN forms have to be paid for out of basic needs, and some of these items are very expensive,” like “medical cannabis;...

“Whereas statistics show that women, particularly women of colour, are most likely to be employed in precarious work, and the Bill 47 amendments to the Employment Standards Act, 2000, and Labour Relations Act, 1995, create conditions that lead to a growth in precarious employment while also eliminating protections for millions of Ontario workers;...

“We, the undersigned, call on” Premier Ford “to double Ontario disability support ... or Ontario Works rates to bring them in line with the CERB, because if laid-off workers need \$2,000 a month to get by, so do people who receive ODSP and OW.”

I will affix my signature to this petition and hand it to the table for tabling.

LONG-TERM CARE

Mr. Michael Mantha: I want to thank the good people of Thessalon, Bruce Mines, Algoma Mills, Blind River and Iron Bridge for providing me with copies of these petitions:

“Support Bill 153, the Till Death Do Us Part act.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas there are 35,000 people on the wait-list for long-term care; and

“Whereas the median wait time for a long-term-care bed has risen from 99 days in 2011-12 to 152 days in 2018-19; and

“Whereas according to Home Care Ontario, the cost of a hospital bed is \$842 a day, while the cost of a long-term-care bed is \$126 a day; and

“Whereas couples should have the right to live together as they age; and

“Whereas Ontario seniors have worked hard to build this province and deserve dignity in care; and

“Whereas Bill 153 amends the Residents’ Bill of Rights in the Long-Term Care Homes Act to provide the resident with the right upon admission to continue to live with their spouse or partner;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to direct the Minister of Long-Term Care to pass Bill 153 and provide seniors with the right to live together as they age.”

I agree with this petition and I’ll hand it down to the Clerks’ table.

TORONTO TRANSIT COMMISSION

Ms. Marit Stiles: I’m pleased to present this petition on behalf of a lot of folks in my riding, including Alisha Mohamed, who presented this to me. It reads as follows.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas the TTC has owned, operated and maintained Toronto’s public transit system since 1921; and

“Whereas the people of Toronto have paid for the TTC at the fare box and through their property taxes; and

“Whereas breaking up the subway will mean higher fares, reduced service and less say for transit riders; and

“Whereas the TTC is accountable to the people of Toronto because elected Toronto city councillors sit on its board;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“Reject legislation that allows for the breakup and sell-off of any aspect of the TTC to the province of Ontario, and reject the privatization or contracting out of any part of the TTC;

“Match the city of Toronto’s financial contribution to the TTC so transit riders can have improved service and affordable fares.”

As a TTC transit rider, I’m very pleased to affix my signature to this petition and table it with the Clerks.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Ms. Jill Andrew: This petition is called, “Don’t Take Away Social and Economic Rights for Women and Marginalized People.

“Whereas Bill 47 erased many of the legislative gains achieved through Bill 148, the fairer labour laws and working conditions that had a particularly positive impact on women and marginalized people;

“Whereas statistics show that women, particularly women of colour, are most likely to be employed in precarious work, and the Bill 47 amendments to the Employment Standards Act, 2000 and Labour Relations Act, 1995 create conditions that lead to a growth in precarious employment while also eliminating protections for millions of Ontario workers;

“Whereas Bill 66 further erodes women’s and marginalized people’s social and economic rights; and

“Whereas the Ford government continues to remove, cancel or freeze funding for other supports, programs and regulations that would increase women’s equality in the workforce and beyond;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to, at the very least:

“—reinstate paid sick days, the scheduled increase to a \$15 minimum wage, legislation to increase pay transparency, regulations that support equal pay for equal work, and all other worker protections gained under the Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act;

“—reverse changes to daycare regulations that allow more children per caregiver;

“—reverse the retroactive cuts to funding for the Ontario College of Midwives;

“—reinstate funding increases to sexual assault centres;

“—restore the round table on violence against women; and

“—restore the child and youth advocate commissioner’s office.”

I overwhelmingly support this petition, affix my signature and will table it with the Clerks.

SOINS DE LONGUE DURÉE

M. Michael Mantha: Je veux remercier les gens de la communauté de Dubreuilville qui m’ont présenté la pétition « Projet de loi 153 : jusqu’à ce que la mort nous sépare;

« À l’Assemblée législative de l’Ontario :

« Attendu que 35 000 personnes sont sur la liste d’attente pour les besoins de longue durée; et

« Attendu que le temps d’attente pour un lit de soins de longue durée était de plus de 99 jours en 2011-2012 et fut de plus de 152 jours en 2018-2019; et

« Attendu que selon Soins à domicile Ontario, le coût d’un lit d’hôpital est de 842 \$ par jour tandis que le coût d’un lit de soins de longue durée est de 126 \$ par jour; et

« Attendu que les couples devraient avoir le droit de vivre ensemble » pendant la vieillesse; et

« Attendu que les aînés de l’Ontario ont travaillé fort pour bâtir cette province et méritent d’être soignés dans la dignité; et

« Attendu que le projet de loi 153 modifie la déclaration des droits des résidents de la Loi sur les foyers de soins de longue durée afin d’accorder au résident le droit, à son admission, de continuer à vivre avec son conjoint ou partenaire;

« Nous, soussignés, pétitionnons une pétition à l’Assemblée législative de l’Ontario de demander au ministre des Soins de longue durée d’adopter le projet de loi 153 et de donner aux personnes âgées le droit de vivre ensemble en » vieillesse.

Je suis complètement d’accord avec cette pétition. Je mets ma signature et la présente à la table des greffiers.

1540

EDUCATION FUNDING

Ms. Marit Stiles: It’s always a pleasure to rise in this House and present a petition—in this case, from some folks in Scarborough who have presented this to me. I’m going to present it in the name of Tracy Cameron. It reads as follows:

“Petition to the Ontario Legislative Assembly:

“Invest in the Schools Our Students Deserve: Stop the Cuts!

“Whereas the provincial government has announced over \$1 billion in funding cuts to our schools, which will result in:

“—much larger class sizes in grades 4 to 12;

“—significantly less support for our most vulnerable students, including those with disabilities, special needs, and English-language learners;

“—forcing secondary students to take four online courses;

“—further deterioration of schools already in need of repair; and

“Whereas Ontario already ranked last in per pupil funding when compared to the per pupil funding of 18 northeastern and Great Lakes states and provinces prior to these cuts;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislature of Ontario to:

“(1) immediately halt and reverse all funding cuts to our public education system; eliminate mandatory e-learning;

“(2) amend the education funding formula to: increase program and resource support for special education; lower class sizes in kindergarten and grades 4 to 12; and increase school boards’ capacity to deliver front-line services by paraprofessionals;

“(3) support the development of an Ontario-wide ‘state of good repair standard’ for all publicly funded schools so that these public assets are safe, healthy, well-maintained buildings that provide environments conducive to learning and working;

“(4) establish an evidence-based review of the education funding formula every five years to determine its effectiveness in supporting high-quality public education.”

I strongly support this petition. I’m going to affix my signature and table it with the Clerks.

EDUCATION FUNDING

Mr. Michael Mantha: For this petition, I want to thank the good people of Hanmer, Sudbury, Chelmsford and Capreol.

“Stop Ford’s Education Cuts.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Doug Ford’s new education scheme seeks”—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I’ll have to ask you to rephrase that and not call anybody by their name but by their ministerial title or their position—if you can rephrase that, no matter what it says on your paper.

I return to the member for Algoma–Manitoulin.

Mr. Michael Mantha: “Whereas” the Premier’s “new education scheme seeks to dramatically increase class sizes starting in grade 4;

“Whereas the changes will mean thousands fewer teachers and education workers and less help for every student;

“Whereas secondary students will now be forced to take at least four of their classes online, with as many as 35 students in each course;

“Whereas” the Premier’s “changes will rip over \$1 billion out of Ontario’s education system by the end of the government’s term; and

“Whereas kids in Ontario deserve more opportunities, not fewer;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to:

“Demand that the government halt the cuts to classrooms and invest to strengthen public education in Ontario.”

I agree with this petition wholeheartedly and affix my signature to present it to the Clerks’ table.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

SUPPORTING BROADBAND AND INFRASTRUCTURE EXPANSION ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 SOUTENANT L’EXPANSION DE L’INTERNET ET DES INFRASTRUCTURES

Resuming the debate adjourned on March 11, 2021, on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 257, An Act to enact the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021 and to make other amendments in respect of infrastructure and land use planning matters / Projet de loi 257, Loi édictant la Loi de 2021 sur la réalisation accélérée de projets d’Internet à haut débit et apportant d’autres modifications en ce qui concerne les infrastructures et des questions d’aménagement du territoire.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Pursuant to the order of the House dated March 23, 2021, I am now required to put the question.

Ms. Scott has moved second reading of Bill 257, An Act to enact the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021 and to make other amendments in respect of infrastructure and land use planning matters. 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 to the motion will please say “nay.”

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

A recorded vote being required, the bells will ring for 30 minutes, during which time members may cast their votes. Prepare the lobbies, please.

The division bells rang from 1546 to 1616.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The vote was held on the motion for second reading of Bill 257, An Act to enact the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021 and to make other amendments in respect of infrastructure and land use planning matters.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 16.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I declare the motion carried.

Second reading agreed to.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Pursuant to the order of the House dated March 23, 2021, the bill is

referred to the Standing Committee on General Government.

WORKPLACE SAFETY AND INSURANCE AMENDMENT ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 MODIFIANT LA LOI SUR LA SÉCURITÉ PROFESSIONNELLE ET L’ASSURANCE CONTRE LES ACCIDENTS DU TRAVAIL

Mr. McNaughton moved third reading of the following bill:

Bill 238, An Act to amend the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997 / Projet de loi 238, Loi modifiant la Loi de 1997 sur la sécurité professionnelle et l’assurance contre les accidents du travail.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We’re going to turn back to the minister now to kick off the debate.

Hon. Monte McNaughton: Speaker, I’m happy today to rise to speak on this third reading of Bill 238, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, 2021.

Before I get started, I do want to take a couple of moments and give a shout-out to some of the parliamentarians and legislators who have played a key role in moving this legislation forward: first, to my parliamentary assistant and my good friend, the MPP for Burlington, Jane McKenna, who has done a great job; as well as the MPP for Carleton and Chair of the committee, Goldie Ghamari; and of course to all of the committee members who saw this bill through. They worked diligently, and their efforts have paid off in getting us here to third reading today.

1620

Mr. Speaker, I want to give you some context about our proposal and how it fits within the larger scope of the very hard work that my ministry has been doing to stop the spread of COVID-19 and help Ontario’s economy recover. As everyone knows here, our province has faced clearly unprecedented challenges. I’m proud to say that our government and our ministry have acted swiftly in undertaking many measures to support workers and employers during this very, very difficult time.

All of us have been impacted by COVID-19. It’s changed the way all of us live, work and connect with family, with friends, with everyone in our own communities. But the pandemic has had a particularly serious effect on main streets and those who work there. Retail clerks, restaurant servers and staff in hotels and theatre attractions and many, many more have been especially hard-hit. According to Statistics Canada, employment in the accommodation and food services sectors is down 35% from last year.

These local shops and merchants are the lifeblood of all of our local communities. During this last year, many of these establishments have had to shut down, lay off workers or reduce hours. They’ve had to rethink quickly

how they run their business to comply with COVID-19 safety requirements. We've seen examples of the Ontario spirit and their resilience and resourcefulness. These entrepreneurs that have remained open are working hard. They're being creative and making every possible effort to follow health and safety guidelines.

A vital part of my ministry's mandate is to work with employers and labour to create and maintain safe and fair workplaces. That's why I've met now with over 200 labour leaders, hundreds of business owners and countless workers since becoming the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development back in 2019. I've heard first-hand how people are struggling. I've spoken directly with shopkeepers and other employers in my riding of Lambton-Kent-Middlesex and others from across the province and heard the innovative, creative things they're doing to keep employees on the payroll. Many restaurant owners have moved to selling online, for example, and many others have transitioned to curbside pickup to support social distancing measures. Take-out and delivery are simple and convenient options, and a great way for all of us to support our local shops.

I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge and thank people right across Ontario for pulling together to support local businesses. It's making a difference, and it's helping to move our province's recovery forward. As we work towards reopening, I encourage everyone to continue buying local and supporting small businesses in your own area. For years they've been there for us, sponsoring our kids' sports teams, our seniors' clubs and our local charities. Today they need our support more than ever, and we owe it to them to be there.

As I mentioned, Mr. Speaker, I've spoken to many small business owners who are seeing bills pile up, despite making every effort to stay open. They desperately need our support to stay afloat. I want these hard-working people to know that we are listening to what they're saying and that their government has been working hard to find ways to make this difficult time easier and safer for them and their workers.

To date, our government has provided more than \$1 billion through the Ontario Small Business Support Grant to help business owners affected by COVID-19 restrictions. The grant provides a minimum of \$10,000 to a maximum of \$20,000, and can be used in whatever way makes the most sense for individual businesses, from paying employee wages, to offsetting the cost of rent, to purchasing inventory and supplies. We recently renewed supports and grants, including the Main Street Relief Grant, to help offset the cost of purchasing PPE. We're offering rebates for property taxes and energy bills, and we're helping more small businesses innovate and go digital through the Digital Main Street program, supported by the federal and Ontario governments.

At the ministry that I lead, the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, we have also been rolling out a series of initiatives to protect the workplace health and safety of employees. We're supporting businesses by showing them how to comply with health and

safety requirements to stop the spread of this deadly virus, and we have found ways to ease the financial and operational burden on employers working to keep customers and workers safe. Helping these businesses get back on their feet is critical to our recovery.

Speaker, our proposed legislation, Bill 238, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, 2021, is an important part of our plan to support employers at this critical time. This bill, if passed, will help protect businesses from sudden and unanticipated increases in their Workplace Safety and Insurance Board premiums. Just as importantly, it would not affect the annual increase and the maximum earnings cap for worker benefits. This is a win-win situation for workers and employers.

The 7.8% increase to the earnings cap for worker benefits will still take effect this year, but for businesses, we are limiting the impact the unexpected rise in the average industrial wage would have on WSIB premiums to 2% for 2021. Speaker, that will make a significant difference for employers. It will help many remain solvent. It will help them retain jobs, and that's good news for everyone. This is why I firmly believe this legislation will ultimately benefit everyone.

Speaker, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, or WSIB, is an arm's-length agency of the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development. It plays a key role in protecting our province's workers, families and employers. The board provides wage loss benefits, medical coverage and other supports to help after a work-related injury or occupational disease, and then get workers back to work, if possible. The WSIB provides no-fault collective liability insurance, and benefits and services are available to families of injured workers right across the province.

It also offers financial supports for businesses, including the Health and Safety Excellence program. This program rewards and promotes workplace safety, offering rebates to safe employers, and it's tailored to help businesses safely resume operations and remain open.

Speaker, the Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board covers more than 300,000 workplaces and over five million workers right across Ontario. It is Canada's largest insurer for workplace safety. My ministry works closely with the board to ensure our province is one of the healthiest and safest places to work in the world. It's been a great partnership that's now spanned more than 100 years. This pandemic has made us work even more closely and collaboratively. Our proposed legislation is another example of the important work that we've been doing together.

Speaker, as part of our government's many actions to protect workers and businesses, our ministry has rolled out a number of important initiatives. All of these contribute in one way or another to the goals that are reflected in our proposed legislation. Together, they will help deal with unprecedented circumstances in a way that prioritizes the well-being and safety of workers and employers. I'm proud of the work we have done in concert with other ministries and levels of government to protect workers and stop the spread of COVID-19.

I know many in this chamber and many people across the province have seen the news coverage of our inspection blitzes. Our provincial offences officers have now visited more than 3,000 big-box stores and other essential retail businesses across Ontario in this year alone. I'm pleased to report that our inspections are making a real difference. Since January, we've visited retailers from Windsor to Niagara to Toronto, up to Sudbury, Muskoka and over to Ottawa. These inspections are welcomed by business owners and customers alike. They're helping prevent the spread of COVID-19 to front-line workers and helping business operate safely.

As Ontario continues to transition to reopening, we're scheduled to continue these inspection campaigns to ensure people are masking, screening workers and customers, abiding by capacity limits, practising physical distancing and creating COVID workplace safety action plans.

Speaker, we're also focused on making these campaigns more targeted to small businesses, because we know that they have really suffered during this pandemic. Many of these businesses have only recently started to reopen after being closed down for months during the provincial shutdown. We know these business owners and workers are just as concerned about operating safely as we are, but we also recognize that many of them may not have the resources to understand the new safety protocols. We're not here to punish businesses unfairly. We want to work with them to ensure they have the tools they need to keep workers and customers safe and remain open.

1630

That's why my ministry announced in late February a new series of inspection campaigns to help Ontario small businesses reopen safely. The two-stage campaign, focused on education first and enforcement later, helped to ensure businesses are treated fairly while protecting workers and customers. We have been giving employers guidance on screening, masking requirements and developing a safety plan, which is now a requirement for every single business in our province. We also offer a full suite of general and sector-specific guidance, posters and a safety plan that business owners can access at no cost. For small businesses that have questions, there is a dedicated phone line available to them to make it easier to get the information they need and then return to the shop floor. Together, these resources and investments in health and safety are helping guide them in preventing the spread of COVID-19 in their workplace.

Since we started this two-step campaign for small businesses, our inspectors have now visited over 850 small businesses, ranging from stores and gyms to personal care services. We visited locations in York, Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph, Durham, Windsor and Cornwall. As mentioned, we first make educational visits where we provide employers of these small businesses with instructions on how to safely reopen. Then we follow up with some of these businesses to check to ensure they are following the requirements to operate safely. In cases where we continue to find non-compliance, we will

enforce the COVID-19 safety requirements by issuing orders and tickets if necessary.

I'm very encouraged, however, by the way business owners are taking safety seriously. Reports from the follow-up visits show that compliance has increased by 20%. It shows that the overwhelming majority of small business owners are protecting their workers and customers and that the assistance our inspectors are providing is paying off.

We're also taking important steps to protect workers in the farming sector. Since January, my ministry has ramped up inspections on farms, greenhouses and other agricultural operations to ensure health and safety measures are being followed. We've especially focused on farm operations employing temporary foreign workers.

With the busy growing season fast approaching, thousands of temporary workers will be arriving from outside of Canada. Many are already here in Ontario. We have seen over the past year that farm workers are at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19. We owe it to these workers to ensure they have the protections they need to return safe and sound to their families when the job here in Ontario is done.

Speaker, these inspector visits have the power to save lives. Farm workers make sure our food supply chains are maintained. That means grocery store shelves are stocked and food is available for all of our dinner tables. This is a vital service, and I can't thank them enough for doing it on behalf of all of us.

Whether you were born here or come from overseas, if you work in Ontario, your safety is my business. Health and safety laws are not determined by your passport. Nothing is more important to me than every single worker's health and safety. We owe our workers nothing less.

Our proactive measures and education campaigns are important elements of our government's overall plan to safely reopen the province when we can. We are making sure we have lots of boots on the ground to do this vitally important work.

Just last September, we launched a recruitment campaign to increase our team of front-line health and safety inspectors looking to add new recruits. Earlier this month, we brought on 103 new inspectors onto our force. They started their condensed training program on March 1, and will begin making field visits with a mentor early next month. By Canada Day, they will be fully trained and deployed where we need them the most. I'm proud to say that with these new recruits, we now have the largest force of inspectors in provincial history.

All of these actions will bring us closer to the day when we fully reopen, which I know all of us are looking forward to.

Speaker, health and safety has been at the core of my ministry's efforts during this entire pandemic, but we also acted quickly to help protect workers' jobs and, with that, also protect employers. This includes the creation of new unlimited job-protected leave, the infectious disease emergency leave, that is fully retroactive back to January

25, 2020, the day the first presumptive case of COVID-19 was confirmed here in the province of Ontario. This leave helps to ensure employees' jobs are protected as they follow the advice of public health officials in stopping the spread of this virus.

The list of reasons for taking our leave is extensive, and here are just some of the reasons: having an infectious disease, needing to quarantine or self-isolate, following the direction of your employer, caring for someone else for a COVID-related reason, or being subjected to travel restriction related to COVID. This leave was passed with the unanimous support of all parties here in the Legislature.

In addition to the list of reasons for taking the leave, the list of people who can take time off to care for is also extensive. This list includes: taking the leave to care for your spouse, parent, child, grandparent, in-laws, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces and anyone you consider to be "like a family member." We intentionally designed this leave to ensure there was no question that if you need to stay home, your job here in Ontario is protected. Workers in Ontario can count on our government to have their backs.

Speaker, I also want to take the opportunity to remind everyone that there's financial assistance for employees who need to stay home. Thanks to an agreement between Prime Minister Trudeau, Premier Ford and other Premiers and territorial leaders, there is over \$1 billion available for workers to access 20 paid sick days. I'm pleased to update the House today: To date, more than 250,000 applications for this funding have either been approved or will be approved by the federal government.

Speaker, we're aware that this program needs to work better and continually improve. There is \$760 million still in the bank, and workers need the support. I've spoken many times with my federal counterpart, Minister Carla Qualtrough, regarding what needs to be done to improve the federal paid sick leave program. I discussed with her that workers need to be paid faster, that we need to make it easier to access the benefit and we need to raise awareness about the program. We have agreed to continue working on these challenges to make sure employees get the support they need.

Speaker, I've always said that our people are our greatest strength here in Ontario. This is why I was truly happy to announce on February 22 that my ministry is investing more than \$4 million to help train 373 new personal support workers. This funding will also provide them with additional health and safety resources. But our government is not stopping there. On February 24, we announced an additional \$115 million to help train more than 8,000 new PSWs—well on our way to our goal of 27,000 new PSWs here in Ontario. We will ensure we provide the best care for seniors and residents in long-term-care homes while connecting people with meaningful work.

We're taking comprehensive action to help people develop new and much-needed skills that will benefit some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

Working closely with our colleges and other important health care training partners, we will help many people prepare for rewarding careers while solving a decades-long problem, which is a shortage of personal support workers. Importantly, the government's investment will support a number of PSW training projects in regions hard-hit by COVID-19. Some projects have already begun, while others will start later in the spring. I will also mention that last fall, we invested half a million dollars to help train almost 100 new personal support workers in the Niagara region.

1640

Speaker, whenever we talk about work and the economy, we have to talk about young people and how we can support them, because they truly are the next generation that will power Ontario's recovery and prosperity. As I mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit workers incredibly hard, particularly young workers. Many have lost their jobs in sectors like retail, hospitality and service. As we work to protect these jobs, we're also planning ahead to help workers prepare for the future. That means enhancing and broadening our efforts to help workers learn skills they need to find new, in-demand jobs.

For one, we are taking action by investing more in training programs and employment services. At a time when many have experienced job loss, our initiatives will help ordinary people connect to new careers, helping them not only survive but thrive. I believe that it is these people in our local communities who will lay the foundation not only for recovery, but for a better future.

My ministry's mandate to support and advance worker training and skills development is an essential one, for our workers and our economy. Part of this includes our additional investment of \$478 million in skilled trades training, for a total of over \$1 billion over the next four years. Our plan is based around three pillars: to end the stigma and get more youth in the trades; to simplify the apprenticeship system; and to encourage employers to take on apprentices. It is through these pillars that we're giving people a hand up. When we do and they're supported in finding the training to succeed, we prosper as a society and as a province.

Mr. Speaker, it's my mission to spread opportunity more widely and fairly. It's our goal to connect people to well-paying, secure jobs within their own communities. Even now, there continues to be a high demand for skilled trades workers. Our skilled trades sector is the backbone of our economy. Skilled tradespeople have continued to keep Ontario running. I'm thinking of the construction workers who continue to build testing centres for COVID and hospital infrastructure, the automotive and other factory workers who kept our industrial worksites running, and so many others. Without these dedicated workers, we literally couldn't function.

Our mission is to attract more young people into the trades. Becoming an ironworker or a steamfitter should be as important and attractive as becoming a firefighter or a lawyer. Young people and their parents need to view careers in the trades as exciting, fulfilling and well-paying.

As our Premier says, “When you’ve got a trade, you’ve got a job for life.”

Part of our solution involves helping erase the stigma around blue-collar jobs, and we are doing this by investing to increase awareness of careers in the trades through various initiatives. We’re providing \$17 million over one year to the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program, which gives high school students opportunities to learn about work in the trades while completing their Ontario secondary school diploma. We’re also investing \$21 million in Ontario’s Pre-apprenticeship Training Program, giving hard-working people exposure to a variety of good jobs in the trades. The program is free for participants and includes a work placement.

Speaker, we’re also simplifying the apprenticeship system so it’s easier for people to access and navigate our programs. This includes providing funds to launch the new, non-repayable Tools Grant, which provides between \$400 and \$1,000 to apprentices to help with the cost of buying trade-specific tools and equipment. We’re investing \$5.8 million over two years in the Grant for Apprentice Learning to support those attending in-class training with basic living costs, including an increase of \$1.3 million this year and next, and we appointed a skilled trades panel to provide recommendations on ways to modernize the skilled trades and apprenticeship system.

Speaker, we’re also continuing to encourage employer participation in apprenticeships. We’re investing \$20 million over one year in a new group sponsorship grant to encourage small to medium-sized employers to come together to provide a full range of training and on-the-job mentorship for apprentices. We’re working with industry on labour force planning for major infrastructure projects. We will ensure that skilled trades in Ontario continue to grow and meet demand by connecting employers with the talent they need.

Speaker, we are taking the steps and putting in place initiatives to help workers increase their skills and be more productive in safe and fair workplaces. In February, I was proud to announce a new \$115-million initiative called the Skills Development Fund. It is timely and it is needed. The fund supports apprentices, job-seekers, employers and others in the community who have been hard-hit by COVID-19. It’s specifically designed to help people get back to work quickly and to support employers who need skilled trades and highly skilled workers. We put out a call for applications for creative, new and innovative ideas to help people get back on the job and kick-start growth in their communities. Our goal is simple, Mr. Speaker. It is to reduce obstacles to hiring, training and retraining. Through this funding, we’re helping workers to prepare for the province’s economic recovery and their career advancement.

I’m pleased as well to share that our government recently launched a \$77-million redesigned Second Career program. This initiative prioritizes laid-off workers and trains them for in-demand jobs in Ontario and in their own local communities. The redesign is improving access and support for laid-off workers impacted by COVID-19 and

will assist thousands of workers with up to \$28,000 for tuition, training materials and living expenses. This updated and much-improved Second Career program will help people get back on their feet and learn new skills, providing hope for them and their families.

Speaker, as you can see, the proposed measures are a critical part of our larger efforts to protect jobs and get local businesses back on their feet. Small businesses need stability now more than ever, and if passed, this bill would help protect them from unexpected increases in their WSIB premiums arising from the economic effects of the pandemic. It will help them remain solvent and it will help them to retain jobs. At the same time, it would not affect the annual increase in the maximum WSIB benefits for workers. This means that benefits for workers who are unable to work due to a work-related injury or illness will continue to be protected.

Our government has been constant in our support for workers and employers during the pandemic. The proposed legislation is one more step to help Ontario come through and recover from this clearly unprecedented time. Across the province, people are doing their part. From the front-line health care workers who work to protect our health and safety each day, to the local people in our communities who continue to buy local to support small businesses, and the people who continue to wear masks, wash their hands and keep physical distance in their workplaces and communities, it matters and it’s making a difference.

I know those of us here in the Legislature are just as committed to reopening our province safely so we can get small businesses back up and running. As legislators, we have a responsibility to step up and help them through this very difficult time. With the vaccines now rolling out, we’re beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel, but we’re not out of the woods yet. We need your support now to relieve the pressure on struggling businesses so they can survive and build a stronger, more resilient economic future for our province.

Mr. Speaker, I urge all members in this Legislature to support this bill.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. We do have time for questions. I’ll turn, for the first question, to the member from Beaches–East York.

Ms. Rima Berns-McGown: I was very interested in the way that the minister talked about the need for improvement of the federal program for paid sick days. It tells me that he doesn’t completely understand why it is that we keep calling for paid sick days. The issue is not only that there’s a delay, but that there is literally a cap on how much somebody can receive, whereas if the minister were feeling ill or, God forbid, got COVID, he would continue to receive his salary. It would just continue to go into his bank account, and there would never be a break.

I hope the minister understands that I am currently trying to keep people housed who have lost income due to COVID. They’re going out to work if they have to because they want to keep housed. It’s that desperate, and I’m not

sure the minister understands. I wish he would try to put himself in their shoes.

Hon. Monte McNaughton: Sorry, I was expecting a question there on what we're doing here today. This legislation, it's important that we pass it. We need to ensure that employers continue operating so workers have jobs to go to every single day.

Mr. Speaker, all of us together here in this Legislature worked together on day one, when the pandemic hit the province, to pass job-protected leave, which told any worker, if they're in isolation, in quarantine, if you're a mom or a dad who has to stay home to look after a son or daughter because of the disruptions to the school system, that you're not going to be fired.

Furthermore, we went further. We eliminated the need for sick notes during COVID-19, and I'm proud to say that now a quarter of a million workers in Ontario are receiving paid sick days through the federal program that we successfully negotiated.

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

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: I want to thank the member for his speech. When I talk to workers and many business owners in my riding, they talk about the importance of needing any type of relief now, especially when it comes to their payroll taxes. WSIB, of course, is one of the biggest expenses—just like the health tax, which this government has eliminated. Can the minister elaborate on the importance of establishing this bill now and how important it is for workers and businesses?

Hon. Monte McNaughton: I'd be happy to take this question from the member for Barrie–Innisfil, who works every single day, advocating on behalf of employers in her riding and workers and working-class families there.

The reason why we need this bill passed is because we need to protect those small and medium-sized businesses from a hike in unexpected WSIB premiums. This is something that all members in this Legislature should support. Stand up for those small and medium-sized businesses in your own local communities to ensure that they live to see another day.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: I have a question for the minister. I heard the minister talk a lot in his comments about this bill regarding small businesses and lots of different things. But one of the things I really think he's missing, again—that the member from Beaches–East York just mentioned, actually—is that small businesses are calling for this government to bring in paid sick days, small businesses like Grosche. The CEO is Helmi Ansari. It's a woman-owned business, a family-run business. This was the quote that I have from her. She says, "What we have learned from all these shutdowns ... it's not good business!" These shutdowns are not good business.

"Our economy is actually suffering most because we don't have paid sick days."

I wonder what the minister would say to Helmi Ansari and small business owners like her.

Hon. Monte McNaughton: I appreciate the question and the opportunity to respond.

Mr. Speaker, we need every worker in this province to know that there's one month now of paid sick days available to them. I would remind them that the official opposition leader actually said one day that that she wanted seven paid sick days, and then I think she said 10 and then back to seven, and she wasn't sure if she was going to put the burden on the backs of every small business. I think that's where she ended up. She actually was going to force small businesses out of business.

But we've taken a different approach. We negotiated \$1.1 billion with the federal government. We advocated every single day. I referenced my partnership with the federal minister, Minister Qualtrough. I'm proud to say that we have one month of paid sick days for workers in Ontario, and a quarter of a million workers are receiving that benefit as of today.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Question?

Mr. Rick Nicholls: Just to the honourable member, whose riding is just north of mine: I know that for many people in my riding of Chatham–Kent–Leamington, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the low-wage earners very, very hard. Many of them have lost their jobs in the retail and hospitality sectors.

But since the start of this pandemic, our government has continued to support businesses in Ontario. So my question to the honourable Minister of Labour is simply this: Why does this bill need to be implemented now, considering we are almost a full year into this global pandemic?

Hon. Monte McNaughton: I want to thank my colleague from Chatham–Kent–Leamington, who arrived at the Legislature the same day I did back in 2011, continues to represent his constituents every single day here in Queen's Park and truly is a pleasure to work with. So, thank you to the member.

This bill—it's imperative that we pass it as quickly as possible. I think this is something that all of us can get behind. Let's stand up for those small to medium-sized employers. Let's ensure that they're not going to face unexpected expenses from the WSIB.

I have to say, Mr. Speaker, I'm really proud of the WSIB system that our government has transformed. We've delivered now over \$2 billion in reductions in premium rates. We have built a system that is sustainable for generations to come. Workers will always be able to depend on the WSIB for benefits.

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

Mr. Wayne Gates: It's a pleasure to rise and ask the minister a question. I'm going to do a lead for an hour after, and I'm hoping that he's not too busy and he stays and listens.

There's two things here. One, you talked about inspections. There were 37,000 inspections that were done until December. You issued two fines, one to a teacher for not wearing a mask and one to a business, but the minute the Toronto Star put an article in and exposed it, then you

started going to do more inspections. But that's not my question.

My question is—you always pretend you're the friend of labour, and if you were, you would have done a lot differently in this bill. So I think it's fair and reasonable and, quite frankly, should be asked: Who from the Ontario Federation of Labour, which represents 1.7 million workers in the province of Ontario, did you talk to about Bill 238?

Hon. Monte McNaughton: I thank the member opposite for this question. I'm proud of my record as Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development. In fact, I'm proud of the Premier and our entire government. We've opened a dialogue with labour. In the first 100 days of taking over this portfolio, I met with more than 100 labour leaders. I marched in the Labour Day parade, the first Ontario Minister of Labour in years and years to stand with working people, with working-class people across the province to stand up for workers' rights.

We talk every day with labour. In fact, Mr. Speaker, when the opposition wanted us to close down every construction job site in the province, I picked up the phone and called the largest labour leaders in the country and said, "How can we keep half a million people working, including 65,000 women, on job sites?" I'm proud because of this government, because of this Premier and because of our partnership with—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. We have time for a quick question and a quick response.

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: Thank you to the minister for his speech. I understand that these proposed changes will provide much-needed relief for businesses just trying to survive this global pandemic. I'm also concerned that Bill 238 will create greater financial burdens for these small businesses in the future. Can the minister please explain to the House how future employer premiums will be affected by this proposed legislation?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thirty seconds to respond.

Hon. Monte McNaughton: Great, and I thank the member for this question. We are going to undoubtedly save many small and medium-sized businesses from going out of business because of this legislation.

Mr. Speaker, I want to go back to the construction issue and just highlight that the opposition parties, all of them, wanted us to close down every job site. Think of those people who were depending on having COVID-testing assessment centres built or new hospitals. I'm glad we took our path, not yours.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): It's time for further debate.

1700

Mr. Wayne Gates: It's always a pleasure to rise in the House, as you know, and in particular to talk about Bill 238, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, 2021. It's unfortunate that the minister is deciding to leave—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Excuse me. The member for Niagara Falls knows that he's not allowed to do that, and I would ask him to withdraw that comment.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker, I apologize. I withdraw.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Back to the member from Niagara Falls to continue.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Let me just say this as clearly as possible now: If there was any illusion whatsoever that his Conservative government cared about workers' health and safety or about injured workers, Bill 238 has shattered that myth.

As we stand before the House and debate this bill today, we know that nearly—and that's why I wish some people would stay here—50%, Mr. Speaker—people in your riding, people in my colleagues' ridings, quite frankly people on the other side of the House—50% of injured workers in this province live in poverty. No one should live in poverty in a province as rich as Ontario. The Minister of Labour should be sick that workers are living in poverty and the only thing they did was get injured on the job through no fault of their own. Even worse, every single worker knows that under this Conservative government, they're one injury away from living in poverty.

Mr. Speaker, under this government's watch, the sickening fact remains that being injured at work can mean a sentence of a life in poverty. How can the Minister of Labour see that and not act? How can he see injured workers struggling and needing his help and just cast them aside? The government knows this fact. We know this fact. Every worker knows that fact. The government has a chance to finally fix this, and they've refused. They've refused here. They've refused at committee. And we saw what happened just a few minutes ago.

Before we begin talking about how this government slapped every injured worker in the face last week, I want to talk about what's actually left in this bill. In fact, I want to quote the legal professionals at the injured workers centre, who said it very simply:

"Bill 238 makes it so that employers who have workers earning above 175% are protected from their premiums. To be clear, the changes proposed in this bill would only benefit employers who pay workers above \$97,308 annually. So who is this bill really helping? How many small businesses"—which they talked about—"in Ontario do you know that have workers earning more than \$97,000? In reality, not many.

"So this bill aims to help big businesses"—like Amazon, who we just saw had to shut down because of COVID-19. And I don't know if anybody heard, but they had a number of employees—600, Mr. Speaker—get COVID-19. Do you know how many filed for WSIB? Less than five. Even though it's the law in this province that they have to have a form 7, less than five. It might have been two, might have been one, might have been zero, but less than five out of 600. That's who they're helping with this bill.

“It doesn't help those who are really struggling with the impact of COVID-19: small businesses and, most importantly, vulnerable workers. And if there's any small businesses that employ people earning above \$97,000, I think it's fair to say those businesses should not be a priority of the government relief bills during a pandemic, when so many businesses and people are truly struggling.

“Also keep in mind that the WSIB's premium structure already automatically adjusts to economic downturns, since premiums are based on payroll. With less economic activity, there is lower payroll and hence lower premiums. By reducing payroll requirements, you just help those industries that are doing well in a pandemic”—and I just mentioned one—Amazon, Walmart.

By the way, I'll add this—it's not my speech, although I did work on it for the last couple of days: How many here know who the richest person in the world is? Help me out. Yell it out. You yell at me all the time. Yell something out. Do you know who it is, Mr. Speaker? It is the chairperson of Amazon. The richest person in the world—that's who we're helping in this bill. I'm sure he's going to say thanks, because he probably needs a couple of more billion dollars. That is who we're fighting on behalf of in this bill—it's not small business, it's not the injured workers; it's companies like Amazon, which, I believe, is an American company. Why are we helping an American company by putting Ontario laws in place for it?

We know Amazon doesn't care about the safety of their workers. During the height of the second wave, the Amazon factory in Peel—and I think my colleague is from that area—was trying to encourage workers to not miss a single day, during a pandemic in one of the hardest-hit regions in the country. Do you know how they were doing it? You can yell it out to me if you know. This is how they were doing it: They were offering the workers, who were already working 12 hours a day, who already had co-workers with COVID-19—they already had workers coming into work sick—the lowest-wage workers, new Canadians, \$1,000 if they didn't miss a day in December. They were going to work because we have no sick days. They were going to work because they can't pay the rent, they can't pay the mortgage. And what did that company do? “If you come to work sick, we'll give you \$1,000.” If I'm a dad or a mom and I'm working in that factory, I'm going to work. I'm making minimum wage. That's what's going on. My colleagues may think it's a good idea because it gets people to work; I don't believe it is.

That's why we've got the problem up in Peel and Brampton area, which have these manufacturing facilities that are paying minimum wage, that have new Canadians working in their plants—because we don't have sick days.

They don't want to talk about sick days, because they've got this idea that the federal program is good; we know it's not. We know it doesn't fit the needs of communities like Brampton. They go to work sick, they spread COVID-19—and now there's a variant that is spreading even more rapidly and they're saying that even more people die from it. This is what's going on in that part.

Amazon posted a profit of \$22 billion last year. They can't hire someone to ensure they're in compliance with safety laws in this province? Do you know what's interesting about that? And I don't like to pick on one company; I could pick on Walmart, I could pick on a number of them that have made an incredible amount of money during the pandemic. The year before the pandemic, do you know what Amazon made in profit? Anybody? Help me out, my colleagues. They made \$11 billion. During the pandemic, they made \$22 billion. And they can't pay their employees sick pay? They can't take care of their employees? This is a company that tries to avoid the regulations already in place. Why are they being rewarded in this bill? It doesn't make sense.

Mr. Speaker, nothing in this bill requires Amazon to comply with health and safety regulations to get this special treatment—nothing at all. The question is, why do we do this?

When these CEOs come knocking, this government jumps; when workers need protection, they can't be found. That's what's going on in the province.

Amazon needed a WSIB freeze and you made it happen in a month—yet none of the thousands of workers at home because of how dangerous their facility was were getting paid sick time.

I know I'm not supposed to hold this up as a prop—but are you kidding me? What are we doing in this province?

Make no mistake about it: If this government cared about workers, they would listen to the calls by cities across the province—cities like Brampton, Toronto, St. Catharines—to implement provincially mandated paid sick days.

1710

Mr. Speaker, if this government cared about worker safety, then they would name these big companies, like Toronto now does. I want to compliment the city of Toronto. I think it's wonderful. They name companies that are in violation. They name companies where people have COVID. We should know where the outbreaks are. The city of Toronto does that and I want to give them a compliment, because that's the type of stuff that can save lives and can make sure that people aren't getting sick.

Every time there's a chance to help workers, this government votes it down and then offers up some excuse which doesn't hold water. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, we've seen the same thing in Bill 238. This government will stand up and say they care about injured workers, but we know the facts because we know what they voted down this week regarding this bill. And it broke my heart. I actually begged the government to support some of these issues—literally begged them. When I was president of my union, I never begged a company for anything. But I know what's going on in the province, and you guys should too. You guys should know what's going on—sorry. Through the Speaker: They should know what's going on in their constituencies.

For those watching at home, the PC Party proudly voted down the following three amendments to this bill. Because we get to do that; we go to committee, we bring amend-

ments, we put our case forward, and then the Conservatives have the opportunity to support us and obviously make the bill better for workers. I'm going to read them out.

Making WSIB coverage for front-line heroes presumptive so they don't have to fight WSIB for benefits: Now, some people at home may not know what that means. Here's what happens—or here's what's been happening in the province of Ontario and why we brought a bill forward. I'm a nurse in a hospital anywhere in Ontario, or I work in a long-term-care facility or retirement home, and I'm exposed to COVID. Obviously, they send me home and they tell me I have to file for WSIB. Now, these are our heroes. We call them heroes every day. I listened to it for a year here. They then file for WSIB, and do you know what happens? They get turned down. Some 2,000 people have been turned down by WSIB; we have almost 700 in an appeal process. Presumptive language would say that it's presumed that after January 25 they would have got that COVID in their workplace. There's an outbreak there; they're transporting residents, or their patients. It almost makes common sense.

Guess who voted that down? The Conservatives. I was surprised, because they call them heroes, front-line care workers—or essential workers. It could be at a Shoppers, it could be at a drugstore, it could be in a corrections centre, it could be working for the city—all our essential workers, who we all, every one of us, have to say thank you to, because they're allowing us to do what we do as they risk their lives every day. “But please don't file for WSIB, because we're going to turn you down.” And if you ask this government to support it, they're going to turn it down too—as they say, they care about workers. That's a myth. We all know that's a myth.

Number two: an end to the disgusting practice of deeming injured workers and ripping away their wages—and hopefully I should get enough time in my speech to talk about some of the cases that will bring tears to everybody's eyes. What happens is, I'm making \$50,000 a year. I go to work, say I fall off a ladder and I get hurt. I can't work anymore and I file for WSIB, and I have a premium. But what they do, the WSIB—and they started this around 2015, really doing it hard—is deem that I could go park vehicles, even though that job's not there, even though my back is so bad and my injuries are so bad. But they deem I can do that job, and they take that off your benefit. That's why you'll end up living in poverty.

I said to the government, “You can add this to the bill and we'll support the bill.” My colleagues over here supported it. I reached across to them and I did a passionate speech to them. And I don't know how many are on Facebook with me; you can go watch it. I put it up on my Facebook to let people know that they said no to deeming. It makes no sense. They prefer to have injured workers live in poverty.

And a wording change to make it so that the purpose of this act is to provide for injured workers—believe it or not, that is not mentioned anywhere in the act. So if you wanted to make a change to say, “The act provides for injured

workers”—you would think it would already be in the act, but it wasn't. Guess who turned that change down? I know the Speaker can't guess, plus he's got a mask on, but it was the Conservatives. Three things that would have made this bill better—would have made it better for the workers in the province of Ontario; would have made it better for our front-line workers who are risking their lives and getting COVID-19, to take on WSIB—where they automatically would get covered with WSIB—they turned it all down.

I want to talk about these individuals. Mr. Speaker, on the presumptive language, this should have been an easy decision for this government. As of this morning, there were almost 300 claims pending for workers who caught COVID-19 in the workplace. To date, nearly 2,000 claims have been denied. Of those 2,000 claims—and I'm just going off the top of my head; these numbers are actually higher—769 have either been nursing home workers or staff in a hospital—our heroes. You turned it down. That's right. The WSIB has told almost 800 health care heroes that they probably got COVID somewhere else and that they weren't getting WSIB benefits. “You got it at Shoppers”—even though you were transporting patients all day for 12 hours in the hospital, risking your life.

What happens here is that these workers are getting COVID-19 in the workplace, then they file a claim with WSIB and WSIB says, “Prove it. Prove that you're on your shift for 12 hours. Prove that that patient had COVID-19.” How can you treat workers like this, who are our heroes? How can these workers prove they caught an invisible airborne disease in a workplace? Somebody can answer that for me. The ONA, the Ontario Nurses' Association, has pointed out that Ontario is behind other provinces like Quebec for even recognizing how contagious this virus is when it's airborne. The province won't even give nurses the proper PPE for this, but then tells them they got COVID on their own. So while we're fighting with WSIB, these workers aren't getting paid and, frankly, they aren't getting better because they're busy dealing with WSIB.

Mr. Speaker, I want you and those watching at home to stop and actually think about this: During this pandemic, the Premier and his friends who own these rich corporations are all saying that our front-line workers are heroes, and they are right. We all can agree to that. They are right; these people are. It wasn't a CEO from Walmart who kept our residents safe in our hospitals; they're too busy counting their money. I didn't see the Weston family on the front lines of any of the grocery stores as they cut their pandemic pay. No. It was the workers who did this. That's who did it. And they've got an obligation, I believe, with this bill, to stand up for workers. It was the people from our community who kept our communities from going through the darkest hours of the pandemic. And, despite this, the Premier and these CEOs don't care about workers, and I'll debate that with anybody. I remember; I was here. I remember even our labour minister—I think I can say this—called me a union thug. Do I look like a thug, with these arms? Come on, there's nothing there. He said I was an elitist. I don't even know what an elitist is, but I know I'm not an elitist.

And, despite this, the Premier and these CEOs don't care about workers. As soon as the cameras are turned off, they couldn't care less, and that's the difference. That's the difference. We saw when the CEO of Loblaws and so many of these other companies gave workers pandemic pay when the cameras were on and then ripped it out of their hands the second the cameras were turned off.

1720

In the last quarter of 2020, Loblaws—listen to this. It's incredible. Maybe everybody can answer; you can yell it out. How many have noticed our food prices have gone up? Our food prices are going up. Guess what happened in the last quarter of 2020? Loblaws increased their net profit by \$325 million. It didn't even balance out; they increased their profit. Yet they still refuse to reinstate their workers' hero pay. The Weston family doesn't care in the slightest about their workers. They're among the worst examples of greed we have to offer during the pandemic.

The Premier said nothing about that. To make matters worse, he has essentially done the same thing—we saw it with nurses and ensuring that they were paid when they had to self-isolate. In the first wave, the Premier had no problem with ensuring they had pay during that period. When the second wave hit, the Premier couldn't be found; he refused to lift a finger on his own to help them or to provide paid sick days for workers.

On this side of the House, we have fought tooth and nail to get this government to do the right thing and ensure that our nurses aren't losing pay because they are exposed to COVID-19. The story behind that—in the first wave, our nurses got paid; in the second wave, they didn't. It's wrong that we even had to do that in the first place. The nurses and doctors aren't taking vacations. They're working around the clock to keep people safe. They're burnt out. They're tired. They rightfully expect even the smallest gratitude from this government—and yet, they have to fight with the government to even be recognized.

Mr. Speaker, you can see it in the legislative priorities before the House. Last week, the Conservatives rammed through a bill so their development friends and donors could pave over the greenbelt and bypass local authorities. They rammed through a bill that allowed those developers to triple the amount they can donate to the PC Party.

The Premier said it himself last week: "My job is to represent the party." As the member from Davenport said, that's false; that's not his job. He's not in this House as a PC Premier. He's supposed to be the Premier for all the residents of this great province. That includes nurses. That includes hospital cleaners. That includes injured workers who are on WSIB. That includes PSWs. Yet if he's left unchecked, he just forgets these people, and they have to fight for benefits on their own.

One of the benefits that workers are fighting for is presumptive coverage. They are fighting so that our heroes can get coverage in the workplace. What is presumptive language? I explained it a little bit. Right now, the process is that the WSIB presumes they caught it outside of work, and workers have to fight. If you look at what really happens in Ontario, we can see why this policy is a failure.

In Waterloo region, we saw our paramedics being denied WSIB coverage because they were told by the WSIB that they had PPE on at work. That's a real case. The WSIB told these paramedics, "If you were wearing PPE, then there's no way you could have caught COVID-19 in the workplace. Therefore, you got it at home." We all know that's nonsense. You don't need to be a doctor to realize that you could still get COVID-19 even if you're wearing PPE. This is an airborne virus that is known for how effective it is at spreading.

If we look across Canada, we see that the number of medical professionals who are getting sick is much higher than in some countries similar to ours.

So to the WSIB I say, it's pretty clear that even when wearing PPE, you can still get COVID-19—especially when you're talking about our paramedics, who are dealing constantly with people who have the virus.

Mr. Speaker, if this government actually spoke to workers and their representatives, they would have realized that this bill could have been a serious WSIB bill; it could have been so much better—one that actually meets the moment before us. When I spoke to workers, they were clear: Now is the time to address the exemptions in the WSIB. This legislation could have been the time to address gaps that injured workers fall through. It would have involved expanding coverage to all workers and volunteers who put themselves in harm's way during a pandemic to ensure safety and the well-being of others. This would have been extending protection of the act to workers who must isolate or quarantine because of work exposure.

It's unacceptable that these workers should have to burn through their vacation or their savings as they self-isolate. In fact, most workers who are self-isolating are exactly the workers who should be getting vacation when this is over instead of having to use up all their vacation. They're heroes who have been working non-stop for a year, face to face with COVID, saving lives. It's disgusting that they should have to do that and then pay to self-isolate because this government won't honour them and pay them sick pay.

Mr. Speaker, if the Premier or the Minister of Labour even took the time to talk to front-line workers, they would know that these workers are going above and beyond to stay safe in their home lives. They would know they are constantly exposed to COVID, whether they're in the grocery store or in a hospital. They know they're more exposed at work than people who are at home. Oftentimes they're even safer in their home lives than the guidelines call for. They are caregivers, family members. They're losing out on more time with their families trying to meet these standards. That's what makes this so much worse. They get COVID in the workplace, and then somehow they have to prove to WSIB that that's the case.

The question is: Are these people front-line heroes, or aren't they? Ask yourself that, those that are listening.

The question is—I just said it: This is how you treat heroes? You don't take away their pay. You don't let billionaire CEOs walk away with their pay. You don't stand back and watch them as they suffer. That's how our

heroes are being treated right now in the province of Ontario. If the Premier wants to actually be a leader, then he needs to show leadership and stand up and defend these workers, truly be on their side. Stand up for workers.

The member from Burlington made it clear in her prepared speaking notes yesterday that the government isn't willing to debate or consider presumptive coverage on its merits. They're falling back on the presentation of one person in a committee. They want you to forget the fact that the rest of the presenters called for presumptive coverage. They're claiming one legal opinion which, by the way, didn't even discuss what a presumptive coverage bill was—one opinion that suggests that's all they should do.

Here's the thing: The presumptive coverage bill is a very specific piece of legislation. It doesn't change WSIB; it just makes the change for COVID. It would cease to exist once the crisis is over, and this bill does provide coverage for those workers that WSIB has refused, unless they get a clear case of fraud. It's that simple. It can protect our front-line heroes, and this government proudly voted against that. I don't know how you can do it.

Today they'll stand up and say they did it because of procedure. If they say that, ask why front-line heroes are still being rejected and they won't even call a vote on my bill.

Mr. Speaker, that's just one kind of presumptive language. As was pointed out in the committee, there's already presumptive coverage for many occupational diseases. So why ignore this one during a pandemic? One that comes to mind, to the top of my head, is firefighters.

We know this government cares very little for workers who get sick on the job. This is a case of Peterborough workers who had proven they were working in a workplace that exposed them to a workplace cancer. They've been fighting for justice for decades, and I want to say that I stand with them, as they've lost their partners. It's disgusting that the minister won't even respond to the letters in a timely fashion. It's wrong that they won't implement the recommendations made in the Demers report. Those workers are heroes for the fight they've waged for justice, and they deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

1730

One of the lawyers who presented before the committee brought up a great idea that I think this government should look at: Every five years, have a mandatory, full-scale and independent review of the WSIB. That review should take into account the stories of injured workers. That way, if something is being abused—the way the deeming clause is being abused right now—then it can be caught and addressed. No worker should have to wait 20 years for justice. Why not listen to that presenter and implement that plan, or even give us a reason why you won't?

The point is that there were numerous efforts made that were fully within the scope of this bill that would have made workplaces safer and helped injured workers. When they want to give companies breaks, they have no problem legislating the WSIB. Yet when workers need help, you'll see them say, "It's an independent agency." One rule for

injured workers, one rule for their donors—and, quite frankly, it's shameful.

Mr. Speaker, maybe, to this government, the health and safety of workers is a laughable matter or something that should depend upon which political party you're from, but for me, it's real. I was president of my local, Unifor Local 199. We lost a guy, a pretty young man. He went to work during the day; he was on day shift. He had a wonderful family: a beautiful wife, two kids. He coached his son's hockey team. He went to work for General Motors. He was on day shift. They assigned him a job that he hadn't done in a year. What he didn't know when he was assigned the job was that they had turned the switch so it could continuously run so you get more parts out. Joel went in—at the start of the shift, you always change your tools. He went into change his tools, not realizing that once he did it, a part came down. It cycled, and it killed him instantly. With the paramedics, about four hours after the accident, we wheeled Joel out. I had to make a call to his wife as president of the local union that her husband had died. I had to tell his daughter and his son. And every year since then, on the Day of Mourning ceremony in Niagara-on-the-Lake, we pledge to never, ever stop fighting for workers. And their family has gone every year. His wife is remarried. His daughter got married. His son is a mechanic. They're doing okay.

Do you know the one thing Joel will never get to do? It's why we have to protect injured workers. It's why we talk about health and safety. Do you know what Joel never got a chance to do? Help me out here. Anybody? Anybody that's paying attention? Joel would never get a chance to see his granddaughters and his grandson. He never got that opportunity that day when he went to work on day shift to come home and say to his wife, "I love you. I love my kids." He never got that chance. That's what it's like when you die on the job. It's not just the person that dies; it's the family around them: Joel's mom and dad, his wife's parents, the aunts, the uncles, the nieces and nephews. Everybody is affected.

So when I stand up here and talk about health and safety and how this government could improve the lives of workers, and they say no, and they say no, and they say no, as they stand up there and say, "We care about workers. I've met with 2,000 labour leaders," and they don't give us sick days as workers, and they don't give us presumptive language, and they don't fix deeming—and you care about us? How can anybody think that? Put it in perspective. We are to this government what we are: We're workers. And we're not going to get support from this government when it comes to these issues.

But I'm not going to stop fighting. I promised Joel's family that I will always stand up and fight to have better safety laws in the province of Ontario. And I always go to the Day of Mourning in Niagara-on-the-Lake where we have a monument to remember Joel. That's why these amendments are so important.

Yesterday I asked the member from Burlington, the parliamentary assistant for labour, if she knew the motto we chant on the Day of Mourning. It's simple, across this

country we say, “Mourn for the Dead, Fight for the Living.” Mr. Speaker, I asked the parliamentary assistant yesterday if she knew that motto. It took her 10 minutes to google it before she could respond.

I can tell you that anyone who has been to their local Day of Mourning ceremony knows those words. I can tell you those people know why legislation like this must expand workers’ health and safety regulations. It’s reasons like this which are the reasons I fear this government doesn’t care about injured workers, and maybe doesn’t even like to talk about them. Families like Joel Murray’s and those we mourn on the Day of Mourning know how important these opportunities are.

I’d like to turn to the next thing this government proudly voted against, and that was to end deeming. Quoting from the presentation at committee, here’s a summary of what deeming is—and please listen to this. I wish the government would listen to this, because I really don’t think they understand what deeming is—“Deeming is a practice which applies to workers who have permanent injuries and can’t go back to their previous job. Essentially, the WSIB chooses a new job (called a suitable occupation) which it deems a worker able to do, and then proceeds to reduce that worker’s benefits according to what they ‘could’ be earning, irrespective of whether the worker is in fact able to earn that money.”

Now, everybody understands that? I can’t work, yet they say I can work—they deem I can work—and then they cut my benefits and they force me to live in poverty. They force me to lose my family and they force me to lose my house, the connection between my kids because now I can’t pay to have them go to dance or to go to skating or to play hockey. That’s what deeming is. It’s a disgrace in this province. And everybody here that’s been here as an MPP should be standing up and screaming. Just because I got hurt on the job doesn’t mean I should live in poverty in one of the richest provinces in the country.

Again, yesterday the member from Burlington shared with us the PCs’ talking points about deeming. They take no responsibility, despite the fact it has continued to happen under their government. In fact, think about this—and this would have happened at committee, so it’s in Hansard and I’m not talking out of school here, guys—they went back 33 years and blamed the NDP, when we were in government. Some guy named Bob Rae, I think, was Premier. He’s a Liberal now, is my understanding, probably for 31 years. They ignore the fact that they’ve been in government with three majorities since then. So it was the NDP government 33 years ago, but they’ve had a majority three times and never fixed deeming. They ignore the fact that really deeming hasn’t been used in the way that it’s being used now since 2015, when the WSIB really began deeming workers under the Liberals, quite frankly, and now their government. They ignored the fact that there is a bill before this House that the NDP would fully support voting for today that would end deeming.

I’m asking you, Speaker—I know you can’t answer, but I’ll ask anyway: I don’t think you want anybody that you represent to get hurt on the job, whether it be at the—

you’ve got a lot of automotive workers, I believe, in Windsor, with the assembly plant; you’ve got a lot of parts manufacturers. If they get hurt on the job, they get deemed and they go and live in poverty. Don’t let the member from Burlington’s talking points confuse you: This government has the ability to vote on Bill 119 and end deeming this week, and they refuse to do it. We fully support it and we’re just waiting for them to act.

This government will make the nonsense argument that somehow this wasn’t appropriate for this bill. I want to read to them one of the presentations that will show why they are misleading people about this. The United Steelworkers—we’ve all heard of them: “There doesn’t seem to be any connection between the two proposed additions to the WSIA, other than they would both be part of that piece of legislation. While we have concerns and questions regarding both proposed additions, they are unique to each section. Since they are in ... order in the bill, we will present our position in that order as well to be followed by concerns of a general nature regarding the proposal to amend the WSIA.”

1740

They refused to even debate our motion on a technicality that they themselves are using. That’s how you can tell they’re not upfront, and this tells us the true intention of this particular bill.

Mr. Speaker, let’s be honest: Their bill, designed to give rich employers a break, changes two completely unrelated sections of this act. It’s all over the place. If they can change unrelated sections of this act, then it’s perfectly appropriate, under the rules of this House, to include amendments to end deeming and provide presumptive language. They can do it today and they won’t. Don’t let them try to use the member from Burlington’s messaging, which doesn’t add up. They can fix it today and they won’t, because they don’t care. When employers who have employees making \$96,000 a year want help, they drop what they’re doing and draft this legislation. When developers want to pave over our greenbelt, they shoehorn destructive environmental policies into a rural Internet bill—I think it’s schedule 3, which, quite frankly, is a disgrace. When rich developers want to give them more money, they immediately table a bill and ignore their obligations to get vaccines into residents.

Speaking of vaccines—I think it’s fair and appropriate to raise that—I learned a new word in the House the other day from my question: “myth.” The health minister wanted to say there is a myth about Moderna vaccines in Niagara. I have a letter from Niagara Health that talks about the fact that we were supposed to get Moderna vaccines. They were going to be delivered on January 11, in the middle of—we were a hot spot; we were having somebody die every 3.5 hours. It’s a myth that I have the signatures of 20 doctors on this particular letter. It’s a myth that Dr. Hirji, who provided me with these emails, said that he was told by their government that Niagara was going to get Moderna and that they were going to come on January 11. Pfizer was going to go to our health care professionals at Niagara Health, and Moderna, because it’s easier to

transport, was going to go to our long-term-care facilities and retirement homes. What happened was, we didn't get them. Here are his emails.

Mr. Rick Nicholls: Point of order.

Mr. Wayne Gates: There are four of them—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I'm sorry to interrupt.

The member for Chatham-Kent–Leamington has raised a point of order.

Mr. Rick Nicholls: Speaker, I've been painfully listening to the member from Niagara Falls pertaining to this bill, but I'm finding—and this is the painful part—that he's not sticking to the intent and content of this bill. He's going off on tangents, and I would ask that he bring it back and speak specifically to the bill.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): That's a good point. I would ask the member to bring it back to the bill. Although I will recall, for those who were here during the hour-long debate led off by the minister, that he did a long-winded, geographic—he had a lot of fun going not to the bill but around. I've been very lenient because I allowed the minister not to speak strictly to the bill. I've been listening to the member from Niagara Falls, and I hope he does tie it back, as the minister did. Thank you for raising that point.

I return to the member from Niagara Falls.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I appreciate that, Mr. Speaker.

I'm hurt that the member actually said it was painful listening to me. I think that wasn't called for.

I was trying to illustrate that a new word in the House is “myth.” It's a myth that all these documents pertain to Moderna in Niagara.

I will bring it back to the bill. Do you know what happened here because we didn't get our vaccines? It's a health and safety issue. Because we didn't get our vaccines, in some of our long-term-care facilities, and in one in particular called Oakwood, we ended up with 100% COVID-19 with the residents—100%. Forty people died. But you know what else happened—because that's health and safety—we had 100% of the staff get COVID-19. Even though it's a myth that they don't exist, I actually think it's tied to the bill and that's why I thought I'd raise it. I appreciate you giving me a little leeway there on that as well.

I'll go back: Yet when your injured workers are living in poverty, some with less than \$10,000 a year to live on, they can't be bothered to add this to the bill. That's who this government is, and those are the talking points from the member from Burlington.

Mr. Speaker, when we were collecting stories on Bill 238, we heard some of the most heart-wrenching stories from workers who continue to be deemed by this government. I know they voted down dealing with deeming last week, but I wanted to share their stories and hope their experiences will make one final appeal to include deeming in this bill.

The first is that of Ms. Brown. Her story was given to us with simply the line that she had been deemed down to

the point where her benefit was only \$25 a week. She told us she lost everything she had ever worked for.

The next was a story of a nurse from North Bay, Dianne. Dianne had been a nurse for 25 years dealing with patients who suffered from mental health issues. One night while she was working, she was locked in a room where a patient beat her severely with a chair, so badly that she could not work again. The WSIB deemed that that nurse, one of our heroes, was capable of doing customer service work, and reduced her benefits. She went from making \$65,000 a year to living off \$22,000.

These are real stories, and your government is saying no.

Interjections.

Mr. Wayne Gates: In an article in a local paper, she said that the WSIB had taken everything from her. So that you guys hear it again—there's a little rumbling there—in an article in a local paper, she said that the WSIB had taken everything from her. This government, which has a majority, can fix that today.

The next story is from a former auto worker—that's what I was, by the way, and very proud of it; I worked in a plant for over 30 years: “I was deemed to be an office worker and deemed the minimum wage at the time. They also said I did not try to mitigate my losses and took the minimum wage off the LOE I won in my case. The WSIB determined I hadn't tried to look for work so therefore reduced my earnings. Even though in the same breath they said I gained skills as an office worker through my volunteer work.”

Another story, this one sent to me by a friend, Paul, was about a schoolteacher. Listen to this one, because teachers are our heroes. I actually think teachers should get vaccinated, with what's going on with the COVID-19 and the variants that are happening in our schools across the province. But this is a story about a teacher. This was sent to me by a friend, Paul. A schoolteacher went walking between the school portables. You know how sometimes schools have portables? On the path—it's Paula, sorry—she slipped on the ice and fell, hitting her head, and her back and side hit the ground.

She was seen by a panel of three specialists who confirmed she had a brain injury and leg, back and wrist injuries, and that she was to be off work for at least a year. The WSIB doctor, after reading the medical reports, claimed she was diagnosis shopping—that she went to see these doctors on her own, when she was referred by her family doctor—and she was deemed fully recovered.

These are real stories from real workers this province could help. How can they hear stories and not act? How can you still use these lines to justify not helping people?

I have also had legal professionals reach out to me, who have made their careers by trying to defend workers against deeming, who begged us to put them out of work and end this awful practice. So I've got lawyers saying, “Get rid of deeming. I don't want the work.” They'd rather see the end of deeming.

1750

One professional told us about his client who had suffered a head injury on the job. His claim for permanent

disability was denied at the WSIB. They got the necessary entitlement that recognized that this was a serious mental health impairment and was work-related. That took a number of years to get recognized.

But when the benefits resulting from this entitlement were determined by the board, they deemed him to be able to return to his high-wage job at his accident employer and he received no loss of earnings benefit. This required another appeal—this is what goes on with the WSIB—which took another number of years to sort out.

During the entire time that these appeals were going on, the client and his family lived on ODSP and his Canada Pension Plan disability benefit. The WSIAT awarded this client full loss of earnings benefits with full arrears. His WSIB benefit went from \$0 to almost \$2,400 a month; along with his Canada Pension Plan disability benefit, he is no longer poor. All of the ODSP money paid to him and his family were repaid by the WSIB arrears.

We hear this time and time again: that workers win, but they need to be able to afford a lawyer and go on for years without benefit and entitlement. I'll ask anybody here. Everybody in this room makes a fair wage. I can openly say that I make \$116,000 doing this job. I know everybody on that side of the House makes probably \$140,000, just because of the different roles here. I'll ask anybody here: Who could go a number of years with no money?

So you're forced to live on ODSP. You're forced to live in poverty for a number of years. Do you know what happens? Mental health—you lose your partner, in a lot of cases. The marriage splits up. You lose your family, your community, your sense of worth. That's what's going on with the system, and yet we won't support getting rid of deeming? It makes no sense to me.

Another story I'll tell, because I'm going to run out of time: The worker's accident was recognized, but he was denied benefits as WSIB felt that he was always able to return to work with his employer. He was therefore deemed to be earning his full wages and received no loss-of-earning benefits.

Listen to this, Mr. Speaker, and hopefully everybody over there listens. Listen to this one line. Do you know how long his appeal took? Somebody yell it out, so at least I'll know you're listening; I know the one member is. Mr. Speaker, his appeal took 20 years—20 years. What are we doing in this province to injured workers?

Throughout the length of his appeal, his sole source—listen to this—was ODSP. They had to go to WSIAT to get recognition that he was not able to return to his work at his accident employer. The board eventually recognized that he was unlikely to ever return to work and eventually paid him his full loss of earnings with full arrears. His WSIB benefit went to \$2,800. He got that after 20 years.

I don't know how far I'm going to get on this, but as you can see here, this process is painful and it's difficult for workers. They get injured on the job, they get deemed into poverty, and the best they can hope for is being able to get their money back two decades down the road. Who can afford it? Are there any lawyers on that side? If there are—I'm guessing; I haven't been to a lawyer in a while, but I would think a lawyer is \$300 to \$400 an hour today.

That may be low in Toronto; I don't know. I'll be honest, I haven't been to a lawyer in probably 20 years. But it's at least \$300—for 20 years, and they're living on ODSP. Now you know why people can't fight and they just give up and live in poverty. Do you know what happens to them? They get mental health issues. They commit suicide. They take their lives.

We can fix it right here. Every one of you over there can fix it. Add deeming to this bill. You listened to these stories. These are real stories.

What about workers who can't afford a lawyer? I just said that. Of course, it was made even worse when this government cut funding to legal aid. They've got WSIB workers who have voted in favour of strikes because their workloads are so heavy and unmanageable. That was at legal aid. If you speak to the Office of the Worker Adviser, in some places it can take up to two years just to get a lawyer. Meanwhile, you're not getting any income. There's no world in which this is a reasonable time for workers.

Mr. Speaker, every way you cut this, it's bad for workers and it's bad for taxpayers.

Do you want to reduce the need for workers to have lawyers? Then end deeming so they won't need to appeal these decisions. Do you want to reduce the casework on WSIB workers? Listen to what is taking their time and ask why there are so many claims put in. You can take these workers off ODSP and OW by ending deeming.

This is something that nobody really talks about: Who pays for ODSP? If I get injured on the job and go on ODSP, who pays for it? Does anybody know? The taxpayers. Who's not paying for it? The employer. It's not coming out of premiums; it's coming out of our tax dollars. And then, they reduce the employers' premiums. This is what's going on. It's absolutely vicious.

There's no good reason why this government chooses to keep deeming. They know how the Liberals started improperly using deeming, and they allow it to continue. Why are they standing by and doing nothing? They could have made this important change to deeming by voting for this amendment. They're changing unrelated parts of this bill, so why not add this? Once you realize that it would save the government money and, most importantly, bring justice to these injured workers, it becomes crystal clear why this government made this a political issue: They don't care about injured workers.

I'll say it again: You can't care about injured workers if you won't correct this.

Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned before, this bill only provides a WSIB break for those who pay their employees more than \$96,000. Do you know who's left out? I've heard it on that side. My colleague in front of me talks about it all the time. Small businesses, medium-sized businesses, restaurant owners—all the ones that need help—are not going to benefit from this bill.

In my riding, we have tons of restaurants that are empty right now because we are a tourist district and because our public health officer made moves to limit indoor dining. It's not the fault of the restaurants or the small businesses. We have some that are reaching out to the small business

grant for relief, but because it's only based on one month, they're not getting the full benefit. I tried writing to the minister in charge of the grant and to the Premier—but while I have the floor, I'll say it as loudly as I can: Your small business support grant is flawed. It needs to be amended. People need the ability to appeal the original amounts. Every day you leave that flaw in place is a day another business may face bankruptcy and shouldn't have to. These small businesses and restaurants have faced the worst of this pandemic through no fault of their own. You're the government; you need to fix it. You can fix it by listening to them when they identify where the problem is. Why not give a break to the small restaurants? Why isn't it included in the bill?

Mr. Speaker, as you can see here, it's clear who this bill is purposely leaving out. The question is, who is the bill designed to help?

I want to quote a written submission by the United Steelworkers—actually, I'm not going to have time. I only have a minute left. Unfortunately, I have a number of pages left, but I'm not going to get to them.

I'm going to say to the Speaker, to my colleagues, to everybody here, that we have an opportunity before us. I've been elected here just over seven years now, and I

haven't spoken for an hour more than four or five times. This is the second time I've talked about WSIB in the last couple of weeks, and I cannot believe the number of people who are reaching out to me who have been affected by deeming. Their kids are reaching out to me and telling me what they went through with their mom or dad who were deemed. They lost their family. They had marriage split-ups. They couldn't go with their friends to play hockey and dance.

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I'm looking at my colleagues across here. I've asked you, I begged you at committee, and I'm saying it again to you: You can fix deeming and presumptive language today. Amend the bill. It's the right thing to do. If you're going to stand up here every day and say you care about workers—injured workers are workers too. Their lives matter.

Thank you for giving me the time to speak.

Third reading debate deemed adjourned.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Normally, we would have time for 10 minutes of questions. Unfortunately, it being 6 o'clock, it is time to move on to private members' public business.

Report continues in volume B.

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Gill, Parm (PC)	Milton	
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Gravelle, Michael (LIB)	Thunder Bay—Superior North / Thunder Bay—Supérieur-Nord	
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Harden, Joel (NDP)	Ottawa Centre / Ottawa-Centre	
Harris, Mike (PC)	Kitchener—Conestoga	
Hassan, Faisal (NDP)	York South—Weston / York-Sud— Weston	
Hatfield, Percy (NDP)	Windsor—Tecumseh	Second Deputy Chair of the Committee of the Whole House / Deuxième vice-président du comité plénier de l'Assemblée législative
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Hunter, Mitzie (LIB)	Scarborough—Guildwood	
Jones, Hon. / L'hon. Sylvia (PC)	Dufferin—Caledon	Solicitor General / Solliciteure générale
Kanapathi, Logan (PC)	Markham—Thornhill	
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Kusendova, Natalia (PC)	Mississauga Centre / Mississauga- Centre	
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Lindo, Laura Mae (NDP)	Kitchener Centre / Kitchener-Centre	
MacLeod, Hon. / L'hon. Lisa (PC)	Nepean	Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries / ministre des Industries du patrimoine, du sport, du tourisme et de la culture
Mamakwa, Sol (NDP)	Kiiwetinoong	
Mantha, Michael (NDP)	Algoma—Manitoulin	
Martin, Robin (PC)	Eglinton—Lawrence	
Martow, Gila (PC)	Thornhill	
McDonell, Jim (PC)	Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry	
McKenna, Jane (PC)	Burlington	
McNaughton, Hon. / L'hon. Monte (PC)	Lambton—Kent—Middlesex	Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development / Ministre du Travail, de la Formation et du Développement des compétences
Miller, Norman (PC)	Parry Sound—Muskoka	
Miller, Paul (NDP)	Hamilton East—Stoney Creek / Hamilton-Est—Stoney Creek	
Mitas, Christina Maria (PC)	Scarborough Centre / Scarborough- Centre	
Monteith-Farrell, Judith (NDP)	Thunder Bay—Atikokan	
Morrison, Suze (NDP)	Toronto Centre / Toronto-Centre	
Mulroney, Hon. / L'hon. Caroline (PC)	York—Simcoe	Minister of Francophone Affairs / Ministre des Affaires francophones Minister of Transportation / Ministre des Transports

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Park, Lindsey (PC)	Durham	
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Rasheed, Kaleed (PC)	Mississauga East—Cooksville / Mississauga-Est—Cooksville	
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Roberts, Jeremy (PC)	Ottawa West—Nepean / Ottawa- Ouest—Nepean	
Romano, Hon. / L'hon. Ross (PC)	Sault Ste. Marie	Minister of Colleges and Universities / Ministre des Collèges et Universités
Sabawy, Sheref (PC)	Mississauga—Erin Mills	
Sandhu, Amarjot (PC)	Brampton West / Brampton-Ouest	
Sarkaria, Hon. / L'hon. Prabmeet Singh (PC)	Brampton South / Brampton-Sud	Associate Minister of Small Business and Red Tape Reduction / Ministre associé délégué au dossier des Petites Entreprises et de la Réduction des formalités administratives Minister Without Portfolio / Ministre sans portefeuille
Sattler, Peggy (NDP)	London West / London-Ouest	Opposition House Leader / Leader parlementaire de l'opposition officielle
Schreiner, Mike (GRN)	Guelph	
Scott, Hon. / L'hon. Laurie (PC)	Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock	Minister of Infrastructure / Ministre de l'Infrastructure
Shaw, Sandy (NDP)	Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas / Hamilton-Ouest—Ancaster—Dundas	
Simard, Amanda (LIB)	Glengarry—Prescott—Russell	
Singh, Gurratan (NDP)	Brampton East / Brampton-Est	Deputy Opposition House Leader / Leader parlementaire adjoint de l'opposition officielle
Singh, Sara (NDP)	Brampton Centre / Brampton-Centre	Deputy Leader, Official Opposition / Chef adjointe de l'opposition officielle
Skelly, Donna (PC)	Flamborough—Glanbrook	
Smith, Dave (PC)	Peterborough—Kawartha	
Smith, Hon. / L'hon. Todd (PC)	Bay of Quinte / Baie de Quinte	Minister of Children, Community and Social Services / Ministre des Services à l'enfance et des Services sociaux et communautaires
Stevens, Jennifer (Jennie) (NDP)	St. Catharines	
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Wynne, Kathleen O. (LIB)	Don Valley West / Don Valley-Ouest	
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