

Legislative
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of Ontario



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**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

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des débats
(Hansard)**

F-65

**Standing Committee on
Finance and Economic Affairs**

Protecting the People
of Ontario Act
(Budget Measures), 2021

1st Session
42nd Parliament
Friday 9 April 2021

**Comité permanent
des finances
et des affaires économiques**

Loi de 2021 visant à protéger
la population ontarienne
(mesures budgétaires)

1^{re} session
42^e législature
Vendredi 9 avril 2021

Chair: Amarjot Sandhu
Clerk: Julia Douglas

Président : Amarjot Sandhu
Greffière : Julia Douglas

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111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS**

Friday 9 April 2021

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**COMITÉ PERMANENT DES FINANCES
ET DES AFFAIRES ÉCONOMIQUES**

Vendredi 9 avril 2021

The committee met at 0900 in room 151 and by video conference.

PROTECTING THE PEOPLE
OF ONTARIO ACT
(BUDGET MEASURES), 2021
LOI DE 2021 VISANT À PROTÉGER
LA POPULATION ONTARIENNE
(MESURES BUDGÉTAIRES)

Consideration of the following bill:

Bill 269, An Act to implement Budget measures and to enact and amend various statutes / Projet de loi 269, Loi visant à mettre en oeuvre les mesures budgétaires et à édicter et à modifier diverses lois.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Good morning, everyone. We are meeting today for public hearings on Bill 269, An Act to implement Budget measures and to enact and amend various statutes. We have the following members participating remotely: MPP Arthur, MPP Cho, MPP Fife, MPP Kanapathi, MPP Mamakwa, MPP Roberts, MPP Smith and MPP Ke.

Committee members, I want to mention that Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, passed away this morning. I would like to take a moment of silence to commemorate his passing before we begin. Please join me for a moment of silence for 60 seconds.

The committee observed a moment's silence.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. We'll go back to the business.

MPP Piccini, can you please confirm your attendance?

Mr. David Piccini: Thank you, Chair. Sorry for the Internet difficulties. MPP Piccini here in Port Hope, in my office.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

As a reminder, I ask that everyone speak slowly and clearly. Please wait until I recognize you before starting to speak.

Are there any questions or is there any business before we begin? Seeing none, we're just waiting for the minister to join us. I'll request the members to please bear with me. We're still waiting for the minister to join us. He will be just a few moments. Thank you so much.

MINISTRY OF FINANCE

TREASURY BOARD SECRETARIAT

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Now I see Mr. Bethlenfalvy. Welcome, Minister. I will now call on the Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy, Minister of Finance and President of the Treasury Board. You will have fifteen minutes for your presentation, followed by 45 minutes of questions from members of the committee. The questions will be divided into three rounds of six minutes for the government members, three rounds of six minutes for the official opposition members, and two rounds of four and a half minutes for the independent members.

Minister, the floor is yours. Please begin.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, Chair. Are you able to hear me?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes, we can.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: That's a good sign, so we're off to a good start. Good morning. Before I begin with my remarks, I do want to just convey my condolences to Her Majesty and her family for her loss today.

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to speak to the members of this committee about Bill 269, Protecting the People of Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2021.

Ontario is at a critical stage in the fight against COVID-19 and our government is acting swiftly and decisively. On Wednesday, our government declared a provincial emergency and issued a province-wide stay-at-home order to keep people safe while allowing our vaccination program to reach more people. It is more important than ever to devote the resources that our government has, and can muster, to defeating COVID-19.

Ontario's Action Plan: Protecting People's Health and Our Economy continues our record investments in the province's health care and long-term care systems and pulls out all the stops to protect jobs. Today, I would like to speak in more detail about what's in Bill 269, which I tabled in the Legislature on March 24, 2021, to implement our budget.

The 2021 budget is our government's second pandemic budget and the third phase of our COVID-19 response, which now totals \$51 billion. It reflects the priorities of people and businesses across the province.

Le budget de 2021 est le deuxième budget que notre gouvernement a déposé pendant la pandémie et la troisième étape de notre plan de lutte contre la COVID-19,

qui totalise maintenant 51 milliards de dollars. Il tient compte des priorités de la population et des entreprises de la province.

Through 28 virtual pre-budget consultations, we heard from 745 attendees and we received 857 submissions, and almost 5,100 survey results, including consultations with Catherine Fife of the NDP, Mitzie Hunter of the Liberal Party and Mike Schreiner of the Green Party. We held 15 city/region town halls and 13 sector round tables, and we listened to people who took the time to call our offices and write letters.

The people of Ontario made very clear what they expected from their government, which is reflected in the two pillars of our 2021 budget: first and foremost, to protect people's health; and secondly, to protect our economy.

While we have declared a provincial emergency and issued a province-wide stay-at-home order, our vaccinations, which now are coming in at a much greater pace, continue to roll out. I know the stay-at-home emergency measures are painful, but they are also necessary because it gives us precious time to distribute more of these vaccines. Now is the time to batten down the hatches and redouble our collective efforts so that once we defeat this virus—and we will—Ontario will be able to unleash growth that I know this province has the potential to do.

Our government's total investment to protect people's health since the start of the pandemic is now \$16.3 billion. Right now, our highest priority is getting vaccines in arms, as many as we can, as quickly as we can. We're investing more than \$1 billion in our province-wide vaccination plan so that everyone who wants a vaccine can get one.

We're also making sure hospitals have the resources they need so that every person who requires care can access a bed even during the worst of the pandemic. We have invested an additional \$5.1 billion to support hospitals since the beginning of the pandemic, creating more than 3,100 additional hospital beds, the equivalent of six new large community hospitals.

In addition, we are taking action to fix long-term care by investing an additional \$933 million, for a total of \$2.6 billion, to support our commitment to build 30,000 new beds. And we are making investments to improve the quality of care in long-term-care homes by training and hiring thousands of staff and providing \$4.9 billion over four years to deliver on our commitment to increase the average daily direct care for long-term-care residents from 2.75 hours to four hours. Our loved ones simply deserve the best care, and we are taking action to make sure they get it.

To support people and jobs, our government's total investment to protect Ontario's economy is now \$23.3 billion. Fighting COVID-19 is truly a collective effort, and the people of our province have overwhelmingly done what it takes to protect each other, yet these protections have come at a cost to those families, workers and employers who have sacrificed so much.

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Bill 269 represents significant steps forward in our plan to protect our economy, not only to get through COVID-

19 but to emerge on the other side even stronger. This legislation proposes three changes to the Taxation Act, 2007, that will bring direct relief to people and businesses.

To provide additional support to parents with their child care expenses, the government is proposing a 20% top-up to the Ontario Childcare Access and Relief from Expenses—also known as CARE—tax credit for 2021. The top-up proposed in Bill 269 would increase support for parents from \$1,250 to \$1,500, on average, for 2021. The total support provided by this temporary top-up would be about \$75 million. If passed, it will help make child care more affordable for those families struggling to make ends meet during this trying time.

Bill 269 also aims to help people connect to jobs by proposing the Ontario Jobs Training Tax Credit, which would ease the burdens on people looking to shift careers, retrain or sharpen their skills. The credit would provide up to \$2,000 per recipient towards 50% of eligible expenses, including personal support worker training, graphic design programs, heavy machinery training programs and post-secondary courses that provide credits towards a degree, diploma or certificate.

I should note that Ontario is initiating the largest recruitment and training of personal support workers in our province's history to reduce unreasonably long waitlists and provide better care for long-term-care residents. It is our hope that people interested in becoming personal support workers will take advantage of the proposed tax credit to help with their training costs. Overall, this credit would provide an estimated \$260 million of support to about 230,000 people in 2021.

Bill 269 also proposes to enhance the Regional Opportunities Investment Tax Credit by temporarily doubling the tax credit from 10% to 20%. Ontario introduced this credit, known as the ROITC, last year to help encourage business investment in areas of the province where employment growth lagged the provincial average between 2009 and 2019. The proposed temporary enhancement would double the available tax credit support for regional investment from a maximum of \$45,000 to a maximum of \$90,000 in a year. This represents an additional investment by our government of \$61 million, resulting in total tax credit support of about \$155 million by 2022-23.

Our government is taking steps to support long-term growth in our province. An important factor in that growth is a strong and modern capital market system that attracts businesses and competes for investment and talent worldwide.

In response to the Capital Markets Modernization Taskforce recommendations, Bill 269 includes legislative amendments to strengthen the capital market sector, including proposing a new Securities Commission Act, 2021, to expand the province's capital markets regulator, the Ontario Securities Commission, also known as the OSC; to make the OSC more effective by establishing a new capital markets tribunal to ensure a clear separation between the regulatory and policy functions of the commission and its adjudicative function; and finally, to expand the mandate of the OSC to include fostering capital

formation and competition in the markets. Almost 70% of Ontario's capital market participants are small and medium-sized businesses, and these proposed measures will help make them more competitive.

Bill 269 also includes measures that would bolster the Financial Services Regulatory Authority of Ontario, also known as FSRA, the Ontario financial services regulator. As one of the measures our government took to respond to the pandemic, we provided FSRA with a \$2-billion line of credit designed to give the province's credit unions and caisses populaires strengthened emergency liquidity support. This was to avoid triggering an increase in fees paid by those organizations for the support. The government proposes to allow FSRA to pay some costs associated with the line of credit from the existing sector-funded Deposit Insurance Reserve Fund instead.

Bill 269 also proposes measures that would strengthen the regulator's capabilities to force compliance with rules in the insurance sector and to enable the establishment of an oversight framework for financial planners and advisers.

To help make Ontario more competitive and transform its approach to business attraction, the government has created Invest Ontario, an agency dedicated to attracting investors to our great province.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Five minutes left.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, Chair.

Bill 269 proposes to continue Invest Ontario and expand its current objectives. As part of the 2021 budget, the government is committing \$400 million over four years to create the Invest Ontario fund, which will support investment in Ontario and encourage investments in key sectors.

In addition to Invest Ontario, our government supports businesses through a wide variety of programs and initiatives. In fact, in the 2021 budget, we are expanding our support for businesses through measures such as:

- providing a second round of Ontario Small Business Support Grant payments;
- introducing the new Ontario Tourism and Hospitality Small Business Support Grant; and
- investing an additional \$10 million in the Digital Main Street program in 2021-22.

Bill 269 proposes an amendment to the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade Act that would enhance the accountability and transparency of the business support programs provided through the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade. This amendment would require that the outcomes of those programs be accessible through an annual Ontario investment prospectus report.

Lastly, this bill includes a new act, the Ontario Loan Act, 2021, that would, if passed, authorize the government to finance up to \$40.1 billion in new borrowing in fiscal 2021-22, because our response to the pandemic has required significant measures that have resulted in a growing deficit.

In conclusion, Bill 269 supports the very important work of the budget, and I encourage you to give it your full support.

I want to thank everyone who has gone above and beyond to help their families, their co-workers, their clients, their neighbours, their loved ones during such a difficult time. The people of Ontario have shown grit and heart during this past year, and their resilience, can-do attitude and commitment to helping each other will guide Ontario through the pandemic and into a brighter future. Our government will not stop fighting for them. We will do everything we can to protect your health and your economy, because you deserve from your government that we have your backs, especially now.

Thank you, and I will be pleased to answer any questions.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much, Minister, for the presentation. We'll start with the questions now. We'll start the first round of questions with the opposition. MPP Fife.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you, Minister, for appearing this morning. I want to thank you, also, for the consultation pre-budget. That was appreciated on my part.

I do want to say, though, in that conversation, I did reference the importance of women, because women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and we need a she-covery to address the she-cession. I will say, though, that the budget mentions women 27 times, which I think may be a new record. However, if you saw the YWCA Ontario analysis of our budget, they reported that Ontario fails to deliver on the she-covery on a number of issues. I'm asking these questions with the hope that now that we are in another stay-at-home order and state of emergency, the government may amend the budget in significant ways.

One of those ways is child care, on early learning and care, because it is an economic driver for women and for the economy as a whole. The bill and the budget speech did not reference or address the upfront costs of child care. The tax credit, which you mentioned tops it up an additional \$250, is really only effective if you can get a child care space in Ontario, which we know eight out of ten people cannot. And then also that the upfront costs and the affordability of child care is addressed.

The YWCA also mentioned that a vast majority of essential workers in Ontario are women. Women drive a lot of these essential services, including child care, including health care and residential services. The top-up on some of those wages through this pandemic was not made permanent.

I wondered if you would address the need to address child care as a structural barrier to women's economic recovery in Ontario.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, Catherine. I did appreciate your consultation. While sometimes we don't agree on things, there are many things we can agree on. I really appreciate you advocating on behalf of women, and that was part of your consultation and part of your input, so I really appreciated receiving that.

0920

As you know, I feel profoundly that the support and barriers for women have to be addressed fundamentally. I

also think you and others would acknowledge that my budget day speech acknowledged the great leaders that we have in this province, including your leader, Andrea Horwath, as well as leaders in the health care sector and leaders on our government side and across all party lines.

You asked specifically about women and child care, and I'm going to address both, because child care is an important part of the equation, absolutely. I'll start specifically on the child care. You mentioned the tax credit. That was launched previously, so that's in effect. People who are filing their taxes this year will get that money soon, so that will help. We increased it so that they'll continue to have support, and you mentioned that.

The second thing I would mention is the direct support to families: almost \$1 billion to parents with children, virtually newborn to grade 12; \$400 per child per family. This is the third round of supports. This is direct money into their pockets immediately. It will help a significant 300,000 families in the province, and they could put that money directly into child care or any area where they deem is appropriate with regard to child care expenditures.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I'll also add that we pledged the building of 30,000 new child care spaces. Let me talk about the impact at a local level, such as Pickering, where the first public school investment in 20 years was just announced by the Minister of Education. That comes not only with 500 new spaces in a city that's been expanding dramatically over the last 20 years—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Minister, I'm sorry, I just have such limited time. I appreciate the fact that Pickering is going to have those additional spaces, but I just want to leave with you that the major barrier to child care is those upfront costs. Ontario has some of the highest child care costs.

I only have one minute left before the next round, but I just want to leave with you that the cost analysis on sick days to the economy—did you, as the finance minister and Treasury Board minister, give any consideration [*inaudible*]—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Fife, we can't hear you. I think you have a bad connection.

Unmute, please.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I am unmuted.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Okay, we can hear you now.

Ms. Catherine Fife: It was on the sick days, the cost analysis of investing in a made-in-Ontario sick day strategy to prevent the health care costs and the subsequent shutdown of the economy. Did you give consideration to that during your deliberations?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: We gave very serious consideration. I would also say that we also invested historic amounts in broadband, and hopefully that will impact your household or wherever you're coming from, because we need to connect the whole province.

I will address sick pay in a second in the time left, which I know is short. But on the women's issue, the barriers, also announcing the task force to get input from women across the province into helping recover in the—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. I apologize to cut you off, Minister. The time has come up for the opposition.

Since we don't have any independent members, we'll go to the government side now. MPP Roberts.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Minister, thank you so much for appearing before us this morning. It's much appreciated. I think this is a truly fantastic budget that our government has put forward. As folks had the chance to hear in your recent budget speech, the budget is really focused on those two pillars, which are protecting our health care and, second, protecting our economy.

I want to start my questions focusing a little bit on that bucket, on health care. As I understand it, our government has invested \$16.3 billion in additional funding to protect our health care. As part of some of these investments, I know that we have made investments in some capital projects to help bolster our health care system. I'm wondering if you can start by talking a little bit about some of those capital projects right across the province that are going to help bolster our health care system.

In particular, I hoped you might start by talking a little bit about a project near and dear to my heart, which is the CHEO 1Door4Care project, which was funded as part of budget 2021. As you know, this is a project that I think is going to bring so much value to over 40,000 families across the Ottawa and eastern Ontario region.

I wondered, Minister, if you could talk a bit about that project and then a bit about some of the other capital investments in our health care system right across the province.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, MPP Roberts, and thank you for your contributions in the budget consultations and all your leadership.

I absolutely believe that you can't have a healthy economy without healthy people. That goes from the most vulnerable in our society to our youth, to our seniors, to everyone who participates in our economy—mental health and addiction, physical health.

I'll start off with children, because that's such an important area. I was very proud and privileged to be able to support you and others in the region of Ottawa in your efforts to support the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. That is such a significant thing because you get measured by how you deal with the most vulnerable in society. Your advocacy and others' for that played an important role, so that we could make that investment in a new 200,000-square-foot facility, a one-door facility, as you say, that will allow the coordination of care for our children and youth who are in such need of that care.

I've seen the many family members, including Christine, the mother of Abigail, Abby, who—the compassion and the care. It's a privilege and an honour to be able to support Christine and Abigail.

It goes beyond eastern Ontario and the region—I mean, right across the province, including infrastructure in Chatham-Kent to do a similar facility of 30,000 square feet.

We've had long-overdue investment requirements in our health care hospital system and in our long-term

care—not just the physical capacity, the spaces that you need to care for our citizens, but also the staffing to support that. Those investments weren't made in a necessary measure over the last 10 or 15 years. I look specifically at long-term care, where only 611 beds were built between 2011 and 2018. We have a 40,000-person wait-list. So, our government, before the pandemic, initiated a plan to build 30,000 new, modern spaces for our most loved ones in long-term-care facilities.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: We're well on the way: 20,000 new spaces have already been announced. The physical infrastructure is absolutely essential.

Similar with hospitals: Investment in hospital capacity in fast-growing areas like Brampton, like Mississauga, like Etobicoke, like Windsor, like Ottawa, like Collingwood—I can go on and on, because we have a growing population and we have an aging population, and it's the right thing to do. That infrastructure spend is absolutely critical, and the return to society, both in terms of social good and economic good, I believe is massive. It has been long overdue.

Our government has made those investments because, again, that is what we got elected to do. And I think it's good economic and social policy. Thank you very much for that question.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: I couldn't agree more. The CHEO 1Door4Care project, Minister—I remember, after getting elected, I had the chance to visit one of CHEO's mental health outpatient facilities, where they were essentially offering mental health services in what amounted to broom closets. Now, with this new state-of-the-art facility, we're going to have the right space to offer the right kind of care for kids right across Ottawa. I'm really excited about that.

I know some of my colleagues will want to get in with questions about the protecting our economy piece, but just in the last minute we have remaining, I wondered if you could talk a little bit about our investments in our vaccine rollout. This is obviously something top of mind when we talk about protecting our health care. Folks right across the province want to see those vaccines get into their communities. Could you talk a little bit about our investment in our vaccine rollout?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you for that question as well. Our number one job is to get vaccines in as many arms as want them. My job as finance minister is to provide the financial supports to be able to do that. As you saw on Tuesday, as part of that plan, going into high-risk communities, going with mobile units, going to employers—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. I apologize, Minister. The time has come up. We'll come back to that in the second round.

We'll go back to the opposition now for their second round. MPP Arthur.

0930

Mr. Ian Arthur: Good morning, Minister, and thank you so much for being here. I wanted to talk a little bit

about the small business support grant and the rollout of that grant, and I want to start with the eligibility criteria. I've been made the critic for small business, and we have heard from thousands of businesses across Ontario that they simply are not eligible. The criteria are narrow, it's not adaptive, the lack of an appeal process when businesses are actually turned down—some pretty severe shortcomings for this program.

Would you address what you've done in the budget to expand those criteria or allow more businesses to access those funds?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, MPP Arthur, and thank you for your advocacy for small businesses. One thing I think we can absolutely agree on is that small businesses are the engine of Ontario's economy. And beyond that, they're often the identity of so many of our communities, so it's very, very important, and we've been very focused on that.

You're absolutely right: We announced, in the first measure, over a billion dollars to support small businesses. I'm very pleased to say that over 100,000 small businesses—I'll repeat that, over 100,000 small businesses—have successfully applied and been approved for the small business grant program.

As part of the budget, I was extremely pleased to be able to announce a doubling of those grants between \$10,000 and \$20,000, so that now if you were eligible, qualified and got approved, and you got \$20,000, you'll automatically get another \$20,000. We'll be rolling that out very soon. At a time—

Mr. Ian Arthur: If I could—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, just to address your question about eligibility—

Mr. Ian Arthur: Yes, okay; go ahead.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: That program was designed for those who were affected by a province-wide lockdown and severely restricted from being able to earn revenue. In the budget, we also announced a new program for those even more affected, that were allowed to open and weren't as affected by the lockdown but had no customers or no revenue. I'm speaking particularly of the tourism, hospitality and accommodation sectors. You'll have seen in the budget—

Mr. Ian Arthur: But there are—sorry, Minister; just because we are short on time—many businesses that were already shut down leading into the December 26 shutdown, which is what this program was aimed at. For those businesses that aren't eligible, particularly that lack of an appeal process—there may have been a mistake in their application; there's no avenue for them to be able to correct that. They were denied, and it's over.

The doubling of it is great for businesses that were eligible, but it doesn't take into account businesses that were scheduled to open sometime around the beginning of the pandemic that never even got their doors open, that had invested potentially millions of dollars into their businesses, that we're going to need for economic recovery, and that haven't been able to see a penny in any of the support programs because they don't have those year-over-year losses.

Programs need to be stable and adaptive. Initiating it, doubling it for some of them—that's not stable. That doesn't provide the sort of longevity of support that these businesses need. If you want these businesses to be able to plan for the recovery and be part of that recovery, they can't be wondering whether they're going to stay open next week.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: On your point about someone who made a mistake: There is a customer service desk, and it's open on weekends. I would redirect them there, because we want anyone who is eligible—not because of a mistake, but because they are eligible—to get those funds. So, I would encourage you—and you can work with my office or Vic Fedeli's office to get that done.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: On the second point: One of the features that we put in, MPP Arthur, to your point of new businesses, businesses that didn't have an operation in 2019, so they didn't have a comparator period—we did provide flexibility for new businesses that opened up in 2019 past April into the end of 2019 so that they would be able to qualify. A number of new businesses that have opened post the April 2019 measurement period have been able to access funds.

I would just point out—

Mr. Ian Arthur: And—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy:—a last thing, if I may, that the grant program, unlike many other programs that we've seen from different levels of government—

Interruption.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Apologies for that, if you can hear that.

It's an unconditional grant, so the money can be used in any way. There are no strings attached if you qualify.

Mr. Ian Arthur: Just one last really quick question: Can you confirm that all the money that's been allotted to that grant program is currently accounted for?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: We extended the program to—

Mr. Ian Arthur: No, no, the actual money that's been allotted for the program. Does the government have an accounting of all of those monies currently?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I'm not sure what you mean by accounting. We account for every single penny and we report up on every single penny. The program is still in—

Mr. Ian Arthur: So there's not an audit going on currently for missing money in the Ontario Small Business Support Grant program?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I'm more focused on getting the money out the door and supporting as many businesses as possible.

Mr. Ian Arthur: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. We'll go back to the government side now for the second round. MPP Piccini.

Mr. David Piccini: Minister, thank you very much for your remarks today, for your commitment during this difficult time and commitment to real bipartisanship in your remarks, in your consultation. It's greatly appreciated.

Minister, you know I've long felt really strongly about the importance of a strong economic recovery for rural Ontario. I'm proud to represent a riding in rural Ontario. For us to have a healthy and strong economic recovery, we need growth in rural Ontario.

This pandemic has hit Ontarians from cities to rural areas hard. My question to you is—I've long felt strongly that we don't want to, out here, just become a sprawling suburb of the GTA. And for us to have growing and healthy communities to live, work, play, raise a family, we've got to have business. I noted with interest the rural opportunities piece in the budget, and I was wondering if you could expand a little more on why this is a critical piece and what this can do for job creation, for investment and for growth in rural Ontarian communities like mine. Thanks, Minister.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, MPP Piccini, for your question, and also for your advocacy for our rural communities, which many of us—in my riding of Pickering-Uxbridge, you don't have to go far north of Pickering to be well into rural Ontario. So I very much understand what you're talking about.

I particularly appreciate your support for regional investment, because one of the things that we did announce is the regional opportunities investment fund that I mentioned in my opening remarks, which was largely based on not only advocacy from people like yourself, but also a study that showed that there are many parts of Ontario that, economically, were left behind in the last decade. You're absolutely right, the opportunity to compete—not asking for any favours, but just that ability to compete—is so critical. Providing those sorts of frameworks to do that is one of the important tenets of our government.

I would add as well that, as part of that, our historic announcement in broadband for digital, for businesses to connect with markets, not just in your riding but all of Ontario and, frankly, North America and beyond—a lot of what the Shopify model is, is connecting small businesses to the world. Having broadband and having that investment in connectivity is so critical, particularly in a COVID world. You've seen how much business now gets done online. I would say, as part of that—and not only the investment in broadband, but also the investment in additional funds to the Digital Main Street program to invest more in digital.

So, there are many things that we're doing to support our rural economy. The agricultural sector is a huge part of that, but there are many very successful businesses. As many people now are moving into those parts, that is an important future as well—more customers locally as well.

Mr. David Piccini: Thanks, Minister. I know our times are so short here. I appreciate your commitment also to broadband and touching on that, and it's on that that I'm going to have a follow-up here. When I got involved, it was to make a difference in our community. I think back to the finance meeting in Belleville where we had the ministry officials, my colleagues there and local mayors talking about rural investment and talking about carve-outs to incentivize investments. Well, here we are today,

and you've delivered on that. So I appreciate that and appreciate the work you've done.

On broadband, the commitment here to expanding broadband: Minister, can you talk a little more—I don't want to make this too partisan, but for decades we've seen nothing in this province. I worked in Nepal, where I had better Internet connections in rural, outside Kathmandu, working with the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, than I do in areas of my own riding. In a developed nation like Canada, in the engine of our economy, Ontario, it's critical that we have this—not just that, but a digital government that better delivers easier and efficient services for Ontarians.

0940

Can you tell me a bit about the work you're doing on that? Because it really is important, and it's shameful, quite frankly, that we were in the Stone Ages for so long. But you're pulling us, kicking and screaming, into the 21st century, and I applaud you for that.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you again. I think that this is a province-building moment and I think COVID has accelerated that moment. We connected via highways and waterways and bridges and tunnels a hundred years ago. These are the bridges and tunnels of today.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: The second thing is, it's a digital-first but not a digital-only strategy, to give people opportunity and choice. In many, many remote communities, they don't have the option of a road to get to a hospital or to get physical consultations or education. In some communities very close to metro communities, the bandwidth isn't great enough. So, it's an investment in our health care system, it's an investment in our business infrastructure, it's an investment in our education system and it's an investment in justice, of which, now, a large component is Zoom justice.

On so many levels, Ontario needs to get into the 21st century. You're right, it's historic. Relative to the federal government, this is more than the federal government is putting in all of Canada. We're putting more money to hook up 700,000 households that are underserved or not served at all in all of Ontario by 2025, so we can have the whole province.

Mr. David Piccini: That's crucial. Maybe with better Internet, we'll have more Liberals on committee who can understand the importance of connecting and this investment. Thanks, Minister.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you, MPP Piccini. We'll go to the opposition side now for their third round. MPP Fife.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you, Chair. Can you hear me?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): We can, yes.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Okay. Minister, I want to pick up on—and I'm going to save some time for MPP Mamakwa, but just on the job training credit, which is in schedule 10 of this bill, much of this [*inaudible*].

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Fife, we can't hear you.

Anyone else from the opposition in the meantime? MPP Mamakwa? Unmute, please. We can hear you.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you, Minister. Thank you for the presentation. Earlier, you mentioned remote and fly-in communities. One of the things that's part of being a finance committee member, one of the things I always ask about is investments on-reserve—infrastructure, for example. As you know, I talk sometimes in the House regarding the boil-water advisories.

Since I became an MPP, I've seen a lot of stuff. I've seen a lot of issues whereby—basic human rights, such as access to clean drinking water, have an impact on the health and the lives of individuals in reserves and in communities. What really struck me one time was—it was actually the day before Remembrance Day, on November 10, 2020, whereby these kids had a rally. You had these nine-year-olds and 12-year-olds being very emotional. They asked for two things. Because they were evacuated at that time, they wanted two things: One was to go home; two was they wanted access to clean drinking water.

When will the government invest in these types of issues in the budgets? When will your government start treating us as human beings in this place we call Ontario? Because the communities are not living the way they should be. Can you answer that?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Yes. Thank you, MPP Mamakwa, and thank you for your leadership and bringing all these issues front and centre, because they're so important to our communities.

I will say, with regard to the water, that's something that I spend a lot of time with our ministers discussing. I certainly think that those are absolutely the things that we have to do and continue to do, and do a lot more. As I said in my budget speech, it's important to have these conversations and it's important to have frank conversations, but it's important to act. That is so critical. So that is an area that we're very focused on.

I would also say that we're very focused, as you know, on making sure that the vaccinations, both for urban Indigenous and for many of the remote communities, our First Nation communities, that they have—because of the circumstances they live in, congregate settings or remote settings, and the risks that that poses—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: —we put aside \$50 million and moved very swiftly to get into those communities, as you know, and you participated in it. And hesitancy is a constraint—it's a restraint. So, it's important that we continue to make sure that everyone who can and wants a vaccination can get it.

I think that we have a lot more work to do, MPP Mamakwa, and I do appreciate your leadership. We've never sat down and talked about these issues, and I would reach out to you and say, "Let's do that." I think those are important conversations, but as important to actually move forward.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Okay. Do you want to try again, Catherine? No?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Arthur, you have about one minute.

Mr. Ian Arthur: Just picking up on Catherine's question about the child care tax credit a little bit here: Families are missing money now. Forcing them to wait a full year until tax season to be able to recoup some of this—why wasn't it designed in a way that distributes funds directly? It forces families to wait for tax time to receive their support.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thanks again for the question. As I said earlier in my remarks, the Support for Parents Program, which was the third round, almost \$1 billion, because we could move the money quickly into families' pockets—these are families from newborns to grade 12—so that they could get the money quickly, the third round, bringing total supports to almost \$2 billion for parents with children—we could get it to them quickly, and they could then spend the money in the way they saw fit. The child care tax credit is helpful because we launched it over a year ago, so the money is flowing now—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. Sorry to cut you off, Minister. Now we have MPP Hunter from the independents. MPP Hunter, can you please confirm your attendance?

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Hi, Chair. Yes, I am here and I'm in Toronto.

I wanted to ask the minister about non-profit organizations. It was very clear, when we had the opportunity for deputations—in this budget, we did not have an opportunity for any type of outreach from the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, which is unfortunate because this is a forum in which people are able to bring forward their asks of the government in a way that they feel heard. That was not afforded to them in this round of budgets.

But last summer, the summer of 2020, when we were doing consultations and this committee was open for hearings, a number of non-profits came forward and asked for support as a group, and it was not reflected in the budget that was presented in October and it wasn't reflected in this budget for 2021 either. I'm wondering about the value that the government places on the work of those important non-profits in the fight against COVID, in fact, because many of them are providing food support, providing mental health support, and they're sort of holding it together, but they haven't necessarily seen that support coming forth from the government, at least not to the extent to which they asked.

I just wondered what your government was thinking about in terms of the role non-profits are playing and consideration for them in the budget.

0950

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, MPP Hunter, for that question. Thank you for your advocacy on behalf of the non-profits. Thank you also for your consultation and pre-budget submission and our opportunity to hear your thoughts, much like others who provided that, particularly with regard to women, with regard to small businesses, with regard to health care. I did very much appreciate the opportunity to hear your thoughts, and your advocacy on behalf of your constituents and beyond.

On the consultation process, we did do a tremendous amount of consultation. Maybe Zoom helps that, but it's also my nature to want to hear from everybody. I mentioned in my opening remarks how much we did. My understanding is that there was no request while the House was sitting for the study, that there's no mechanism when you're not sitting to be able to do that. I understand as well from the House leader that that has been changed so that you can actually ask for and receive those consultations, because certainly it has been our intent always to do those consultations, so not for a lack of will on the part of government—probably other reasons. I think that change of rule is very important to continue those consultations in the future.

With regard to the not-for-profits, actually, I'm very much aware of the contributions. I spent the better part of certainly the last three years in government and before, talking and consulting with a number of not-for-profits. In fact, I stood at a press conference with the CEO and the chair and the board members of the not-for-profit network—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: —because of those things we were doing to help them—for example, making it easier to provide for funds. They had to do a lot of paperwork and do submissions in multiple ministries. We put it in one window, and we made it digital. They said that's a lifesaver, because they then spend less time on administration and more putting the funds to the front lines, which you so aptly mentioned. I would also say, the small business support grant—they absolutely qualify. A number have applied and a number have received, so we continue to support them financially as well.

You mentioned briefly mental health and addiction. Many of them are advocates and support services and on the front lines of delivering that. That's why I was so pleased and proud to announce an additional \$175 million in the budget, bringing it to \$525 million in financial support this coming year. But as you know, it's not just the money; it's getting it quickly to the people who need it. This mental health and addiction environment we're in is serious, and we are very focused on it.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you—

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: And Minister—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. Sorry. The time has come up.

MPP Thanigasalam, can you please confirm your attendance?

Mr. Vijay Thanigasalam: Good morning, Chair. I'm MPP Vijay Thanigasalam. I'm talking to you from Toronto, Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

We'll now move to the government side for the third round. MPP Kanapathi.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Can you hear me?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes, we can.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Minister, for that great presentation, and thank you for your hard work in regard to the second COVID budget. This is the second pandemic budget, and it's a people budget. I'm telling you, Minister, I'm getting a lot of compliments about this budget from my riding, in Markham–Thornhill, or Markham; I'm not particularly talking in my riding—it's a compliment about this budget for everything, for everyone. It's a great compliment from the most ethnically diverse riding in Canada: Markham, Ontario.

Minister, the pandemic, I often say, has become endemic. That is why we are investing more and more money into the health care sector in order to fight against this deadly virus. We all know that increasing and incredibly concerning numbers of ICU patients are being admitted into the hospital with COVID-19. COVID-19-related ICU occupancy has reached 523, surpassing the peak of the wave of the last week. The number has been increasing. It's staggering.

That's why, from the start of the pandemic, our government's top priority has been to protect the health and well-being of Ontario, and you allocated, and I think you predicted—you never predicted we were going to have a third wave; you predicted in advance to allocate, to set aside, I think \$5.1 billion to support hospitals, creating over 3,100 more hospital beds.

Please, Minister, could you elaborate on that? There's a dire need at hospitals like the Markham–Stouffville or Richmond Hill hospitals. There is dire need for this there. This is the crisis we are facing, and I think our budget is very much addressing this.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, MPP Kanapathi. What I would say—and thank you for highlighting health care. I think there are two parts of health care, things that you have to do right now and that we have been doing since day one—which, in my term as Minister of Finance, is pulling out all the stops financially to support our front-line workers, to support all of the things that we need to do: PPE, testing, obviously the vaccines, the logistics that go with them, the actual facilities that have to be set up.

There are so many aspects to that, so immediate responses—you're absolutely right. We set aside significant additional funds for vaccination, additional funds for contact tracing, testing, rapid testing—which is important to do in our workplaces, important to do in our schools, important to do in our long-term-care facilities—including PCR testing.

But let me tell you this: You also have to have an eye on the future. I've got my eye on two people on the screen. One is Mohamed Lachemi and the other is Smokey Thomas. You've got to think about the future as well, and invest in the future, and that's why it's so important, the announcement to support a medical school for Ryerson in Brampton, to create the opportunity for more people to get into the health care sector. It's so critical.

I've got my other eye on Smokey Thomas, because his members are big supporters and workers in the health care sector. We have to support them. We've got to recruit more of them, and we've got to retain them, we have to

train them and we have to treat them very fairly. We've said repeatedly that we have to do that.

It's investments that we have to do today to defeat this pandemic—which we're doing; it's our number one priority. It's this Minister of Finance's number one priority. My goal is to support the Premier, the government and all Ontarians with all the fiscal firepower to get the job done. But I also have to have an eye down the road, and there has been an underinvestment in our hospital capacity. There has been an underinvestment in our long-term-care capacity. There has been an underinvestment in mental health and addiction.

Another one, combatting of domestic violence: We can't lose our sights on that, so more support for housing—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: —for women who are subjected to domestic violence. Anti-human trafficking, which is happening right underneath our noses—earlier I was asked a question about women. This is such an important feature of not only combatting it today, but laying the groundwork for the future as well. While we're going through a very dark phase in our pandemic, I think we have to also think about a brighter future and the things that we have to do in our health care system, to make sure—as I always say, you can't have a healthy economy without healthy people.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Minister. Also, I could tell my personal story. My mother is dying with dementia in palliative care. She has been bedridden the last three years. You passionately talked about how much we care about long-term care in Ontario. It was neglected for decades and decades, and our government, a serious government, is building more beds: 30,000 long-term-care beds, and also home care, allocating more money, and also dedicating a minimum of four hours—in the history of Ontario, this is a piece of good news, great news for senior citizens. I'm near becoming a senior citizen too.

Could you please elaborate on that, Minister?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Yes, I think that's a great point, the staffing. That's why we announced the four hours of care, which is the highest standard in Canada for long-term-care facilities and beyond. That's going to require us to hire 27,000 more personal support workers and nurses. We've set aside \$4.9 billion—almost \$5 billion—over the next four years. The staffing, the HHR, is so critical—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): I apologize. The time has come up. We'll go to the independent members now for their last round. MPP Hunter.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Minister, if you could just speak to the small business support grants. There are many small businesses in my riding that had concern, and I know that you've heard from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business around the eligibility criteria needing to be more expanded to reflect the types of small businesses that have been struggling under the various lockdowns that we've had across the province. As well, there have been

some that have not found the portal easy for them to navigate, especially at the beginning.

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Now that the grant program is actually an automatic extension in the second round for those who qualified in the first round, small businesses that have felt that they have not had a fair chance of being able to apply to become qualified in the first place and to participate in that grant program—which they so desperately need. I know that the minister of small business has said that we've had over 100,000 small businesses that have participated in the program, but Ontario has 100,000 more small businesses that need that support.

What is your government doing to make that fairer for small businesses that want and need access to this grant program which, in your current budget now, has an automatic extension in terms of the second round being offered to those who qualified in the first round? If you could speak to that, please.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, MPP Hunter. That is something we can absolutely agree on: support for small businesses. I can tell you that the Ontario Small Business Support Grant program is the most generous one in Canada and has the least requirements to qualify. In some provinces, it's a 30% revenue drop. It's 20% for Ontario businesses.

I can tell you that this program also has no strings attached. It's an unconditional grant, so you can use it to pay down debt. Many have told me, including businesses in Scarborough, that they are so appreciative. I can say that over 100,000 businesses in this province—which is a huge number of small businesses—have successfully applied and received their funds.

I'd also say the portal, which you talked about, is actually a pretty simple and easy portal. We have a customer service desk that's open seven days a week, Saturdays and Sundays as well, from 8:30 to 5 p.m. But it's also important to note that on that portal, it's not just the small business grant. The property tax, you can qualify for; the electricity support, you can continue to qualify for it. We've increased the Digital Main Street program to help them with their e-commerce platforms. We've put in another \$10 million. It's been a widely successful program. There are a number of things that we've done.

We did extend the qualification period from March 31 to April 7. I can tell you that certainly on March 31, we saw a lot of applications, but it dwindled down to a trickle. So I believe that many who were able to apply and qualify got through.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: In addition, we've added a new program to those that were even more severely restricted, like in our tourism, our accommodation, our travel agents, our bed and breakfasts and so on. That will capture another cohort of businesses that weren't locked down, but just weren't able to operate, given the environment.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: But given your budget was announced just seven days before shutting down that portal

for those to qualify for the second round, will you consider opening up that portal so that small businesses have a fair chance to apply and to qualify?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, that portal was open since January, and we did extend it. On March 31, you would have heard the Premier say we're extending it until April 7, an initial week, and we were pleased to do so. So, I think we've captured—as I said, we expect it to be 120,000 businesses, which is, even by a measure of per capita, a massive amount in Canada. And we also included new businesses—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. I apologize to cut you off, Minister. The time has come up.

That concludes our time for the presentation. Thank you so much, Minister, for appearing before the committee and for your presentation.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you for the questions and your time.

ONTARIO PUBLIC SERVICE
EMPLOYEES UNION
RYERSON UNIVERSITY
CENTRE FOR ISRAEL
AND JEWISH AFFAIRS

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Our other presenters today have been grouped in threes for each one-hour time slot. Each presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation. After we have heard from all three presenters, the remaining 39 minutes of the time slot will be for questions from members of the committee. This time for questions will be divided into two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the government members, two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the official opposition members, and two rounds of four and a half minutes for the independent members.

I will now call upon our next presenter from the Ontario Public Service Employees Union. Please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation.

Mr. Smokey Thomas: Can you hear me all right? I hope so.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes, we can.

Mr. Smokey Thomas: Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to be here and speak on budget Bill 269, albeit virtually. My name is Warren "Smokey" Thomas, and I'm the president of OPSEU/SEFPO. We represent 180,000 members working across Ontario's public sector. Many of our members have been risking their lives on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic every single day. Our goal as a labour union has been to make Ontario's communities healthier, safer and more prosperous. We know that strong public services are an important part of the equation, because services like health care and education are the great equalizer.

That's why we were so pleased to see a flat-out rejection of austerity in this year's budget. After 30 years of cuts, we're finally seeing the tides turn at Queen's Park.

Of course, it's not everything we'd hoped for, but it does mark a real sea change. It does show the government understands that we have a capacity crisis in Ontario. Budget Bill 269 is an important step in building our public sector instead of breaking it down.

We're moving in the right direction, but we'll need to keep moving forward on this path to achieve recovery and long-term prosperity. We must never return to the outdated deficit obsession that got us into this mess in the first place. You don't get prosperity from austerity. Take hospitals as an example. For years, we've raised the alarm about the capacity crisis. We're pleased to see investment that will build new hospital sites and create thousands of new beds. We are looking forward to having discussions with the government to build on this momentum.

For years, we've called for an annual increase in funding to the tune of 5.2%, considered by many experts as the health care inflation rate. While this year's budget does increase hospital funding, it's about half of what's said to be needed. What's more, this crisis has shone a spotlight on many of the cracks that already existed in our health care system. Now you can see them very clearly. How is it that our province's entire health care system and our economy can come to a crippling halt because we have just over 400 people with COVID in the ICU? Our hospitals should have more capacity, and I'd like to know exactly what they did do to try to build capacity in ICUs since the start of the pandemic. This is certainly not sustainable. If we want to end the lockdowns and prevent even more in the future, we must drastically increase the capacity in our health care system. Capacity-building must be a key priority if we're going to move forward as a province.

COVID times have been tough times, but in the future, Ontario must do better. We must tackle the shortages in health care infrastructure and staffing in a big and bold way, and the same goes for long-term care. The time for half measures is over, which I think the government has recognized. Desperate times call for drastic measures; our peoples' lives depend on it.

We're very pleased to see an investment in the long-term-care sector after years of neglect. But it's not just about the money; it's where the money goes. It's become all too clear that private for-profit long-term care has been a disaster. Not one cent of public money should be flowing into these for-profit facilities. Some 75% of COVID-19 deaths have occurred in long-term care, and that rate is significantly higher in private for-profit facilities.

It's also time to take a closer look at Ontario's post-secondary education system. I note a big investment in post-secondary to offset COVID-19 costs, but I have always submitted and will submit that post-secondary education is at the very heart of our economic recovery. That's why we're pleased to see funding for programs to train a new generation of workers, like PSWs, but we must protect our public post-secondary education system by ensuring stable funding for the long term.

The \$106 million outlined in the budget will help to address the financial challenges these institutions face. It's

a good start, but we need to think about our colleges' long-term sustainability. We also need to support our colleges to create accelerated, fully-funded and credentialed programs to fill badly needed front-line positions across the board in health care, social services and skilled trades.

During this pandemic, nobody has done a perfect job, but funding for Ontario's corrections system, for hiring new workplace inspectors and building child treatment centres shows a renewed sense of understanding from this government. It validates what we've been calling for, for years.

We're glad to see education workers starting to get the recognition and respect they deserve. These front-line workers are the soul of our schools. They have been a lifeline for some of the most vulnerable children in our province during this crisis. The same applies for social service workers across the board, whose compassion and dedication are the hallmark of Ontario's public sector.

It's time to think big and invest big in order to keep our public sector strong for many years to come. We don't always see eye to eye, but I will say that we've definitely entered a new era of collaboration with this government, and by working together, we have made progress. No doubt there is plenty more work to be done, but as long as our hearts and minds are open, we can accomplish great things for Ontario.

1010

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Mr. Smokey Thomas: I was pleased to hear that Ontario's Minister of Finance and Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues will be establishing a task force on women in the workforce. This is important work in addressing the unique barriers that women face due to the COVID-19 crisis. Women will be a crucial part of our economic recovery, and we must make sure our path to recovery and prosperity is inclusive.

We represent 180,000 members, the majority of whom are women. Women are highly represented on the front lines of the public sector and particularly during this COVID crisis. We look forward to being part of that conversation. I believe we are uniquely positioned to advise and inform the government on these issues, and we look forward to the opportunity to be involved with the task force. I think it's a great idea, but if it's going to work, it's got to have some teeth to address issues like women's wages.

If the government is committed to supporting women re-entering the workforce, they need to tackle wages as a top priority. The first step would be to repeal Bill 124 and its unconstitutional wage cap. I'll just say we have a charter challenge in on that, and we will see that one through.

All workers deserve paid sick days as well, so it's no big surprise that public health officials agree and have called for paid sick days; it's elementary. But I also believe the best way to get sick pay and the health benefits workers deserve and their families need is to join a union, and we'll bargain it for you.

Again, Bill 269 leaves room for some improvement, but I say, let's keep the conversation going. My union and

myself, we're here to help. COVID-19 threw us all a curveball, and I'd like to make a pitch again for the Premier to bring together Ontario's best from business, labour, not-for-profits, NGOs and the community—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. I apologize to cut you off. The time has come up.

We will now move to our next presenter, Ryerson University. Please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation as well.

Dr. Mohamed Lachemi: Good morning, all. I would like to take a moment to thank all members of the Ontario Legislature and the public service for your continued contributions to our province, particularly during these challenging times. My name is Mohamed Lachemi, and I am the president and vice-chancellor at Ryerson University.

As the pandemic continues to unfold, the 2021 Ontario budget sets out a path forward that not only protects people's health, but also protects our economy and ensures economic recovery. I'm pleased to see the government of Ontario making investments in the post-secondary education sector, such as the university training and equipment fund and the Virtual Learning Strategy. While these investments in the sector are much appreciated, I do want to highlight one of the most important investments made by the government in this year's budget.

Scaling up health human resources is needed now more than ever. The financial support that the province is providing Ryerson University to plan for a new medical school in Brampton is creating a pathway towards a stronger health care system, rooted in community-centric and culturally competent care. Even before the pandemic, it was clear that our health care system was challenged to address growing need, especially in Brampton. The case for transformation is even greater now. Ryerson University will offer a new approach to medical education in Ontario, one that draws on the university's commitment to community, diversity and inclusion and innovation, to address the changing needs for health care delivery and practice.

The investment being made in Ryerson and in the city of Brampton is critical and timely. As you know, Brampton and Peel region are areas that have been heavily underserved and are in need of transformative health care investments now more than ever. There has never been a better time to invest in projects that strengthen our province's health care sector.

Ryerson's new approach to medical education will not only equip the next cohort of doctors to think and work differently to improve health outcomes but will also address the unique challenges faced by Brampton, the Peel region and the surrounding regions. Through the support of the provincial government, Ryerson has been empowered to build upon the strength and foundation of our faculty researchers and deep and broad community and industry partnerships to help shape the future of health care.

Ryerson University has a proven track record of disrupting traditional educational approaches to address

society's needs. I have no doubt you have heard about our new law school, which opened its doors last fall to its first class of students—and what a diverse group they are, determined to make a difference in the practice of law.

Thank you for your entrusting Ryerson University in this new approach to medical education and for your continuing support of Ontario's post-secondary education sector. Through collaboration and collective ambition, I know that we will be able to work together to deliver a brighter future for all Ontarians.

Thank you once again for having me today. Stay safe, and be well.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

We'll move to our next presenter now, the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs. Please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation as well.

Mr. Noah Shack: Thank you very much, Chair. Before I begin, I'd like to echo my colleague President Lachemi's thanks to all of you for the phenomenal work that you're doing day in and day out to get this province through such a challenging time. It's deeply appreciated.

My name is Noah Shack, and I'm vice-president at the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, or CIJA, the advocacy agent of the Jewish Federations of Canada. I very much appreciate the opportunity to speak with the committee here today, representing Jewish communities across the province.

I'd like to focus primarily on the government's investment in anti-racism initiatives, including the \$1.6-million investment in the Anti-Racism and Anti-Hate Grant program of the Anti-Racism Directorate. It's auspicious that I'm doing so during month of April, which is Genocide Remembrance, Condemnation and Prevention Month in Canada. Yesterday, Jewish Ontarians marked Yom ha-Shoah, the official Holocaust Remembrance Day, a solemn occasion to listen to and honour the remaining survivors of this darkest chapter in human history, to mourn the victims of Nazi atrocities, the lives lost and the families broken, to recommit ourselves to making the slogan "Never Again" a constant call to action against anti-Semitism and all forms of hate.

The day before, we joined with the Rwandan community to commemorate 25 years since the Rwandan genocide. On April 24, we will come together for Armenian Genocide Memorial Day as well.

As we reflect on the absolute lowest depths of depravity to which hate can lead, it is profoundly encouraging to know that the government is taking steps to stop hate in its tracks here in Ontario. Building on the \$2.6-million investment in the Safer and Vital Communities Grant Program, which will help keep at-risk community institutions like summer camps, community centres and houses of worship safe from hate crime, the \$1.6-million investment in the Anti-Racism and Anti-Hate Grant program will proactively seek to raise awareness and educate Ontarians in an effort to stop this hatred from taking root in the first

place. We very much appreciate the collaborative approach being taken by the Anti-Racism Directorate in designing this program in order to assess and address the challenges facing targeted groups, like Jewish, Black, Indigenous, Muslim, Asian and other racialized communities, at this time.

On March 29, Statistics Canada released its annual hate crime report with data for 2019. There were 1,946 reported criminal incidents in Canada that were motivated by hate in that year. That's more than five hate crimes per day on average, and three of the top five cities where the most hate crimes occurred in 2019 are right here in Ontario.

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While it represents a tiny fraction of total crime, hate crime doesn't just victimize a targeted individual but an entire targeted community. The reverberations from each of these acts can be very significant. The bottom line is one hate crime is too many. The Statistics Canada report notes that hate crimes targeting the Black and Jewish populations remain the most common types of hate crimes, representing 18% and 16% of hate crimes respectively.

Jews in Canada make up less than 1% of the population, yet we're the target of 16% of hate crimes in this country. There are no numbers for 2020 yet, but I can tell you anecdotally that the Jewish community is experiencing an alarming increase in hate incidents during the pandemic. I receive reports on a weekly basis of anti-Semitic hate incidents in schools, graffiti in communities, vandalism, harassment and assault. Conspiracy theories about Jews being the originators and spreaders of the COVID-19 virus abound, and a society under stress during a period of acute challenge due to the pandemic is unfortunately giving rise to more and more hateful ideology, invective and action.

Of course, this reality doesn't only target Jewish Ontarians. Of particularly alarming note, Asian Ontarians are experiencing an acute pandemic-related spike, and it's in this context that I want to commend the government for allocating resources to fighting racism and hate at this moment and in this budget, which is, of course, rightly focused on pandemic resilience. It's crucial that our institutions do not turn a blind eye to the toxic impact the pandemic is having in terms of rising hate, and that there are plans to act against its virulent spread in our society.

Before closing, I'd also like to mention two other aspects of the budget that will have a meaningful positive impact on communities like ours across the province. First is the \$50 million available for grants to support faith-based and cultural organizations that are struggling—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Mr. Noah Shack:—due to the pandemic and do not have access to provincial government support through other programs. I cannot underscore enough the impact that these institutions have in supporting Ontarians during this challenging time. The comforting embrace of community gathering done safely, the centring meditation of prayer and the spiritual guidance of clergy all contribute to mental health and well-being as we confront the challenges of life and life cycle events in the challenging pandemic conditions.

CIJA and the Jewish community, alongside others, stand ready to work with government to support the development of this program to ensure it has maximum impact. It's crucial that houses of worship and other faith-based institutions get the help that they need.

Last, as a father with children learning from home again, whom you may hear in the background, and as someone who speaks often with families in our community across the province, including parents of children with special needs, I would like to note the positive impact of the COVID-19 child benefit. It's been a chaotic year for our children, and this support helps parents to make the best of a difficult situation, whether with stimulating activities to keep kids mentally and physically active or technology to ensure they can make the most of online learning.

I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have on these aspects of the budget, and I thank you for your time, consideration and, again, for your work on behalf of the province.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. We'll start with the questions now, and we'll start the first set of questions with the opposition. Who would like to go? MPP Fife.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you. Can you hear me?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Okay. My question is actually to—I'll start with Smokey. Smokey, it's good to see you. I wanted to mention that today we are seeing 4,227 new cases of COVID-19, which is pretty alarming, and also that hospitals have had to cancel all elective surgeries today. So, we're not in a good place as a province. I wanted to get your feedback specifically on a made-in-Ontario paid sick day strategy and what impact that may have had on mitigating the transmission of COVID-19.

Mr. Smokey Thomas: On that, a lot of people have been calling for 10 paid sick days. I guess I would say this: I don't think it's that simple. There is a lot of opposition to it. I'm in favour of paid sick days, but I'm also in favour of unions and negotiating them, and people joining unions to get there. But I do know people in small business have said that that would just put them out of business, and they're almost under now because of COVID. So, I think it would be something for—there's money in the federal EI programs for people to access. I think that if the feds and the provinces could get together, they could come up with a national solution that would be housed inside the EI system and—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Okay. Are you familiar with Peggy Sattler's bill, Bill 239, which proposed 10 days, but the government would alleviate some of the costs of paid sick days so that businesses, obviously, don't have to bear the brunt of the cost? The government's own science table actually has called for made-in-Ontario paid sick days as a method to mitigate the transmission in workplaces. Obviously, we're disappointed that the government did not follow through in this particular budget on that. I did ask the minister earlier on, Smokey, about the return on investment for such a measure. I think that there's just room for improvement.

You did also mention that of your 180,000 members, many are women. The YWCA has come out and said that this budget misses the mark on hoping to get women back into the workforce, especially around essential workers—you have many of those workers in your union—and making the wage top-up permanent on a go-forward basis. What feedback have you had from women in the province as far as the pandemic negatively impacting them more so than men in Ontario? And do you see early learning and care, child care and wage top-ups as a way to get women back into the workforce so that we can get our economy back up and running?

Mr. Smokey Thomas: We've got lots of questions in there. The feedback that we get is that the shutdown puts a lot of people at risk because they don't have child care, and if they close the schools, they don't have child care. Daycare centres are running at overcapacity. We actually represent some.

The pandemic pay top-up was extremely problematic for many unions, including mine. There are over 800 occupations in health care, for example. They all thought they should have gotten it. They didn't. And so it created a tremendous amount of internal dissension in unions, not just mine but lots of unions. There has got to be fair pay for fair work.

A lot of front-line positions in the public sector and in the for-profit sector are underpaid. Women are underpaid, and that's where pay equity comes in. I think if there's a renewed effort to actually make pay equity work and make it enforceable, I think it can bring those wages up. But I don't know; it's something that I think needs a lot more consultation with trade unions and all the political parties in the province and the business sector—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Smokey Thomas: —on how it might be brought about.

It's really a worthy idea, and I truly support paying front-line workers more money, because it has definitely proven to be well worth it—not millionaires and billionaires getting richer. But it's not as simple as people might think, and it's not as simple as just passing a law and forcing everybody to do it. Unless the government funds it, then you're going to just see that the way they would pay it is by cutting services and cutting positions. That wouldn't be advisable either. I do think if the government was to strike a task force on that as part of the women's directorate, we could probably make some headway.

Ms. Catherine Fife: And have you been invited to be part of that, do you know, Smokey?

Mr. Smokey Thomas: I believe we have, yes—not me directly, but through some of—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Some of your folks. We're going to have another set, and so maybe I'll address the long-term-care piece on that, because the iron ring clearly didn't materialize for those who were suffering in long-term care.

This is an idea that you've come to finance committee for many years to talk about: the precariousness of those contract workers who move from home to home and actually were just trying to make ends meet. I'll circle back

on long-term care on the second round. Thanks for your time.

Mr. Smokey Thomas: Okay.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. You still have a minute, if you anyone has any questions, from the opposition. Otherwise, we'll move to the independent members. MPP Hunter.

1030

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Thank you to all three presenters today for the work that you do on behalf of your organizations. I certainly respect all of you and have worked with all of you over many years.

I want to say a special thank you to Smokey Thomas for the work that his members have done throughout the last over a year to keep us all safe. The important and clear role of government in times of crisis is something that we can't argue with, so I want to just say thank you to Smokey, if you can pass that on to your members, on behalf of the Ontario Liberal caucus.

I want to really drill down into CIJA's presentation on the rise in anti-Black racism, in anti-Semitism incidents and others as well. We see anti-Asian racism happening. Obviously, there are Islamophobia issues in the province. One thing that the pandemic has done is that it has shone a light on some of the areas in our province that have inequities and imbalances. I actually think the conversation around things like paid sick leave and pandemic pay, minimum wage increases—all of those things are talking about imbalances and inequities, because there are some people who have choice and others who don't. They are the essential workers that we've relied on. Oftentimes, when you see the faces of those individuals who are bearing the brunt of the pandemic, many of them are people from diverse backgrounds and racialized communities.

I wanted to hear from you—and each of the panellists, I think, can speak to this. Noah, if you're okay, maybe we could start with President Lachemi, because I know his university is doing a lot of work in this area. Your announcement this week, naming your law school on behalf of the Honourable Lincoln Alexander—I thought that was a pretty brilliant stroke, a symbol of inclusion. Can you speak to what we as a province can do to really deal with these systems that are in place that create inequities and how we can address them? We now see them because of the spotlight of the pandemic, but we don't want to go back to the old way; we want to build back better, and we want to do things in a better way. So, President Lachemi, if you can kick us off.

Dr. Mohamed Lachemi: Thank you very much, MPP Hunter. I totally support my colleague Noah in terms of supporting the government putting funding and supports to combat racism, all forms of racism in the province.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Dr. Mohamed Lachemi: I represent Ryerson University. It's all about education. I think of the importance of education in opening the doors for people who are from various communities to be part of finding the solution.

You mentioned, MPP Hunter, our new law school. Yes, we have made that decision to name it after Lincoln Alexander, but I can tell you that more than 50% of our

students in the law school are racialized students. We have the only Black dean of law in the country at this moment. Also, 60% of students are female students. I also support Smokey in his support of the government making sure that we give opportunities for women.

I think it's all about education and about pushing boundaries to find a way to support various communities.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. I apologize to cut you off.

We'll come back to you in the second round. Now we'll go to the government side. MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm going to start with Mr. Thomas. Do you mind if I call you Smokey?

Mr. Smokey Thomas: Yes, that's what everybody calls me—well, some other things too.

Mr. Dave Smith: We'll try not to get into the other ones then.

Thank you very much for that. You're on record so far as saying that you think that this budget has been a positive step forward toward the health and economic recovery for Ontario. Actually, one of your comments I want to touch on in particular is that you said, "Buy local, or bye-bye local." I think I know exactly what you mean by that, but do you mind elaborating on that a little bit for us? What exactly do you mean by "buy local," and how do you think that will help improve Ontario's world-class workforce?

Mr. Smokey Thomas: Well, I would put it this way: The vast majority of my members had very few layoffs. They're still working, still getting their paycheques—really difficult conditions for many, but they're still getting a paycheque.

So, what we're saying to people is—I have a couple of favourite restaurants back home in Kingston that are locally owned and operated. They source all their meats locally. I don't drink, but they get craft breweries in the area. They support locals. So, what I said to our members is, "If you want those businesses to survive and if you're going to order out, support those local businesses, because otherwise, if you don't, they may not be there at the end of the pandemic."

I am very much in sympathy with small business because most of them, they work—my son used to have a small business and he gave it up and got a job, because he just was working to pay his own employees. So, I have a lot of sympathy for small business. That's why I say to people, "Buy local." And that buying local, I'm really pleased that we've got 3M making masks in Ontario, that we've got vaccines that are going to be produced in Ontario. The whole world is probably going to go protectionist, so I think the province needs to, and I see the Premier doing that.

What are we going to do here in Ontario to keep people working to make stuff, to create that workforce that we need, to develop all those mineral extractions in the north? You need robust education and robust health care, but all of that, small business employs something like 87% of Ontarians. So, you know what, if you want those people to be around for you when the pandemic is over and you can go back, go in and dine or go in and shop at the local craft store or whatever it is, then support them now.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you very much for that. I think that we should be clipping that video and pushing that out everywhere in Ontario. I think you're bang on with it.

I'm going to pivot a little bit as well and I'm going to jump over to CIJA, if that's okay. Noah, I know that you touched on it during your deputation. You talked about increasing the funding to the Anti-Racism Directorate and what that would actually mean in combatting racism. Could you elaborate a little bit more on that and why you think this is a positive step forward for Ontario?

Mr. Noah Shack: Thank you very much for the question. And it ties in with the previous question as well, of course.

We are seeing a rise in hate; multiple communities are experiencing it and reporting it. I think that this particular program that the Anti-Racism Directorate is seeking to get off the ground, the Anti-Racism and Anti-Hate Grant program, will make a significant difference. It's a really important step in the right direction for raising awareness and educating Ontarians about what's going on.

I think, and I would hope, that everybody who is here today has a good sense of the impact that the pandemic is having and the challenges of racism and hate that we experience as a province beyond the specific situation of the pandemic, but I'm not so sure that that is well understood across the province as a whole. The extent to which we can educate Ontarians, make sure they're aware of some of the nasty conspiracy theories that are out there about some communities, about some of the systemic, racist issues that are a barrier for communities—the extent to which people understand those things, they can then begin to take a stand against them in their own small circles and as a broader society.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Mr. Noah Shack: I think this is a really important program that's being developed, again, as I said, in collaboration with targeted communities, that will help to make sure that it's relevant and addresses those concerns.

Mr. Dave Smith: You also touched a little bit on the \$50 million for faith-based organizations and the funding there. Do you have any ideas on how this should roll out and what kinds of parameters you think would be reasonable for it?

Mr. Noah Shack: I think, here again, it's important to consult with some of the organizations in the sector and hear directly from them about what the challenges are that they're experiencing. I know that there's a lot of cost that's being borne by these institutions in order to operate safely. They take safety very seriously. There's a lot of Plexiglas going up in these places and a lot of PPE. I think things like that would be very helpful, any assistance to anything that they have had to do in order to really invest to change and upgrade their operations in terms of ventilation, procedures and things like that.

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I know there have been challenges related to their ability to fund themselves. A lot of these organizations are relying on life cycle events like weddings, where you can have a big reception, and that helps to cover their operating

costs—that's out the window—or dues from members who are not able to pay anymore because they've lost their jobs. There's a number of different factors and figuring out what package of support would have the biggest and deepest impact would be really important to do as the details of this program are being developed.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you. Chair, how much time is left?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Dave Smith: Sticking on the line, then, of the \$50 million for the faith-based organizations, you pointed out that they bore a lot of the costs on it. Plexiglas is probably one of the best examples. When we were talking about the cost of Plexiglas about a year ago, it was significantly less than it is now.

I think you were bang on when you were referring to the fact that they relied on functions, gatherings, where they would have received a profit margin from it, and on top of that, it raised awareness about the organization itself, so it increased the coffers in terms of donations to it. How do you think we can do something that is going to leverage that \$50 million to get some of that money back, to raise some of the awareness so that people remember this is an organization that has been around for a long time, that they've done a lot of good things and they need the support from the average Joe now?

Mr. Noah Shack: I'll tell you, even just having this grant program, having it featured and having people talk about it, helps in that regard. I feel—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. Sorry to cut you off. We'll come back to you in our second round.

We'll now go to the independent members. Any questions? MPP Hunter?

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Perhaps we can continue the thread of conversation we were having on how to combat systemic racism in the province. All of you represent such critical institutions, I believe, that have a role to play. We can't have a province with inequities for people. This added burden of anti-Black racism, anti-Asian racism, all of the concerns around anti-Semitism, the real risk of personal safety—the same thing for Islamophobia.

Maybe, Smokey, you can talk from your perspective about what you and your membership are doing to embrace the work of the Anti-Racism Directorate, things like collection of disaggregated data that can help keep everyone accountable.

Mr. Smokey Thomas: Thanks, Mitzie. We've undertaken two—twice now, we've done a social mapping exercise of our membership. We were the first-ever union to do it, I don't know, 10 or 12 years ago. We actually presented in Cape Town, South Africa. I sent my folks down there to a world forum on diversity in the workplace. So, internally in OPSEU, we've been doing a lot of work on anti-racism.

On our staff side, about five or six years ago, I formed a racialized workers committee and our two staff unions are on that, as well as administrative. So we're doing the

work inside OPSEU to make our staffing represent the faces of society.

We've just recently engaged very directly with the government on anti-Black racism efforts. We have a racialized workers' caucus. Peter—I'm actually booking him off for about three months to work with our racialized workers—you know, all races. We've done a lot of work. Mitzie, when you were in government, you and I had many conversations about these things.

The work that's being undertaken by the government is really, really good. I would really like, Noah and Mohamed, to connect with you both—particularly you, Noah, because I am seeing a lot of anti-Semitic behaviour even from some of my board members. I've been taking it head-on. It's out there and it's real; racism is real.

I do agree that the pandemic has brought the best out in most people, but it's brought the worst out in the haters and the racists. My union and I, we're all in, Mitzie, on anything, working with anybody, to take it on head-on and to address issues. I've learned so, so much from—you and I have had conversations, Mitzie, in the past about anti-Black racism. I learn more every day. Again, I've got a pretty big organization here, and we do have influence, and I'd like to offer it up to everybody, including the government and everybody on the—

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Yes, keep championing those causes. Your leadership is really important.

Moving to Noah, or if Sophie wants to also join you, talk about some of the concrete things that you want to see organizations do, including governments, on this issue.

Mr. Noah Shack: First, I want to thank you, because I know that the Anti-Racism Directorate at first instance, with its areas of focus that include anti-Semitism, was the product of the previous government. We really appreciate our community being included in those efforts and the work that it continues to do.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Thank you.

Mr. Noah Shack: If I had to name one thing that the government could do right now to make the most meaningful impact in fighting hate and discrimination and racism—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thirty seconds.

Mr. Noah Shack: I would say, in 30 seconds, it's mandating hate incident data collection in schools. We're seeing a huge spike in hate incidents in schools. There's only one board in the province that pays attention to this, and what they've found is alarming. Being able to identify what's going on means that they can start to address what's going on. Without first taking a clear look, and resisting the temptation to sweep something so unpleasant under the rug so we don't have to look at it, we're not going to get anywhere.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. We'll go back to the government side for their second round. MPP Piccini.

Mr. David Piccini: I'd just like to first thank all the presenters today. This has been a really fascinating discussion to date. I really appreciate your interventions and all that you're doing to support recovery and taking the time to come here before committee to speak to that.

My first question—I'm just going to lead with President Lachemi. I appreciate you being here and the work that you do at Ryerson. Obviously, as parliamentary assistant, I greatly value our relationship; and personally, your leadership as president of Ryerson, a university that really embraces outside-the-box thinking for tomorrow's workforce.

Obviously, health care first; I'll lead with that. Every victim of COVID-19 has left behind a devastated family. It has touched the lives of countless workers on the front lines and it has also meant moving elective surgeries and deferring others. So this has been difficult on our province, on our country and globally.

Scaling up human resources has obviously been a significant priority of this government. I note in the budget another \$1.8-billion investment to support our hospitals and our health care system and address the surgical backlogs. Specifically, on that human resource capacity, we've spoken about the PSW program, and the government has done the micro-credentialing program to help the laddering of workers, the job training credit that was in the budget and the commitment to hire 27,000 health care professionals.

But in this budget is something critical, even for rural Ontario and the constituents of mine in Brighton, who call me disproportionately more than any other area in my community about family health professionals and getting access to doctors. This investment for a planning grant for a medical school, what does this mean, not just for Brampton, because this is a huge piece for Brampton, but for the broader footprint throughout Ontario and specifically areas like mine in rural Ontario and the constituents of Brighton, some of whom just messaged me this morning?

Dr. Mohamed Lachemi: Thank you very much, MPP Piccini, and thank you to the government for paying attention to an element that is important in our society. I know that we are dealing with a very difficult situation with COVID, and the next step is for the government and society to deal with the recovery.

I would say the most important element to deal with the present situation and future circumstances is the human capital that we have in Ontario and the investment in human resources, as you mentioned and also Smokey had mentioned: the aspect of protecting workers now, professionals that are in health care, but also reinforce the need of doing the practice of health care in a different way.

I would say that the project that I'm excited about for Brampton, for the Peel region—but I would say it's for many other regions—is really to make sure that we push boundaries, think out of the box and find a way to practise the medical profession in a way that we can think about the communities that we serve, think about integration of all elements of Ontarians in terms of diversity and inclusion, but also bring technology to it.

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If there is any lesson of this pandemic, it's the use of technology. I know that. I mean, it actually happens that I am a board member of one of the major hospitals in the GTA, and we were not necessarily embracing technology

before the pandemic. This is an element that we have, I think: to seize opportunities of this pandemic and use technology more in health care. This will help us to actually solve problems in a way that we can also help to reduce the need for increasing budgets year after year in health care.

Mr. David Piccini: So that—

Dr. Mohamed Lachemi: Yes, go ahead.

Mr. David Piccini: Sorry to interrupt; it's just because of limited time. That specific point you meant on embracing technology in health care, that's going to have a meaningful impact for rural areas like mine.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. David Piccini: Can you further elaborate, then, on the government's \$4-billion investment into broadband, which is the largest of its kind in Canadian history and really recognizes the long-overlooked priority of broadband that Premier Ford is finally addressing? How critical is that to then supporting this?

Dr. Mohamed Lachemi: I would say super critical, because having the right technology, but also access to Internet from all regions in Ontario, can actually give an opportunity for more collaboration between medical professionals and provide services to regions that are not necessarily well served. I don't think that we can have all the human resources to serve all the regions and their local units, but we can have access to support from big centres for those communities.

I would add the importance of also serving Aboriginal communities that are in very isolated areas. I think one of the elements that we want to bring to this aspect in Brampton is how we can connect the south to the north, how we can collaborate with local communities, with Aboriginal communities, taking into consideration also local practices. This is why the element of cultural practices is super important here; how we can help them while paying attention to issues that are very local.

I can tell you, Brampton has, in terms of dealing with diseases like diabetes, the highest percentage of people with diabetes in that region. If we look, actually, at the connection between Brampton and the north, especially in some communities with Indigenous things, we see similar patterns. Can we do this in combination with those communities and serve them better, and use technology and innovation?

MPP Piccini, you are very familiar with our innovation network that we are now implementing in different regions of Ontario. It's not just serving downtown Toronto; we can also serve other regions around the province.

Mr. David Piccini: Thank you, President Lachemi. Time check, please, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thirty seconds.

Mr. David Piccini: Okay. Well, just with the 30 seconds, then, I'll thank you all. Smokey, I had wanted to speak with you a bit as well, but maybe offline. Thank you all for what you've done today and for what you continue to do for our future as a province.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. We'll go to the opposition side for their second round. Who do we have? MPP Mamakwa.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you, Smokey. Thank you, Mohamed, for the presentation, and also Noah and Sophie for the presentation. Maybe what I'll do is, I'll ask my question to Mr. Shack. I'll just thank you for both being here.

I know one of the things that really jumped out at me was when you talked about racism, because for myself, I live it on a daily basis. We face it on a daily basis. You mentioned \$1.6 million in the government's budget this year, and there's simply no limit to the increase in the anti-hate and anti-racism work that needs to be done across the province. I know that hate-motivated attacks are growing across the country, across the province, and this is a drop in the bucket.

I think, for me, when you talk about racism, when you talk about how it treats people when we play jurisdictional ambiguity, jurisdictional Ping-Pong, let's say, for example, on Indigenous people, sometimes it's—how should I say it? Playing that jurisdictional game is structural violence, it's structural racism, and people don't understand that sometimes. I think to kind of lay it out—I know we need to do more of that work.

You mentioned that \$1.6 million. I know for me the biggest room in the world is room for improvement, and that's to do the work that we need to do when we talk about the anti-racism work and anti-hate work. Where do you see that we can improve? Should we be doing more?

Mr. Noah Shack: I really appreciate the question, and I thank you for it. You're right, \$1.6 million is a relatively small amount of money when we're talking about the entirety of the budget. But you don't fill the bucket; you fill the bucket drop by drop. I think it's a really important step in the right direction. Once the program is developed and running and successful, I think there will be a clear case to continue investing in it and demonstrating the impact that it has moving forward. I think you've articulated very well what one of the main advantages of this program is: the ability to help Ontarians understand what the challenges are that are out there, and to be invested in fixing some of these problems that exist in our society.

If I may, I'll build on the 30-second response that I gave earlier. I think that there's a real problem in schools, where hate incidents, bullying incidents, incidents of racism are happening on an almost daily basis, if not on a daily basis. It's such a terrible thing to experience and to be confronted with. People tend to just want to make it go away. It's a human response; I'm not placing any judgment on that. But if school boards are required to collect that data, if principals and superintendents are required to feed that into a central system, it means that we're aware of what's going on and we can measure whether or not the strategies that are being deployed are effective in addressing that racism and that hate.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Noah Shack: The Toronto District School Board is the only board that is doing it right now. They found, in the first year of reporting, a significant amount of anti-Black racism that's happening, and I suspect the numbers are going to continue to go up as people get more comfortable with the reporting. Anti-Indigenous racism is of

course a huge problem in schools as well, as is anti-Semitism, homophobia, Islamophobia. These things are happening, and if we turn a blind eye, we'll never solve the problem. If we can address it in children and youth, we're setting ourselves up for a better future as a society writ large. So, I think in terms of next steps, that's where I would first focus my energy.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you for that. I know that at the beginning—I think it was in August or July of 2018—when the government came into power, one of the things that this government cut was the Indigenous curriculum-writing to educate youth, students in schools, about the histories, the real histories, of what happened: our version of histories of Indigenous people. So, I really appreciate your response.

How much time do I have there, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Almost two minutes.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Okay. Maybe I'll just go over to Mohamed. Again, thank you for being here. It's good to see you again. I know I came to see you there a couple of years ago at the university.

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I know a lot of funding that is there is the one-time COVID resources. Base funding isn't growing as fast as we need, to keep up with the times. I know with this third wave, we don't know what campuses are going to look like in the fall. Just a very straightforward question, perhaps: Do you feel that this budget will do enough for post-secondary?

Dr. Mohamed Lachemi: Thank you very much for the question. It's always good to see you.

As I mentioned, we applaud the investment by the government in post-secondary education. The announcement that was made by Minister Romano just before the budget was in the order of \$106 million to cover COVID-19 costs for post-secondary. Of course, I can tell you the needs are much higher, but we appreciate that the government also has priorities. The investment in health care is still the lion's share of the budget, and I think Ontarians understand the need to keep all of us healthy and safe—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. I apologize to cut you off. That concludes our time.

Thank you to all three presenters. We appreciate your presentations.

SKILLS ONTARIO

CANADIAN CREDIT UNION ASSOCIATION

CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH
ASSOCIATION

WATERLOO WELLINGTON

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Moving along to our next group of presenters: First, I would like to call upon Skills Ontario. If you can please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation.

Mr. Ian Howcroft: Thank you very much, and good morning to all the committee members. My name is Ian Howcroft, and I'm the CEO of Skills Ontario. With me is Paul Clipsham. He's our director of stakeholder relations and will be making some comments as well.

First, I would like to acknowledge and thank the government of Ontario for demonstrating leadership on skills initiatives throughout the COVID period and for the support that has been shown to Skills Ontario. This support has been critical in helping us to not only survive but thrive during these challenging times. We are pleased that our team was able to pivot quickly, offering entirely virtual programming to continue to promote careers in the skilled trades and technologies.

With our common objectives to change and improve perceptions of the skilled trades, support Ontarians as they explore these careers and build a future skilled workforce, we appreciate that opportunity to work together to realize even more success. We also recognize that the health and safety of everyone comes first: our staff, the students, the teachers and all the partners that we work with.

The pandemic has truly underscored the value of skilled trades and technology careers. Ontario's skilled professionals have been critical in keeping our economy, our health care system and our society operating under these extraordinary circumstances.

Notwithstanding the progress we are making, the skills challenge remains one of the most significant economic challenges of our time, after the pandemic. This has been further exacerbated by COVID-19. In total, skills gaps in Ontario cost almost \$25 billion in forgone GDP each year. Meanwhile, Ontario is projected to face a shortage of almost 560,000 skilled professionals by 2030. Those are Conference Board of Canada statistics. COVID is expected to further exacerbate these challenges with delays in training and certification, coupled with the growth and demand from key areas such as construction, health and safety, manufacturing and IT.

Better connecting skilled people with the needs of the business is a social and economic imperative. Over 30 years, Skills Ontario has grown to become the most impactful organization empowering youth to consider a career in the skilled trades. Engagement with students, teachers, parents, volunteers, business, labour groups and others to create mentors and programs is key for the future of Ontario. We are working to sustain and scale up our efforts to encourage more youth to pursue careers in the skilled trades and technologies. With the current pandemic and beyond, there is an even greater need for Skills Ontario and the work that we do.

We also wish to explore the opportunity to have expanded enhanced roles in this, given the wind-down of the College of Trades. Skills Ontario is recognized as a leader when it comes to promoting skilled trades and technology careers, and we've been able to maintain and build our momentum to ensure the message is getting out to as many audiences as possible.

Though we've had great success, there's a lot more work that needs to be done throughout the province. We

have increased our efforts to better engage other crucial audiences, such as parents, younger generations, persons with exceptionalities, the BIPOC community and the business community. We've been very proactive in these areas this year. We've created a new position called the manager of diversity and inclusivity to make sure that we're getting to as many audiences as we can.

Skills Ontario has a vast network of key stakeholders in the apprenticeship system, including businesses, educational institutions, unions, students, tradespeople and others. We look forward to working towards developing skill solutions as we continue to deal with the pandemic challenges and we move beyond that into the recovery stage.

I'll now turn it over to Paul Clipsham to finish up with some comments on the budget.

Mr. Paul Clipsham: Thanks very much, Ian. I'm Paul Clipsham, director of stakeholder relations with Skills Ontario. Just to continue on Ian's comments, we are thrilled to continue the strong partnership with the Ontario government and the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development in particular. Working together and inspiring the next generation of skilled trades and technology leaders is critical to the success of the province.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Paul Clipsham: Skills Ontario made the successful pivot by offering virtual programming, and we're looking forward to continuing to provide learning opportunities to Ontarians.

In particular, Skills Ontario applauds the government's commitment to funding for skills training and development by providing funding to assist women, racialized individuals, Indigenous peoples, youth and people with disabilities, who are facing the highest rates of unemployment during the pandemic. Skills Ontario is also pleased to be expanding programming in each of these areas to connect them with rewarding careers in skilled trades and technologies.

The organization also recognizes the importance of the \$2,000 job training tax credit that will help many Ontarians obtain the necessary training to succeed in skilled trades and technology careers, as well as focus on workplace safety, which includes free occupational health and safety training for health and safety representatives.

Thank you for your attention, and we would welcome any questions or comments you may have.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you for the presentation.

We'll now move to our next presenter, the Canadian Credit Union Association. If you can please state your name for the record, and you can get right into your presentation.

Mr. Nick Best: Hi. My name is Nick Best. I'm the director of Ontario government relations at the Canadian Credit Union Association. I'm joined by Louis Grilli, who is the general counsel and VP of strategic initiatives at FirstOntario Credit Union.

Ontario credit unions or caisses populaires are member-owned financial institutions that are 100% provincially

owned and operated. Combined, our sector manages over \$70 billion in assets and employs 7,000 Ontarians. We are active in every form of loan: small business, residential, personal and agricultural. We are the primary financial institution for about 800,000 Ontarians and provide real competition to the Big Five in terms of reach, rates and amounts we can lend, which benefits all Ontarians, whether you choose to bank with us or not.

Bill 269 impacts us in two ways, and I'll talk about those briefly. We are also in the midst of an important regulatory renewal, and Louis will talk about that and what that means for them at the operational level.

Schedule 1 and schedule 2 of the act allow our regulator, the Financial Services Regulatory Authority, or FSRA for short, to use our provincial deposit insurance reserve fund, which is funded by credit unions, in order to pay for a standby fee for a line of credit for the Ontario Financing Authority. This line of credit is designed to be strategically deployed to firms facing a liquidity crisis, but are otherwise healthy. At the start of the pandemic, there was a fear that there would be a significant run on funds, and the Bank of Canada made billions upon billions of dollars available to the Big Five in case there was an unsupported run. The province stepped up and made a similar fund, albeit somewhat smaller, available to credit unions.

Thankfully, this hasn't been used. Credit unions currently hold record levels of liquidity because reduced spending, combined with increased government transfers, have exceeded the drawdowns caused by job losses and economic contraction. We aren't out of the woods yet, but as of right now, we are in a very strong position to continue lending to our members and doing all the great things we do in our community and in memberships.

Schedule 4 of the act amends the Financial Professionals Title Protection Act to allow FSRA to collect fees from credentialing bodies that grant the professional designations of financial planner and financial adviser. As our employees are the customers of these credentialing bodies, we're ultimately impacted. We end up paying the fees that are then passed up for FSRA to regulate this area. But this is consistent with how our regulator bills, in that everybody pays for the service that they need, and that is consistent, whether you're pensions, mortgage brokers or credit unions. Therefore, we support this fee-for-service model.

Louis?

Mr. Louis Grilli: Thank you very much, Nick. As Nick mentioned, my name is Louis Grilli, vice-president of corporate strategy and general counsel for FirstOntario Credit Union.

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As you are aware, enabling legislation was modernized as part of the previous budget. The design of the regulatory framework underpinning the modernized act will allow us to go into new lines of business and also make more important strategic investments in the community infrastructure of fintechns.

FirstOntario is a credit union that has about \$5 billion of assets under management. We represent approximately

120,000 members in Ontario. What we are seeing within the credit union sector generally is that technology is eroding competitive advantage and, as a result, credit unions are looking to normalize the revenue wheel and have a shift somewhat away from the traditional savings-and-loans model of doing business in the financial services sector.

Bill 269 allows us to diversify that revenue wheel. This is what the Big Five has been doing since the 1970s. It allows us to go away from 95% of our revenue being generated from savings and loans and try to make that more of a 50-50 proposition. I believe that the increased business powers that Bill 269 would provide for will allow us to invest in technology, and that technology will allow credit unions to be competitive and relevant into the 21st century.

With the advent of open banking coming to our shores—best estimates Q2 to Q4 of 2022—all financial institutions are going to see a marked difference in the way business is done. The Big Five, with their fiscal advantage, are able to erode our traditional advantage, which is familiarity, being the credit union, knowing the individual, knowing the member. Technology erodes all that. Give us increased business powers, and we can then reinvest that money into a strong and vibrant credit union system.

Those are my remarks. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. We'll move to our next presenter, the Canadian Mental Health Association Waterloo Wellington. Please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation.

Ms. Helen Fishburn: Thank you so much. I actually have a brief presentation that I've put together. I'm just going to share my screen now. Can everyone see that?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes.

Ms. Helen Fishburn: Okay, great.

First of all, thank you so much for the opportunity to come and talk to you about the state of our mental health across Ontario. I'm Helen Fishburn, the CEO of CMHA Waterloo Wellington. I'm based in Guelph, but we serve all of Guelph-Wellington and Waterloo-Wellington.

As you can imagine, through the pandemic, we have seen a tremendous increase in the needs, complexity and acuity of people with mental health and addiction issues across Ontario.

Just to give you a little bit of context, we are the largest CMHA in Canada. We provide a full range of services for kids, adults and seniors, and we have a number of programs. I'll try and speak to the provincial picture; of course, I can only provide our local context, but it is certainly representative of what is happening across Ontario.

What are we seeing now? Basically, we have seen a really significant change in baseline of mental health and addictions needs across Ontario since the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, we used to talk about one in five Canadians being impacted by a mental health condition; now it's really four in five. And I don't mean to say that four in five have a diagnosable condition, but the level of disruption,

the level of trauma, stress, grief, loss and economic hardship that has been created by the pandemic has hit us all incredibly hard. I know, as MPPs, you're hearing and seeing that every single day with your constituents.

We've had a significant increase just here locally in Guelph, Wellington and Waterloo. We've gone from 4,500 calls per month to 6,500 calls per month from March of last year to this March. We've seen increased rates of self-harm and sentinel events related to deaths by suicide and opioid. We've certainly seen increases in substance abuse and what I call bad behaviour, which are things like speeding and stunt driving, which are also really at epic proportions and are certainly part of this stress response.

Virtual care works for a lot of people, which, of course, we've introduced, but not if you're complex or vulnerable, and certainly not for those people who struggle and have suffered because of systemic racism, like people in our BIPOC community.

What does this actually look like? I'm going to share with you the story of Joel. He's a 10-year-old boy in Guelph. He's got learning disabilities. His mom is immunocompromised, so he has had to have virtual learning since September. He has excessive time in a basement, on video games. He started to self-harm. The parents didn't know what to do, where to go. He was seen, fortunately, by our psychiatrist, but then, of course, he's now on a waiting list for ongoing care. Right now, there are no eyes on Joel, and we're worried his cycle will repeat.

For children and youth across Ontario, the wait time for specialized mental health care can range from six months to as long as two and a half years, and certainly that has only grown through the pandemic. These are our kids, not just people out there, but people in our families, our neighbours, our friends, our colleagues.

Also, this is Nivita. She's 50 years old, lives in Kitchener. She's the mother of three. She has been precariously employed since COVID-19, and she's drinking five to eight glasses of wine at night. She is dealing with high levels of anxiety, depression. Some days, she can't get out of bed. She has thoughts of suicide and she struggles to find that hope and that light. She didn't need our help before COVID, but because of the restrictions in the pandemic—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Ms. Helen Fishburn: —it's really been a struggle.

We know that 74% of Ontarians are experiencing increased mental health and addictions challenges. That has been a trend that has been well documented. We've seen increases in substance use, we're losing people to suicide and opioid deaths, and in Waterloo-Wellington alone, we have 3,639 people waiting for care. That's just Waterloo-Wellington.

We've launched a campaign to profile this for our provincial government, just to let people know what we're faced with. What we really need is for mental health and addictions to be fully funded and to reduce the wait times. We need a better system, very much like they have in Cancer Care Ontario, where there's full infrastructure, resources to meet the needs, and people get the care they

need when they need it. People with mental health and addictions issues deserve that care.

We're asking for an increase in base investment. People can't afford to wait. This is literally a life-and-death issue in Ontario.

Thank you so much for your consideration and for your time. We know that you're feeling this pain as well, both at home and at work, as we all are across Ontario. The time for action is now.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. We'll start with the questions now. We'll start the first round with the government. MPP Roberts.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Thank you to all of our presenters for taking the time today to appear before the committee and speak a little bit about budget 2021—three very different presentations on three very important topics. I'm not sure if I'll be able to get to all three of you, but I'd like to start with the Canadian Credit Union Association.

Nick, Louis, thank you for being here. I think the CCUA has presented at almost all of the budget bill studies since I got elected. We appreciate how much of an active participant your association is in working collaboratively with government.

Nick, you talked a little bit about the support that was given in emergency liquidity to support Ontario's credit unions and caisses populaires during the pandemic. I think the OFA provided a line of credit to FSRA for \$2 billion for a period of 12 months. I just wanted you to perhaps go a little bit deeper on why this was important to credit unions and caisses populaires and how it could have been used to support Ontarians during the pandemic.

Mr. Nick Best: Thank you, Jeremy. Yes, the government followed the federal lead and provided us with the ability to access a \$2-billion line of credit from the Ontario Financing Authority. This was huge, because at the start of the pandemic, there was a lot of uncertainty. Credit unions are capitalized in order to—our general standard is to hold 30 days' worth of liquidity as a regulatory minimum, and then after 30 days, we would move into what is your capital base, where you would have your standard capital, which is a minimum of 4%, but the average system uses about 6% of capital held in reserves, and then higher for risk-based assets.

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If you were to use up your 30 days of liquidity, you wouldn't have a way to bridge to your capital, which are your reserves. The idea of the Ontario plan was that they would step in and provide you very quick cash in order to give you a bridge to get to your reserves that would take more months—whether one month, two months, three months—in order to cash in and get those operational for you. That provided a lot more security for the system and allowed us to give our members confidence that we were liquid and we would always be able to handle our obligations, but it also allowed us to continue to lend and provide more services. That was the purpose of it.

Thankfully, we haven't needed it, but that was because the federal and provincial governments came in with major supports for businesses, at least in the short term,

and the ship is more or less stabilized in terms of where we're at. This was an important measure for us to be able to bridge from our liquidity reserves to our capital reserves in the case that sources of funding were unavailable.

Louis, is that fair?

Mr. Louis Grilli: Yes, I think that's completely accurate, Nick, and we do appreciate, obviously, all the government support in this regard.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Thanks. Louis, pivoting to you, you spoke a little bit about this as well, but back in 2020, we started to take steps to modernize the industry by updating the Credit Unions and Caisses Populaires Act. I'm wondering if you could share with us how this has changed the way your members are operating and what effects it will have for the many Ontarians who are members of credit unions and caisses populaires since some of those changes came into effect.

Mr. Louis Grilli: Thank you, and again thank you for the time here. I think it is changing; it has not yet changed. It's a big shift that we're moving, these credit unions, but I think the most important aspect of the liberalization, let's call it—maybe liberalization is the wrong word—the modernization of the Credit Unions and Caisses Populaires Act is around business powers and the ability for credit unions to operate in a more modern way that will increase our capital reserves and thereby allow us to invest back into our credit unions and the communities that we operate in.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Louis Grilli: As credit unions, that's in our DNA. Our DNA is community participation and making our members' lives better through financial security.

What the legislation has done is it has deferred to FSRA, our regulator, rule-making authority on particular investments that we can make. That is going to make the speed to market quicker for investments as we see them coming along and allow us to be more nimble in creating ways to make money that we can then reinvest into our communities.

I don't know if I've directly answered your question. I think this has been a great first step. The modernization of the legislation started five months ago and I think we're on a journey here. It's an iterative process and, again, we appreciate your support.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: I appreciate that. We all look forward to continuing to work with you along that journey.

I'll pivot now in my remaining time to Helen. Helen, thank you so much for your presentation. I really appreciated the presentation, including the facts and figures and some of the stories you shared as well.

My biggest priority in this budget was getting our CHEO 1Door4Care facility funded in Ottawa, which is going to really be a game-changer for mental health support for children across Ottawa by centralizing and reducing wait-lists for care. In the Waterloo region and the catchment area that you represent, I'm wondering if during the pandemic there have been any innovative lessons learned from some of the organizations that you partner with and that you guys have across the region on providing better mental health care across that region.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: I know here in Ottawa, there has been work on mobile mental health units and other things like that. I'm wondering, are there any lessons learned that would be good for us to know about from that region?

Ms. Helen Fishburn: Thank you so much, MPP Roberts, for the question. I know I am always very excited to talk about innovations, because we've had to turn on a dime in mental health and addictions. All of us across the entire province have had to turn on a dime in every sector, but certainly in mental health and addictions, we haven't historically used virtual care means, as one example. Of course, when the province was shut down last March, we had to shift on a dime to virtual care. We've done the best we can through that, but it has been very challenging, because people with complex needs, who are really struggling and in crisis—virtual care will only take you so far. So once PPE became available, we shifted back to in-person—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): I apologize to cut you off. The time has come up. We'll come back to you in the second round.

We'll go to the opposition now. MPP Fife.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you, Chair. Can you hear me?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thanks. Thank you to all the presenters today. I really appreciated your feedback on Bill 269.

Helen, I'm just going to address some of the comments that you had made. I'm trying to get the government to see how mental health impacts all elements of life in Ontario, but particularly the economy, because we are obviously in a very dire spot right now, especially with this latest lockdown.

Reports suggest that parents who miss work to help children suffering from anxiety cost the Ontario economy \$421 million a year. This was back in 2019. Given the data that you shared with us today, can you help all members of the committee understand the impact, that for every dollar that we do invest in mental health, this will have a proactive and positive impact on the economy, well-being and the health care system as a whole?

Ms. Helen Fishburn: You're absolutely right, MPP Fife. Thank you so much for the question. I don't think we can even begin to understand the financial impact that mental health plays in terms of—I mean, we had that before COVID-19, but since COVID-19, it's been astronomical. People have lost jobs, so that impacts their mental health. But then, conversely, poor mental health because of the pandemic then impacts people's ability to do their job. There have been very high levels of short-term disability, long-term disability claims. There is what's called presenteeism and absenteeism. So, absenteeism is that you can't be at work; presenteeism is you're at work, but you can't function.

Then, of course, there are those families that have to be at home and juggle things because their kids are at home. The levels of trauma that creates for families, and women especially, who bear the brunt of being professional

jugglers through the pandemic—we're seeing increased rates of depression, isolation and addiction relating to young mothers who are juggling and are really at that breaking point.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Well, thank you for raising the opioids. I know that all of us—all MPPs who are on this committee and all MPPs who sit in the Legislature—have really struggled with the opioid crisis, and it's taken a back seat. I know that there are MPPs who are on the call right now who are trying to get those resources in their communities. The number of deaths due to opioid overdoses is astounding. It's a point of shame, I think. The addictions piece holds even more stigma than mental health as a whole.

Helen, can you talk about the importance of early intervention and access to those resources to prevent, obviously, overdosing, but then the secondary and third costs to the health care system?

Ms. Helen Fishburn: Absolutely. In Ontario, we have a death by opioid overdose every 10 hours. Some areas are certainly harder hit than others, but every 10 hours, we are losing someone to opioid death. It's been staggering.

We continue to struggle with stigma in mental health and addictions. We've come a long way over the last year or two years. I will say, if there's any silver lining in the pandemic, it is that we have an increase in compassion and empathy for people—for the first time in their lives, many people have experienced increased levels of anxiety, significant stress and worry. There is now increased compassion and empathy for what that actually means for other people who are struggling.

Having said that, we know that there are people who will not come forward and don't get their needs met, and a lot of those people are particularly struggling with addictions. Addictions are really very much a silent killer for people. We see loss of families, loss of employment, car accidents and, of course, a lot of physical health issues related to addictions. So that is something that we continue to really struggle with. Actually, one of our longest waiting lists in the system is addictions care, because addictions is really underfunded within the mental health envelope.

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The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you so much. I just want to thank you for your leadership on this file, Helen. We only met on Monday or Tuesday, and here you are at committee on Friday, so thank you so much for being here.

I do want to give the credit unions an opportunity to talk about going forward, because the potential of the credit unions has not been realized in this budget. As you said, it's a good first step. I'm going to probably run out of time, but please think about what you want to tell this committee on a go-forward basis, because credit unions have really anchored communities across Ontario during these very challenging times. Particularly for businesses, they stepped up, because they are community members. On a go-forward basis, I think that there's room to improve, for sure.

How much time do we have, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Oh, well then, you have time. Nick or Louis, please go ahead.

Mr. Nick Best: I'm happy to start. To follow on what Louis started on, some of the things that are being changed are:

There's no longer an investment limit cap, so credit unions can make much more substantial investments in community organizations and fintechs. We were capped at 40%. We don't have to be capped at that.

Subsidiary restrictions are reduced, so we can actually go into things that aren't directly related to financial services, that are more community driven.

And insurance is liberalized, which allows us to assist the member in a more wholesale way.

These are all things that, over time, will become more prevalent. Louis, do you want to keep going?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Go ahead, Louis.

Mr. Louis Grilli: On the insurance piece—I'll just capture that thread quickly—FirstOntario has created a subsidiary called FirstOntario Insurance Brokers. It has allowed us, prior to these changes, to do some limited business in the insurance space with our membership. The way that insurance works within Ontario is, as a grouping, you can get better rates. I think the affordability of insurance is a big financial burden and will continue to be for Ontarians. I do believe that this liberalization to allow us to potentially distribute via our branching network will allow for other credit unions that may not be of the size and scale of ours to get into this business. I think that's a great thing for Ontarians.

Ms. Catherine Fife: It definitely is. The insurance sector has not necessarily been a very good friend during this pandemic, particularly to commercial businesses. We've seen increases of 30% and denial of coverage. So there's definitely room for the credit unions to move into that space in a very progressive manner. Thank you very much for both being here today.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): We'll move to the independent members. MPP Hunter?

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Chair, can you hear me?

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: Yes, we can.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Sorry, I got a little notice here on my screen.

I want to thank all three presenters. Thank you so much for the important work that you are doing on behalf of your customers and your members.

I want to do my first round on the skills and training area. I believe it is a very important area in our economic recovery for the province. I was actually pleased to see in the budget that there was a credit being offered for skills retraining but a bit disappointed that it's only one year. I believe it's going to be needed much more substantially and for longer periods of time. It's also being done in a way that people have to come up with tuition in advance and then they are reimbursed in their tax a year or more later. A lot of people who are economically impacted by this pandemic are on the lower-income side of things and may not be able to have that type of ability to pay

thousands of dollars in tuition fees upfront and then wait a year to see that come back in the form of tax credits.

I wanted to hear, perhaps from you, Ian, in terms of the growing need in this area for skilled individuals at a time when we need to actually point people in those growth areas—particularly, for instance, women have been very, very strongly affected by the pandemic, and jobs in the skilled trades are well-paying jobs, very good jobs and in-demand jobs.

So, if you can just start your response around the need for greater investments in the skilled areas for key groups and what we should be seeing happen from the government in the economic recovery.

Mr. Ian Howcroft: Sure. Thanks very much, MPP Hunter. We are very interested in promoting skilled trade opportunities and technology careers to all young people, but we know we are seriously underrepresented in certain areas. You mentioned girls and young women. I think 4% to 5% of the skilled trades are held by girls and young women, so we need to do a better job in reaching out to them and engaging them and providing them with the assistance that they need to be able to participate.

We have programs targeted at young women, we have targeted programs for First Nations and, as I said in my comments, we are doing more with regard to the BIPOC community and have hired somebody to deal with diversity and inclusivity. I talked about the three Cs: co-operation, collaboration and coordination. How can we be that conduit to help people along the pathway, to move forward, to find out the information they need, not just about the career itself but what other services—what other assistance do they need to be able to successfully pursue a career in skill trades and technology? What OSAP or Canada student loans and grants are available for them to move forward?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Ian Howcroft: How can we do more of that?

We're trying to engage more in the business community. When we have our regular competition—it's all virtual this year, but we're still going to move forward with some of our scholarships and awards, because we think that's an important part of what we do. It's small in the greater scheme of things, but it's something that we want to be seen as doing to support people who want to take a step forward in that.

We were also pleased with the apprenticeship tax credit and think there's more that can be done at both the federal and provincial levels as we go forward. I've been very encouraged with some of the activities that we've been able to lead and some of the work in which we've been able to partner with the Ontario government, the federal government and others. That's going to allow us to have even more success. Once we are dealing with the recovery stage, we can deal with the health and safety, but when we move forward, we need more skilled people.

The last thing I'll just say, before I turn it over to Paul, is the demographics: We're going to see more people leaving the skilled trades and technology careers because it's an aging community. We have to get more young people aware of what it is that we're doing—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. Sorry to cut you off. The time has come up.

We'll go to the opposition side now for their second round. MPP Arthur.

Mr. Ian Arthur: Good afternoon. I'm actually going to continue with Ian and Skills Ontario. You identified the need to get more women and BIPOC community members into the trades. One of the key factors in allowing women to access the workforce is affordable child care. We have a massive skilled labour shortfall in Ontario. It's decades-long in terms of addressing it. There are no silver bullets, but one of the most meaningful things that we could do, to actually allow more women to enter the trades, is to provide that affordable child care for them so that they can get into the workforce. We've seen the success of that in Quebec. We have years of data that would suggest that that child care program actually pays for itself in terms of the economic stimulus it provides and the economic growth that comes from having it.

Is Skills Ontario pushing for that sort of program, either provincially or affordable child care in any area, so that you can expand those programs for women accessing the trades?

Mr. Ian Howcroft: I'll start off and then I'll turn it over to Paul. Traditionally, we have not been involved in that area, but we're looking at what other work we should be doing with regard to the policy needed to promote skilled trades and these careers to young people. We did have a young women's conference recently; I think it was associated with International Women's Day. We had the focus of that conference on what the challenges and barriers that women face were in getting into the world of work and pursuing a skilled trade career. Child care was one of the issues that we were discussing in that.

So, we're looking at broadening our scope and our way of programs and work that we do in this area, but I have to say we're just getting started in that area. We haven't traditionally done that; we've been more the promoter of skilled trades and technology careers, but we're seeing our role and opportunities a little broader than that now. What else needs to be done that we can support, that we can assist with and that's going to allow more people to get involved in pursuing a skilled trade or technology career?

Paul, I'll turn it over to you.

Mr. Paul Clipsham: I'll just add that we've been hosting round tables with different issues, one of them around women in trades, and that has definitely been an issue that's raised, about the child care aspect.

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Mr. Ian Arthur: Good. I'm glad to hear that. I think that's fantastic. I think that broadened mandates or looking at other areas to move into—I think that's fantastic. Please keep me up to date on any of your efforts in that area, and I think MPP Fife would be very interested in following what you're doing there, and MPP Hunter as well.

I want to talk a little bit about the changing landscape of skilled trades. What is Skills Ontario actually doing to prepare, and how is the government and the budget—does it support preparing for the future skilled trades as well as

the current ones? What I'm actually thinking is, just this week, I had a meeting with a company looking to build the first 3D-printed affordable housing units with Habitat for Humanity in the Windsor area. We're about to need an entire new set of skilled trade labourers who have a different talent set than they did before. Is the government supporting initiatives like this? Is there funding available for that?

Mr. Ian Howcroft: We've been very pleased with the support we've gotten from the government. We started off as an organization to promote skilled trades, but that quickly expanded into skilled trades and technologies. Technology is an area in itself that we focus on, but also every skilled trade area is embracing new technology in the way they do things.

We've also looked at the programs that we offer and the engagement that we can provide, and technology is becoming more and more prevalent in that area. We've added contests to our competitions and our programming. We do 2D animation, 3D animation. We're doing coding contests and we're getting involved in cloud computing. There's a whole array of opportunities around there that the Ontario government has been supporting us on as we move forward, to make sure that young people are aware of what all these opportunities are, the whole array of skilled trades and technology careers out there.

There are 154 skilled trades out there, and then when you throw on the technology, there are enormous amounts of opportunities that we have to make sure people are aware of, because I think there still is a stigma around what people think of when they think of a skilled trade. It's changing, but unfortunately there's still that negative perception that it's a career for someone can't make it in academia, that it's a career for people who want to use their hands—which is true, but it's also a career for people who want to use their hands and their heads. You have to have math skills; you have to have a great deal of intelligence to be successful in the skilled trades. Technology is becoming more and more important, and that's a big part of what it is we're doing. We've seen great supports from the Ontario government in helping us move that forward.

Mr. Ian Arthur: I'm the proud holder of a second place robotics competition prize from Skills Ontario in high school.

Mr. Ian Howcroft: I'm very pleased to hear that. We'll be reaching out to you as an alumnus, then, shortly.

Mr. Ian Arthur: Okay. That sounds good. MPP Fife, do you have any last questions? No? Okay. Thank you so much.

Mr. Ian Howcroft: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): We'll go to the independent members for their second round.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Hi, Chair. Thank you very much. I really like that second prize, MPP Arthur.

I think it is actually so important to invest in young people, and these investments in their entrepreneurship, in their skills building are a really important part of shaping them into the future. I'd like to see more of that, frankly, for our young people—a 22% unemployment rate as a

result of this pandemic; very, very hard hit. In fact, you mentioned OSAP and the need for student financing and loans. The budget for that is quite underspent by hundreds of millions of dollars for the current year.

I would say to the groups on the call that we should be asking the government not to make the opportunity pass to invest in young people and to redirect those dollars, whether it's into their mental health and well-being or into their skills building—not in a delayed fashion, but actually this coming summer, so that our generation of young people are not permanently scarred by the effects of the pandemic, especially when all of those dollars went unspent because they simply weren't able to take advantage of the grants through the financial aid program and it's sort of sitting there in an unspent way. So I would say the resources are there.

I want to ask about mental health. It is an area that I see is very, very overwhelming for people along the full age spectrum, from youth, families, women and older adults as well. Helen, do you see the need for greater investments in that area so that we can really support people as we're emerging from COVID?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Ms. Helen Fishburn: Thank you, MPP Hunter; absolutely. It's a great question. Through our Everything Is Not Okay campaign, which is an advocacy campaign supported across Ontario, we're asking for a 3% base increase and a \$3.8-billion investment over 10 years. That's what we need for both infrastructure as well as more resources for services.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: I fully support that. I know that it was something that was committed to before, and I think that that needs to happen, given the state of the pandemic.

Just with the small amount of time I have left: I'm very much a supporter of credit unions. I'm very pleased to see the transformation that is still happening in the sector, and if you could speak to the need to support smaller businesses. I spoke to the Minister of Finance this morning about the need to extend the Ontario Small Business Support Grant. Giving people one week from a budget announcement to benefit from the second round I don't think is fair.

Can you talk about small businesses and how you can see the credit unions supporting them, especially with the new flexibilities that you've been given in Bill 229?

Mr. Nick Best: I'll go first, and Louis can jump in. The province's small business grant was good because it came without conditions. The federal programs now came on with conditions, and we supported this. Ultimately, our members are telling us they don't want more debt, so this is good on that front.

It's no real secret that there's a big gap in terms of small business lending from all financial institutions and that there's a bit of a miscalibration between the risk and then the cost that we can actually charge to keep it profitable. There's no single answer to this, but obviously the better we can diversify our balance sheets, the better we can handle the risk because we're not so dependent on one form of revenue.

Louis?

Mr. Louis Grilli: I don't have much to add, Nick. I agree with everything you've said. There are certainly—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): I apologize to cut you off. The time has come up. I will move to the government side. MPP Cho.

Mr. Stan Cho: Good morning to all presenters. Thanks for being here.

I'll quickly say, MPP Arthur, my Korean parents would want to know why second place, not first place, but that's a topic for another day.

I appreciate everybody presenting today. I'll start my questions with the credit unions, and if I have enough time, I'll move to Skills Ontario. It's nice to see you, Louis and Nick. I'm very excited that we've been able to create a good foundation from which to move forward. I think we can all agree that 26 years to update the Credit Unions and Caisses Populaires Act from 1994 was way too long, so I'm looking forward to continuing to collaborate with you.

You know, Louis, topics like credit risk, liquidity, revenue wheel are all crucially important, of course, for the Financial Services Regulatory Authority of Ontario. But for the people watching at home, I want to dig into this—maybe Nick as well. What does that actually mean for these communities? I've visited dozens of credit unions together with you, Nick, and we've gone to more rural communities outside of Toronto.

So, let's pick on fintech, for example. Most people don't really know what that means for a small business. When we say "expanded revenue wheels," and that's incredibly important, of course, for the bottom line for credit unions, but for me, more importantly, on the retail side of things, that means a lot more options for job creators out there. I'm wondering if you could tell us what that means on the ground.

Mr. Nick Best: Louis, please go ahead.

Mr. Louis Grilli: Okay. Thanks, Nick. Well, expanded revenue wheels and how they relate to fintechs—I think you need to zoom out a bit to open banking, and "open banking" is basically a term that is going to revolutionize the way that banking is done within Canada. It's already happened in the UK and Australia. Really, when boiled down to its essence, it means that financial institutions no longer own the data. The data of our members' transactional histories needs to be freely shared, and fintechs need to, through what's called secure APIs, access platform interfaces, be able to tie into our banking system to provide innovative ways of delivering financial services.

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So, I think that's one way where you're going to see fintechs quickly impacting and changing quickly the way that individuals all across this province interact with their money, and credit unions need to be able to make the money through the diversified revenue wheel to invest in the technologies, which are very, very expensive, to make sure that we keep pace with the changing regulatory environment. I think that that's the biggest piece, the technological change and the way that it's eroding the way we've traditionally done business, which is, "I know you, Mrs. Smith. I will give you that loan because you've been in this community for decades," and that sort of thing.

We, as credit unions, want to continue to thrive and exist in this new Ontario, and we want to be able to bring the best products and services that we can for Ontarians throughout this province. That's not just in the major centres; that's way up north, way down south, and places that some of the big banks are pulling out of. We still want to maintain a presence. That presence may be smaller, and it may be a smaller retail footprint augmented by increased technological capabilities.

I hope that has answered your question, Mr. MPP, and, again, we do appreciate all of the government support that has been ongoing over the past couple of years in this regard.

Mr. Stan Cho: Thanks, Louis. It does. What that says to me is that it's clear—and I've seen this first-hand from a couple years ago when Nick, you and I went to some of the more rural areas and visited some credit unions. These are sophisticated financial institutions and they should be able to operate as such.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Stan Cho: I was shocked, speaking to some of these community credit unions, when they told me that they still had to snail-mail out material notices for changes to people's accounts because we had some pretty prescriptive regulations from the Credit Unions and Caisses Populaires Act, 1994, which said you have to mail notices to your members.

Nick, maybe you can tell me what principles-based regulation is going to do for these job creators in rural communities.

Mr. Nick Best: Absolutely. Thank you, Stan. I'll just make two really quick points. The first one is I would love to give credit where credit is due. FSRA is advanced on a lot of things, including virtual AGMs and a lot of things like that compared to other provinces, so we've already made—having a new, better resource regulator has already proven dividends in this COVID environment.

In terms of what it actually means to people on the ground, if a credit union can come in and buy the retirement home for the Ukrainian community and then run it as an investor, that is something that we can do. We can bring not just our money—we're an extra source of capital there—we can actually put in our capacity to actually run and organize something.

Then, in terms of rural delivery, there are a lot of studies out there that show that where you actually really lose out when a rural branch closes is on the commercial side, because that's where you lose the expertise and the rates, and this is what we're trying to offer.

I'm sorry, I forget the last point of your question.

Mr. Stan Cho: How does principles-based regulation affect the job creators—

Mr. Nick Best: I'm sorry. I have a great answer for this one. Principles-based basically just changes the conversation with our regulator in that, right now, our regulator has a set of rules and they say that you cannot exceed this rule. Principles-based allows for the regulator to judge every proposal to get to yes. So, if you have an investment right now—if you want to buy 50% of an insurance company in

Ontario, you can't; you are capped at 40%. In principles-based, you can go and ask your regulator, saying, "We want to buy 70% of this. Do you think it's safe?" And the regulator will go look at it and say, "Yes, we think you have the capacity to do this internally. Therefore, we are going to approve it, and therefore you can do that."

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Nick Best: That means, therefore, there's another person offering insurance, which means that there's a downward pressure on prices for the consumer—more choices, pressure, options across the board. That's what principles-based is at its core: You remove the no and you get to a point where it's to get to yes, with regulatory discretion, and the regulator is given bigger tools to penalize you if you're not acting in the best interests of your members and your community.

Mr. Stan Cho: That makes a lot of sense. Very quickly, to wrap up, using my original example, that just means you communicate with members on material facts instead of having to send prescriptive mail, for example. It's that idea that we'll get the job done without telling you exactly the process of how to do it, while protecting also.

Thank you very much. I didn't get to my other questions, but I appreciate the time of all panellists.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): That concludes our time. Thank you to all three presenters for appearing before the committee and for your presentations.

This is all our business for this morning. This committee stands in recess until 1 p.m.

The committee recessed from 1155 to 1300.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Good afternoon and welcome back. We're continuing public hearings on Bill 269, An Act to implement Budget measures and to enact and amend various statutes.

As a reminder, each presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation. After we have heard from all three presenters, the remaining 39 minutes of the time slot are for questions from members of the committee. This time for questions will be divided into two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the government members, two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the official opposition members, and two rounds of four and a half minutes for the independent members.

MUNICIPALITY OF SIOUX LOOKOUT

CITY OF WINDSOR

GREATER KITCHENER WATERLOO CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): We'll move to our next group of presenters.

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): All right, we don't have the first presenter right now, so we'll start with the municipality of Sioux Lookout. If you could please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation.

Mr. Doug Lawrance: Good afternoon. My name is Doug Lawrance, mayor of Sioux Lookout. Thank you for the opportunity to present. I'd like to take this time to recognize committee member Sol Mamakwa, MPP for our provincial riding of Kiiwetinoong. Sol, it's nice to see you.

It's said that politicians must develop thick skins. Perhaps we may also need to develop thick skulls. Repeatedly advocating for the same issues seems like banging our heads against a brick wall. But walls sometimes do come down, so today I'm going to cover three topics related to the provincial budget and commitments: (1) mental health and addictions challenges; (2) support for small businesses, including the tourism sector; and (3) long-term care.

First, mental health and addictions: Sioux Lookout is located in Treaty 3 on the traditional territory of the Lac Seul First Nation. Sioux Lookout is a service hub for 30 First Nations, many of which are fly-in access only located in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation. The population in these northern communities, by almost any measure of social determinants of health, is the most marginalized population in Ontario.

In repeated formal submissions and delegations to the province of Ontario over the past six years, we have provided the facts, the data and the stories which support the desperate need for facilities and programs to respond to the mental health and addictions challenges facing the people in our region and our municipality. Over the past year, we have worked with the Kenora District Services Board, the Sioux Lookout Friendship Accord, the Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority and the Sioux Lookout Meno Ya Win Health Centre to prepare a business case for a detox addictions treatment centre and associated supportive housing in Sioux Lookout. This was presented to Minister Tibollo earlier this year in time for inclusion in the budget.

The current course of action—which is provincial inaction—forces our municipality to spend a burdensome share of our resources on policing costs. Essentially, we are trying to address the provincial responsibilities of mental health and addictions through municipal policing, which leads to the judicial system, incarceration, release, and repeat and repeat and repeat. This is not working and is rather like banging our head against a brick wall. But in this case, there is ample proof that this wall, the wall of addictions, will never come down using this methodology. We need provincial engagement and resources.

I would now like to address the provincial commitment to provide COVID-related support to the small business sector. I'm going to read some representative samples of comments we have received from a survey of 25 tourist outfitters operating in the Sioux Lookout region, all small businesses:

(1) "Bills are adding up. They are slowly sinking us."

(2) "It is sad that the federal and provincial government have not figured out assistance programs are not being tailored to the smaller operator. I do not qualify for anything."

(3) "To survive this season, we will spend everything we have in our accounts. If we don't have our customers,

we will be closed. Opening to a handful of Canadian customers is not viable. We cannot afford to pay ourselves or our staff.”

(4) “We need the border to be open, the CEWS program wage subsidy to be extended throughout the summer season to October and grants to cover our fixed costs based on 2019 revenues.”

(5) “The support we need: defer property taxes, special funding for new businesses that started at the end of the 2019 season and 2020 was their first season, lower hydro rates, free advertising for tourism operators to promote the area.”

(6) “As it appears the border is unlikely to open for a second straight year, we need recognition that this industry is valued. If it is valued, then there must be recognition that its customers and revenue cannot be replaced with Canadians. We are a highly affected sector.”

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Doug Lawrance: (7) “The province’s Ontario small business support program would have been a great help for our companies; \$10,000 to \$20,000 would have covered our insurance and paid our property taxes, for example. However, this program chooses April as the revenue comparative date. This meant our industry was shut out. Why choose April instead of May?”

This sector and our municipality need provincial engagement and resources to support these small tourist outfitter operators. They are in danger of failure.

Finally, I would like to address the provincial commitment to long-term care by reading a letter that was sent yesterday by the Sioux Lookout Meno Ya Win Health Centre to Minister Fullerton:

“As you know, SLMHC (Sioux Lookout Meno Ya Win Health Centre) received an allocation of 76 additional long-term-care beds by the previous Liberal government in 2018. The work to determine the operational funding has been stalled based on the assumption from the LTC Home Renewal Branch that the capital infrastructure of approximately \$43 million would be carried by the organization. This assumption involves an operational model that is unrealistic and unsustainable, placing the organization in a significant negative financial position year over year.

“The most recent Ministry of LTC announcements of approved LTC projects across the province have left our board and community feeling undervalued by the province and, quite literally, offended. The SLMHC submitted a pre-capital submission in 2014, supported by the North West LHIN, and received no acknowledgement. Subsequent to that submission, our application for LTC beds received at the LTC Home Renewal Branch in February 2018 saw the successful allocation of 76 additional beds. Although our organization has been advised that LTC Home Renewal Branch does not require a new capital submission, it is evident from your latest announcements that our project is not a priority for the current government. Therefore, our executive team has prepared a new capital funding submission to support the capital infrastructure required to healthy LTC beds.

“Our elders have waited far too long for this project to advance. We need your support to get the funding we require. We look forward to hearing from you,” signed Sadie Maxwell, SLMHC chair of the board, and Heather Lee, president and chief executive officer.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Doug Lawrance: Thank you.

In the 2018 election, the Conservatives committed to long-term-care beds in Sioux Lookout. In fact, I asked, why build only 100? Let’s build 200. We need their engagement on this and to follow through and build the 76 additional beds, which would create 96 beds in Sioux Lookout. That would make us very satisfied—not 200.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

Before we go to our next presenter, MPP Wai, can you please confirm your attendance?

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Yes, Chair. This is Daisy Wai. I am in Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

We’ll go to our next presenter, the Corporation of the City of Windsor. If you can please state your name for the record, and you can get right into your presentation.

Mr. Drew Dilkens: This is Drew Dilkens, mayor of the city of Windsor. Good afternoon, members of the committee. It’s certainly my pleasure to be invited to present to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs about Bill 269 and to support the recent Ontario budget framework.

As mayor of the city of Windsor, I’ve seen the impact that investments in small business and in the tourism sector specifically—have supported my community and the region during the course of the global pandemic. I understand that hundreds of small businesses in my community will be eligible for enhanced support grants, should the budget be approved and adopted, as proposed.

I would also be able to share with you the financial pressures that the pandemic has placed on the city’s balance sheet, social services delivery and, of course, loss of revenue from the operations at the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel, which is 50% owned by the city of Windsor, and our international local airport, of which we are the sole shareholder.

However, I really wanted to spend my time today outlining how a relatively small amount, \$9.8 million, as part of the \$64-billion Ministry of Health budget, is so important for my community.

When the Minister of Finance delivered the budget, he made clear reference to Windsor’s need for a new hospital system. In fact, we’ve been waiting for years for this simple planning grant to be provided. In 2017, then-Minister of Health Eric Hoskins announced with much fanfare that Windsor Regional Hospital would move to stage 2 and begin the functional plan and engineering designs associated with our new acute care hospital system. But the government of the day refused to fund the

functional plan, and we've been on hold ever since. For more than two years, our community has waited and waited, and we've advocated for the funds to be able to proceed to the next stage of design work needed to prepare for the new hospital in our region.

Last fall, KPMG released a report outlining the anticipated direct and indirect economic benefits associated with the construction of a new acute care hospital to serve Essex county and the city of Windsor. Significantly, the proposed development of our hospital system would generate more than 11,600 full-time jobs and contribute more than \$1.57 billion to Ontario's GDP alone.

In the longer term, the research notes that the hospital will be an important anchor that will unlock new commercial, employment and residential lands in the region. The impact of these adjacent investments wasn't even contemplated in the economic analysis, so the regional boost will certainly be much higher than projected by this study.

Building up our regional health care infrastructure will be a shot in the arm for local construction and building trades. It will create a modern health science complex that will be a new southwestern hub for health care and related medical services.

Among the benefits of the new hospital in Windsor-Essex, the new state-of-the-art facility will accommodate a greater number of acute-care beds than the current system capacity combined. The proposed 1.6-million-square-foot facility will provide ample room for expanded care as the region grows, and this single facility will exceed the size of the two current campuses combined by an additional 30%.

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Learning from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic response, at least 80% of the rooms will be private and single occupancy, limiting the spread of infection and increasing patient privacy. Each patient will have access to their own washroom and shower facilities, ensuring privacy and dignity, and it will mean an end to hallway medicine in Windsor-Essex. The new facility will support dedicated negative pressure isolation rooms with segregated airflow. Modern laboratory facilities will support rapid patient testing, and the larger facility can support additional surge-capacity beds.

Our existing health care facilities will be redeveloped to support outpatient mental health care. Redevelopment of the Windsor Regional Hospital's Ouellette Campus to accommodate an urgent care satellite emergency facility in order to provide a new model of emergency care to patients in the city of Windsor's downtown core will also occur. The facility will also include ambulatory day service, diagnostic imaging, primary care services, a laboratory and a pharmacy.

On behalf of the residents of the city of Windsor and Essex county, I urge swift passage of Bill 269 so that my community can finally get on with the next stage of planning and design work associated with our new hospital system.

Once again, I appreciate the opportunity to voice my support on behalf of the constituents of my community for

this budget, which has finally delivered on the health care needs of my community. We are extremely grateful. I look forward to further discussions and questions. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. Our next presenter is the Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce. Please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation.

Mr. Ian McLean: Good afternoon. It's Ian McLean, president and CEO of the Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce. Thank you, Chair Sandhu, for the opportunity to appear before the committee this afternoon. I'd like to recognize our MPP for Waterloo, MPP Fife, who works very closely with the greater KW chamber on any number of different fronts.

My name is Ian McLean. I'm president and CEO of the Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce, the second-largest chamber or board of trade in Ontario. I'm joined by my colleague Art Sinclair, vice-president of our organization, policy and advocacy. I always find when I come on these things, I try to bring someone who is smarter than I am with me, so I brought Art today.

Today is our third appearance before the committee. In June 2020, we appeared to discuss the impacts of COVID-19 on the Ontario tourism sector, followed by a presentation in August to discuss issues for all of small business across the region of Waterloo and throughout Ontario.

Our chamber does support the 2021 budget, as it contains vital measures to move our small business members through the current pandemic and prepare us for our recovery. We would ask members of the Legislature to ensure its passage.

Infrastructure development will provide construction-related jobs and greatly enhance our future capacity to move goods and people throughout Ontario. The region of Waterloo business community, in collaboration with local municipalities and post-secondary institutions, has been advancing the case for all-day, two-way GO service between Waterloo region and Toronto for many years. The announcement of a huge investment in this project is a game-changer, not only for Waterloo region and Toronto, but indeed for the provincial economy.

The announcement in the 2021 budget related to an increased GO train service through the innovation corridor is the most significant one to date by the Ontario government. The proposed improvements are necessary to increase capacity on the line for more trains to travel both ways between Toronto and Kitchener during morning and afternoon peak times.

Two-way, all-day GO has the potential to deliver over 170,000 new jobs, billions in new direct investment, a significant reduction in congestion-related greenhouse gases and a tangible improvement in the quality of life for residents right across southern Ontario. For years, congestion has been holding back the corridor, costing the GTA approximately \$6 billion in lost productivity annually. This is one of several steps we can take towards a more coordinated and connected regional rail system that can

serve new passenger needs and clear up congestion for years to come.

Today, we are a big step closer towards giving people the flexibility to live, work and raise a family anywhere along the innovation corridor. That is the kind of flexibility that today's top talent demands and that will help drive our economy forward.

Transit infrastructure is a catalyst for the kinds of innovation, in-person learning and research that Ontario's colleges and universities foster to fuel Ontario's economy. The investment demonstrates the confidence the Ontario government has in the innovation corridor as one of the province's key economic engines. This transformative project will ensure that the economic benefits accrued to this region can be shared with the rest of the province. So thank you to the Premier, the Minister of Transportation, Minister Surma, Metrolinx staff and the CEO Phil Verster for making this happen.

Another significant investment which has provincial and federal pre-budget priority for our organization is rural broadband. Our chamber includes hundreds of members within the boundaries of Waterloo region and beyond who are significantly disadvantaged by Internet access that does not allow them to connect with their clients across the globe. The additional \$2.8 billion proposed for this year in rural infrastructure is an important investment in our current and future levels of economic productivity.

The budget proposes doubling the Ontario small business grant for a total investment of \$3.4 billion to support approximately 120,000 small businesses. While previous assistance is highly beneficial to those who received it, we are concerned with the applicants who have not received any financial support. In particular, businesses who have commenced operations over the last two years have generally been unsuccessful, as comparisons of sales to determine revenue declines have been unsuccessful. This has been an unfortunate issue with federal business emergency programs as well.

Small businesses are facing unprecedented cash flow challenges, forcing many to close and others to restructure. We are generally supportive of the proposed expansion of the program—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Ian McLean: —but we do know that there are thousands of businesses who are not captured on this, so our call, particularly with the latest lockdown, is to expand the eligibility of this program and put additional resources to support the small business sector.

Finally, the provincial tourism sector has been particularly impacted by COVID-19. The tourism and hospitality small business support grant and the tourism recovery program will help tourism operators and attractions that have historically provided employment with costs related to restructuring, safe opening, marketing and partnership development.

In summary, we do hope that the Legislature will pass Bill 269 to provide the necessary supports for Ontario business to proceed in a fast manner.

Finally, the last comment I would make is, as we reopen after the lockdown, we are going to need new tools for

business and communities to safely reopen and stay open. An enhanced mandate for medical-grade masks in the workplace is absolutely essential. Quebec has just done it; Ontario needs to do it.

Rapid screening for business: We've just launched a pilot program here in the region of Waterloo. Businesses are thirsting to have that self-administered screening in the workplace, and it needs to be enhanced and rolled out.

And finally, vaccinations: We know that's the end goal of being able to fully reopen the economy. Ramping up vaccinations is absolutely essential, because we cannot do the same things that we've done thus far and expect a different result.

Whether it's using these rapid screening tests or medical-grade masks from the likes of InkSmith or Swenco or Eclipse Automation here in the region of Waterloo, medical-grade masks—that mandate needs to come from the province so that everyone knows that's what we need to do to contain the spread. Thank you very much.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. We'll start with the questions now. We'll start the first round of questions with the independent members. MPP Hunter.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Thanks so much to all of today's presenters and for the work that you are doing on behalf of your members.

I want to pick up, Ian, where you just finished here, on the question of medical-grade masks in the workplace. Something that we've been repeatedly fighting for is for the province to support small businesses in particular with paid sick leave and also to have paid vaccination leave so that workers can get vaccinated and be protected from the virus. Adding PPE as part of worker protection, I think, is definitely a smart approach, because at the end of the day, and I'm sure the chamber—we've recently met with the OCC as well. There is not an economic recovery while we have a health crisis.

We're now in our stay-at-home emergency orders again, just as we were a year ago, because of a third wave. Over 4,000 people testing positive was reported yesterday. So, if you could just speak to the importance of PPE in the workplace. One of the largest sources of transmission right now is in workplaces, so I'm really thrilled to hear and to see the chamber recognizing this and wanting to do something.

1320

Mr. Ian McLean: Thank you for the question. I would say the two things that we know, before vaccinations can make a difference—whether it's in Mayor Dilken's community; whether it's the north, for our other colleagues; or in southwestern Ontario—that people can actually do themselves, whether it's a small business owner or an individual, is wear a medical-grade mask. A cloth mask that people wear has somewhere between 8% to 12% effectiveness. A medical-grade mask like the one here from Eclipse Automation has almost 60% efficiency. So this small thing of wearing this medical-grade mask can make a huge difference in the workplace and in the community.

We're calling on and saying the province needs to go that step further and say these variants are so much more transmissible—and business will want to do that. They need to be given that direction. We're going to work with the business community to provide them to small businesses here in the community.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Mr. Ian McLean: The other part is rapid screening. Remember that most of the spread is coming from asymptomatic carriers. When they're in the workplace, they don't know they're sick. Rapid screening: We started this yesterday; we had 3,200 of these kits. We have over 250 businesses that have already picked them up. We are now up to 12,000 of these testing kits in the region of Waterloo being used by business. That screening allows us to identify who may have the virus before they start spreading it.

I guess the answer to your question is PPE and screening are the things that we need to do now that can help business safely reopen and stay open—vaccinations and ramping that up, absolutely, as well. But those are things that businesses can actually do and individuals can do to keep themselves, their employees, their customers and their families safe.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Perhaps the provincial government can renew the PPE grant support to those businesses so that they can—part of our pandemic response is to give individuals the protections that they need. Having that medical-grade mask will help to do that right away for some of those essential workers who have to go in to work. Hopefully, we can support you on that call and to support those businesses in getting provincial support to make those purchases from Ontario manufacturers, whether it's in Waterloo or other parts of the province. Thank you so much.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Now we'll go to the government side for the first round. MPP Wai?

Mrs. Daisy Wai: I am thankful for our three presenters, especially with your comments about, with this budget, what we have been doing for the small businesses and what we have—especially for Windsor, having that hospital and the transportation that we are doing. I'm happy to hear that.

Just now, when we were talking about rapid testing, yes, our government has been promoting rapid testing as well. There is a lot of rapid testing gear in stock. So please, I would support all businesses to start working on that.

As well, I'm sure you heard that we are producing N95 masks right in Ontario as well. Yes, using the higher-grade masks is something that we're also working towards.

I just have a quick question to Mr. McLean from the Kitchener Waterloo chamber of commerce, and I thank you for all of the work that you're doing for the small businesses. I'm happy that we are supporting them the best we can.

I also heard you talking about tourism. In the 2021 budget, Ontario is investing an additional \$400 million over the next three years in new initiatives to support the

tourism, hospitality and cultural sector. This builds on the previous announcement that we have made for \$225 million, bringing it to a total of more than \$625 million since the pandemic.

Will this targeted support help the businesses that are hardest hit by the pandemic, especially in the tourism and hospitality area?

Mr. Ian McLean: It will help. But ultimately, what I would come back to is, those financial supports help the businesses that were closed first and will open last. The best thing we can do is to contain the spread and be able to safely reopen and have consistency with them being able to reopen, even in a limited capacity. Right now, many of them will have no revenue whatsoever.

The cash flow supports are useful, but I come back to saying that the government needs to mandate, or at least give guidance, that medical-grade masks are the course of action. Quebec has done that. Ontario needs to do it, because if we can contain the spread, we can live with COVID until we get to full vaccination.

The other part is this rapid screening. Allowing those businesses as they reopen to have these self-administered rapid screening tests so that they can open their business and have confidence for themselves, their employees and their customers that they're on top of the COVID is essential.

The cash flow supports are important. I don't think you could possibly put enough money into it to deal with it because, as one of the members said, you can't have a healthy economy until you have a healthy population and a healthy province. We've got to get that health piece done, and the part that business can support more than anything, beyond the financial support, is rapid screening and the masking.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you, Mr. McLean. I have already mentioned that this is the direction that we're working towards and we totally agree with that. There are some rapid test kits that you can access as well. There are a number of them in stock. Please use them.

Mr. Chair, how much time do we still have?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes and 30 seconds.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: I see. Does MPP Ghamari want to ask any other questions, please?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Ghamari?

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: I have questions for this round and next round, so I'm happy to follow up.

Mr. McLean, just to follow up on your comments regarding [*inaudible*], I'm just looking here at the government of Ontario COVID website. If I just read through this, it says: "Using masks as personal protective equipment ... Correct"—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Sorry, how many minutes?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes, sorry.

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Two minutes. Okay.

"Correct use of PPE can help prevent some exposures, but it should not take the place of other control measures...."

Surgical or procedure masks worn as part of PPE also work as source control and would normally meet any requirements for face coverings.”

We’ve also provided a link on that website to the Ontario Together website where you can actually order these PPEs that are acceptable for the workplace, including medical supplies, so you can find medical and surgical masks on the Ontario Together website.

I just wanted to know, Mr. McLean, if you are actually aware of this website and if you have distributed the information on this website to your colleagues and within your network, so that they can also access the PPE that’s available from the Ontario Together website.

Mr. Ian McLean: Thank you for the question. Let me just say, I certainly have shared any information around masks and the ability to get PPE. That wasn’t available a year ago. It is now. Many of the businesses that are providing those medical-grade masks are actually producing them right here in Waterloo region. InkSmith, Swenco, Eclipse Automation are doing N95s and medical-grade masks. So we certainly—

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Thank you—

Mr. Ian McLean: The other part is Supply+Protect. It is a website that’s produced here that is consolidating all of the PPE providers right here in Waterloo—

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Mr. McLean, sorry to interrupt. My time is running short. But thank you. I think that what you just said is an excellent [*inaudible*] of the financial commitment that our government has put into this province and into small businesses in the past year in order to get us to a place where we can have made-in-Ontario PPE so that we are never—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: —put in this position again. I do want to thank you for that, because I think that is a testament to the investment that our government and the Premier have made. I do remember a year ago when this happened we were all—I think the entire world was unprepared. But I think that our government has acted swiftly.

One thing that really resonated with me and I think with a lot of Ontarians is that the Premier never wants Ontario to be in a position ever again where we have to rely on other provinces or other countries. I’m glad to see that a lot of the medical-grade PPE that you were referencing is being produced right in that area. I think that’s excellent.

I think my time is almost out, Mr. Chair, so I’m going to leave the rest of my questions for the next round. Thank you.

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The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): We’ll now move to the opposition side for their first round. Who would like to go first? MPP Mamakwa.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you, everyone, for the presentations. I’m going to do a very quick question to Doug Lawrance, mayor of Sioux Lookout. It’s great to see you here. I know you’ve been here a number of times, trying to address the issues that you brought forth today, when we talk about mental health and addictions and even

the small businesses that are affected in the Sioux Lookout area—not only that; in northwestern Ontario—when we talk about tourist camps and all that, even the issue of the long-term care. I know in long-term care we talk about the number of deaths that happened across Ontario, of the residents at the long-term-care facilities across Ontario. As you know, in the riding of Kiiwetinoong, we have long-term water-boil advisories and we have 20 long-term-care beds in Sioux Lookout region.

I’m wondering if you can elaborate on some of the mental health and addictions issues. I know from working with you and talking to you that we had 10 deaths in 2018 of people without homes in Sioux Lookout. What are the resources that we need to be able to try and address this issue?

Mr. Doug Lawrance: Thank you, MPP Mamakwa. Yes, and Sioux Lookout is the hub of the north for about 30,000 people coming largely from the remote First Nations. The population of Sioux Lookout is about 50% Indigenous as well. It’s a population that has been severely adversely affected by historical wrongs, such as colonialism, the residential school system and the Sixties Scoop, and suffers disproportionately from the rest of Canada from mental health and addictions issues as a result. Many of those become focused in Sioux Lookout among people who have come here seeking refuge from homelessness and other such things.

Police calls for service in our community: In a community of 5,000, we have over 10,000 calls for service. That’s two for every man, woman, child and baby in the community. We have 19 cells and they are occupied about 90%, better than most hotels. That’s because they are the detox centre and they are the addictions centre. We have nothing to treat this scourge of mental health and addictions.

The statistics have been presented to the province umpteen times. We’ve presented a business case to Minister Michael Tibollo, in partnership with the Kenora District Services Board, the Sioux Lookout Meno Ya Win Health Centre, the Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority and the Sioux Lookout Friendship Accord, which is an accord of the four proximate First Nations to Sioux Lookout and the municipality itself. We are told that it’s not being included, once again, in this year’s budget. We desperately need help for the people of this region.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you, Mayor. I want to go back to your issue with the long-term-care facility. I know previous governments—even during the campaign in 2018, I know Premier Ford visited Sioux Lookout and he promised Sioux Lookout that they would have a long-term-care facility built, which is the 76 beds that were promised. I know there are a lot of announcements across Ontario which are in ridings of PC members, and sometimes I just feel that we’re not part of Ontario when they focus on their ridings.

I know the plan is there. The work has been done. We just need the resources to be able to do that. Can you explain a little bit the impact it would have on the northern communities?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Because once they get into a long-term-care facility, our elders leave their community and the fly-in communities, and they pretty much go home in a casket. Can you explain that a bit?

Mr. Doug Lawrance: Certainly. Thank you, Sol. Thirty years ago when our current 20-bed extended care facility was built, it was built and operated through the EldCap program, which no longer exists. That seems to be the hiccup: How do you fund this in the long term? That 20-bed facility at the time was built to service a population of around 5,000 to 6,000 in Sioux Lookout, Hudson and the approximate area.

Since that time, airstrips have developed, and airports in all the northern communities. The northern communities now use Sioux Lookout as a hub, so we service 30,000 people. We now have a long-term-care bed ratio of two thirds of a bed per 1,000. The provincial average is about six to seven beds per 1,000 population. We're one tenth the provincial average. It's desperate. People are being sent far away, from places like Big Trout Lake or Kingfisher Lake to Thunder Bay, for long-term care, where they have no family, no hope that their family can visit.

In Sioux Lookout itself, there are many Indigenous people. Most of the people in the north have family here. It would be a location where northern people could certainly come if they needed the long-term care. We also advocate for in-community resources to let people stay in their homes as long as possible. Everybody can't do that. Some will need long-term care.

We're grossly underserved here. We need the province and the ministry to move on this, get the funding sorted out for the old EldCap program, which no longer exists. It can be done, and it's being deferred and deferred. The letter from the Meno Ya Win health centre, signed by the Indigenous chair, Sadie Maxwell, and the chief executive officer is quite clear. It's quite short. All the information is at the province.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Doug Lawrance: They need to unplug this.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Going back to Mayor Lawrance: I know, again, that the other thing you talked about were the small businesses in the Sioux Lookout region. I know we're a very unique riding, rural and northwestern Ontario. Again, you spoke about property taxes. You spoke about free advertising, the insurance. How are the businesses coping with the response from the government right now?

Mr. Doug Lawrance: It's very difficult. I appeared before this committee in August of 2020 and subsequently sent a letter to the committee outlining how distinct these 25 operators are in Ontario and in northern Ontario. They rely completely on the American market. Geography, demography dictate this, but they have been successful for 40, 50 years as operators. COVID is wiping them out and the lack of designed assistance tailored to this unique—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): I apologize to cut you off. The time has come up for opposition.

We'll move to the government side now for the second round. MPP Ghamari, would you like to continue?

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: I'm sorry. Can you give me one moment?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes.

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: I can continue right now; my apologies.

Thank you. Sorry. I am used to the other committee where there are two rounds for independent members as well.

So, I just wanted to turn now to my next set of questions. I wanted to talk with Mayor Dilkens from the city of Windsor. I hope the weather there is nice and warm and sunny.

I just wanted to maybe get your feedback a little bit, because I did speak with Mr. McLean from Kitchener. How are things in Windsor with respect to PPE, for example? Have you heard anything from businesses? It's the same question I asked Mr. McLean. Are they aware of the Ontario Together website, and have they been accessing that? How involved do you feel the community is in being able to not just access the PPE, but also maybe even supply it?

Mr. Drew Dilkens: It's a good question. I don't think that there are any material issues on the ground here. I think people have responded to support one another quite well. I reflect back about a year ago, where times were really tough, and we did a community call asking for donations of PPE, because we were all running out in our respective communities. The pandemic was thrust upon us, and so the community responded very well then. Over time, over the past year, I think supplies have built up. I even think of one of our oldest employers in the community, that being Hiram Walker and Sons Ltd., and how they converted one of their bottling lines to start making hand sanitizer. That was so helpful at the time as well.

I'll be really honest with you: I haven't heard that as an issue. I think they're all dealing with the PPE supplies in their own right, and it's not been raised as a concern by a single person or business owner that I've spoken with in the last, say, six or eight months.

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Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Thank you very much for that. I appreciate that. My next question is again for Mayor Dilkens. The 2021 budget included funding for the stage 2 planning grant for the Windsor-Essex regional hospital. Could you share with us why that's important for the community in Windsor-Essex?

Mr. Drew Dilkens: Yes. Oh, my gosh, that is what we're most excited about, and we're so thankful to Premier Ford and the entire government for recognizing this important project for our region. We happen to have one of the oldest hospitals in all of Ontario in the city of Windsor, and so I think it's fair to say that COVID has certainly shown and stressed the fractures of every system, every family. It's put everything on high alert.

Down here, in the middle of a pandemic, it's fair to say that in this hospital there are still ward rooms where five

people share a room, the bathroom is down the hall and the shower is down the hall. During a pandemic, I think it's just enunciated the fact that that is not acceptable anymore, that there are probably hospitals in Cuba that have better facilities than this particular floor of rooms in the city of Windsor.

Having this money allows us to move forward. It's been a long time in the making, and we're super thankful to get this money in this round. We've done all the due diligence. Again, the last government came forward in 2017, took credit for saying we were moving, but never gave us any money to do it. So we've been in limbo since that time. Now we'll be able to move forward. It's a \$2-billion project. Before we even received this grant to move to phase 2, we've been collecting our 10% share as a city and as a county. We have to fund \$200 million of the cost of this \$2-billion project. We've been collecting our share since 2016. That's how committed we are. We wanted to show the government how committed we are to this project.

I can't tell you how excited people are down here. This means so much. Don't underestimate the value of \$9.8 million in a multi-hundred-billion-dollar budget. This is huge for Windsor-Essex. We're extremely grateful. It moves the needle, and we know we're on the way. We're thankful to you and all of the ministers, and Premier Ford especially who came down here in August of last year and said he was going to deliver this and act like an "800-pound gorilla" with—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Drew Dilkens: —and others to get it done—

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Thank you.

Mr. Drew Dilkens: —we're very thankful.

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Thank you so much, Mayor Dilkens. Before I move on to Mayor Lawrance, very quickly, would it be safe to say that you would give our performance as a government, when it comes to health care and infrastructure and support for business community, an A-plus?

Mr. Drew Dilkens: Yes. The hospital is huge, but let me say on the tourism front—I don't want to impede on your time so I'll speak quickly. The tourism grants are really important for a community like ours, which is a border town. When, last summer, everyone was able to breathe, we weren't able to breathe in the same way down here because the borders were [*inaudible*]. But these grants [*inaudible*] and although, of course, I agree with Ian that if you doubled it, it would still help. We recognize that that's not possible in this financial framework. This is super important and well appreciated and received by the people down here.

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Thank you so much, Mayor Dilkens.

Mayor Lawrance, just very quickly, with the time that I have left, thank you for joining us and for the discussions as well. My question for you, Mayor Lawrance, is: Ontario is providing municipalities with the flexibility to target property tax relief for small businesses, and that's through the adoption of the new optional small business property

subclass. The province would also consider matching these municipal property tax reductions in order to further provide support to small businesses. This measure would essentially provide as much as \$385 million in total provincial and municipal property tax relief by 2022-23. Could you maybe explain and describe a little bit how the municipality of Sioux Lookout would utilize the property tax relief to support small businesses as they recover from COVID-19?

Mr. Doug Lawrance: We're inviting all the small businesses—we have done. Our CAO and treasurer have been meeting with the—if you want to talk about the tourism sector, and that's what I want to talk about, the tourism sector. Some of them actually lie outside on the fringe of our municipality and do not pay property tax, so the property tax relief doesn't really mean much to them.

The tourism sector is in desperate need. This is unlike any other sector. The business has been completely taken away. Even if the border opened tomorrow, they would have a trickle of business from the United States this year. This business is booked generally one year ahead, six months ahead. It's planned ahead. It's all American, so this is two years you've cut the rug out from under them with the border closure. They have no income.

We're doing what we can through property tax relief. It doesn't apply to all. They desperately need a serious look at the considerations and the proposals that have been put forward by agencies such as the northern Ontario tourist operators. They have put proposals together that would help this sector, especially a sector that has slipped through the sieve of small business relief and tourism relief, one totally dependent on Americans, the seasonality of the business. It's two years of zero income. It's a desperate situation.

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Thank you for sharing that, Mayor Lawrance. There are a lot—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. I apologize. The time has come up.

We'll now go to the opposition side for their second round. MPP Fife.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you very much. Chair, can you hear me?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Okay, good.

First, I just want to acknowledge, Mayor Lawrance, that you've appeared before this committee every year I've been on the finance committee, which is now eight years. You've been a staunch supporter of your community, and so I want to thank you for that.

I also want to acknowledge that MPP Mamakwa talks about Sioux Lookout on a regular basis. He's a strong advocate for your community. We're going to try to do the best we can to get the government to listen to your concerns, because they're valid and they're backed up by evidence and research.

I'm going to go right now to the Kitchener Waterloo chamber. Thank you very much, Art and Ian, for being here. I want to first address this issue of PPE, because as a local agency, you have really filled a gap for businesses in

our region with the rapid testing and the supports that you've given to small businesses.

Ian, as you mentioned, there are a number of companies that really did step up when there wasn't an inventory of PPE across the province. They retooled and pivoted, just as the government had asked them to do. Canadian Shield is one of those companies, and of course, now they have all these products on their shelves that they can't get out into the sector, which is an issue around procurement. I think that's something that certainly needs to be addressed. It is not addressed by this budget or by the PPE grant, which is limited and time-specific.

I just wanted to give you an opportunity, Ian, to follow up on that gap and why it's so important for businesses, because obviously this is a really tough week for your members across the region.

Mr. Ian McLean: Thank you for the opportunity. I would echo that. The Ontario Together website is great, and it gives people an opportunity to know what's out there in the province of Ontario, but we've also developed a made-in-Waterloo solution here called supplyandprotect.ca, and that's aggregating for—especially for small businesses. They can get in smaller quantities the PPE that they need to safely run their business.

Access to PPE is not a problem now. It's not a problem because the private sector did step up. It's like we've all forgotten what it was like in March. Mayor Dilken mentioned this: We were out scrambling to find PPE for hospital workers a year ago. The private sector pivoted, and the government deserves some credit for incenting that, but the private sector primarily filled that domestic gap, because we didn't have domestic supply in the way we needed it. You talk about Canadian Shield, Eclipse Automation, Healthy Hands doing hand sanitizer and any number of different ones. There are 78 companies or more in Waterloo region that have gotten into that space.

Procurement is the issue that we face now. Many Ontario companies are finding that, because the way they do buying in the health care space is by large consortiums, they're back to buying overseas supply, which is a problem, because now domestic suppliers within striking distance on price are having problems with getting their supply out.

In any event, that does need to be fixed. It doesn't take away from the fact that this budget should be passed, in our opinion, because there are good things in this budget. But we have to deal with that procurement issue. If you truly want to have a domestic supply of PPE, then we need to make sure that it's there when we need it.

Frankly, we don't have to go back too far to understand that this is not going to be the last one. We need to have a domestic supply and a reliable PPE sector here in the province of Ontario. That can be done, because the private sector can fill it, but we need to refine and fix the procurement side of things.

The other thing I would say to you, Ms. Fife, and to the committee is the mask mandate that I'm talking about is not about whether you are giving masks to business. It's about saying to business, "Here's how you can keep yourself, your customers, your staff and the community safe."

What we know is that a medical-grade mask—and I showed you the Eclipse Automation. That's 60% effective at containing the spread. A cloth mask may be 8% to 10%. We need, as the province and as the region of Waterloo, to tell people that that's how they can make a difference: wearing a medical-grade mask to contain the spread.

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As far as the rapid testing, the province and the feds, Communitech—everyone has stepped up and said, "We've got millions of these. How do we use them now?" Because we've got to make sure that we can identify where people have COVID and get them into the health care system sooner and stop the spread. We started on Wednesday at 9 o'clock; 3,200 units went out in one hour. We're up to over 15,000. We've now had chambers from the Windsor area, from up north. Everyone wants to do this. The chamber network is ready to step up and do this in every community across the province. We've got a pilot now so we can get these tests out in every community, get them to small and medium-sized businesses, which can do nothing but help open the economy and help it stay open while we get vaccinations done.

Ms. Catherine Fife: And that's essentially what we're talking about: strategic investment in keeping people safe so that we can come out of this third wave, if you will. For us—I want to be straight with you—this budget missed the mark on that, and then also, there was a true lack of support for those businesses that are still excluded from the small business grant. I don't know if you or Art would like to mention this, but I was watching the news on Wednesday, and business owners who invested tens of thousands of dollars to reopen, only to find themselves shuttered once again—and those are the businesses that are still excluded from the small business grant.

I've said this to the Minister of Finance, that he has doubled down on a program that does not meet the needs of small businesses, who have borne the brunt of this lockdown. How important would it be—and I asked the finance minister this very question in the morning, if he would be amenable to expanding the criteria for small business grants to all those businesses. Please go ahead.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Ian McLean: I'll just say this: Our chamber and the network of chambers don't do politics; we do public policy. No one gets it right all the time, and we need to learn as we go, particularly in this pandemic. The SARS report from years ago gave us one lesson, which is the precautionary principle, which is, don't wait for 27 studies to do what you can see with your eyes makes a difference. That's why we talk about masking and screening.

I think, to be fair, this Premier and this government are listening, and they're open to input from business in a way it certainly wasn't in the previous administration, so give credit where credit is due, from our perspective. They're open to listening, to change.

One of the things that we have seen with this latest lockdown—I would agree that what we have been calling for is to expand the eligibility, because those it has helped, it has helped tremendously. If you are one of those

businesses that has gotten a small business grant, it has been a lifeline, and not having to reapply—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. The time has come up.

We'll now go to the independent members for their second round. MPP Hunter.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Thank you so much to both mayors for being here today. Mayor Lawrance, I want to start with you in terms of just how this budget completely missed the mark when it comes to a green recovery and the environment. I know that this is an important issue for people in the north. You talked about some of those land-based businesses offering wilderness tours and things like that. They rely on the environment, really, for the livelihood and the way people live in the north. I wondered if you could speak to the fact that we're really falling behind in Ontario when it comes to the environment and when it comes to protection and preservation.

Mr. Doug Lawrance: Respectfully, Ms. Hunter, that wasn't what I prepared for, but the tourist operators that operate here are certainly in the heart of our wilderness environment, operating as very unintrusive operators in the north. They employ many people. The spinoffs from this industry go to people who guide, to people who supply goods and services, to people who clean, to people who repair. The loss—it's 25 businesses who provide significant dollars to our property tax base, significant dollars to our economy.

In a community that is so dependent on the public sector—our largest employer is a provincial hospital, the Meno Ya Win Health Centre, which, if it were a paper mill, would give us a million and a half dollars in taxes. As a hospital, it gives us payment in lieu of about \$7,000.

We rely on the private sector, the small chunk that we do have, and tourism provides probably 5% of our total economic base here; of the private base, it probably provides something like 30%. We're losing it. They depend entirely on the American market. May, June and July are about 80% of their season, and they have a smaller season from August, September, October. It's gone; it's gone for two years. It's not like a restaurant, where you're shut down and then you can open up again, you shut down and open up: They're shut for two years. It's a serious loss. They need help and they need programs that work for them.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Thanks, Mayor Lawrance. One of the things that I asked the Minister of Finance this morning was to extend the small business grant so that businesses that have seen that 30% or more loss can benefit from those grants, which are going to automatically be renewed as part of this current budget. It's unfair for those businesses that have been left out.

I know I just have a small amount of time. I would like to ask Mayor Dilkens specifically about farm workers who are coming into the province and if you support, first of all, making sure that they are all universally tested and vaccinated when coming in, so we can avoid some of the real catastrophic events that happened last year in terms of the outbreaks in some of those locations, which affected

the nearby municipalities even being able to open in terms of the spread of COVID in the community.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Drew Dilkens: It's a good question. It's a real thorny issue. The situation played out in full technicolour down here and has never quite been brought under control. But you can't pinpoint or lay blame at any one level of government's feet here. It's a complex situation with 10,000 workers across 176 or 177 farms, folks coming in and out continually because we have more land under glass here—greenhouses—than anywhere else in the nation. So, it really is a continual supply of folks who are making their way in and out.

It's been thorny. It is getting better. The federal government just renewed their funding, \$18 million, to operate an isolation recovery centre in the city of Windsor for another year. So, they're taking that seriously, which we're very appreciative of, because the impact—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. I apologize to cut you off. That concludes our time for the presentation.

Thank you to all three presenters for coming and for your presentations.

Before we move along to our next group of presenters, I would like to do an attendance check. MPP Bouma, can you please confirm your attendance?

Mr. Will Bouma: Yes, Mr. Chair. I am Will Bouma and I am in my house in St. George, Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

ONTARIO LIFE LINE/ONTARIO LIFE LOAN
INTERMEDIARIES
ONTARIO SECONDARY SCHOOL
TEACHERS' FEDERATION
COMMUNITECH

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): All right. For the next group of presenters, we will start with Ontario Life Line and Ontario Life Loan Intermediaries. Please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation.

Mr. Daniel Kahan: My name is Daniel Kahan. I'm an actuary. I am the principal of Ontario Life Line, which I set up in 1993 with another actuary.

The last time I appeared before the standing committee was actually in normal times, back in 1995, when I had a private bill, Canadian Life Line—it was Pr39—to allow my Nova Scotia company to operate in Ontario and get an exemption from section 115 of the Ontario Insurance Act. At the time, my MPP was Monte Kwinter. I wasn't quite sure if he's still alive. I just checked that; I'm glad to see that he's still with us. He was born in 1931.

We had a private bill—it wasn't a private member's bill—and at that time, the committee felt, based on legal counsel, that it wasn't appropriate to have a private bill dealing with a public insurance matter. They were obviously trying to help people with AIDS. People needed

money because they were dying. Unfortunately, at the time, they hadn't discovered the PrEP pills, and these people had about one or two years to live. They needed the money today because it wasn't going to help them when they were dead.

1400

What I brought here with me—I think I've sent it in to the committee—is something which is an ad. It was Ron Barbaro who, at the time, was the president and CEO of Prudential Canada who came up with what they call the living benefits. It was quite revolutionary at the time, innovative. The idea was to help people, particularly, with AIDS but obviously other people who are terminally ill. I could just read this out very quickly. This is an ad from Prudential in the US. After he got this going in Canada, he went to the US and he became the president and CEO of Prudential in the US. The title of this ad is, "The Day the Rules for Life Insurance Were Broken."

I must say, Ron Barbaro is actually turning 90 this year. I don't know how many people I look up to in the life insurance industry, but certainly he would be one of, shall we say, my heroes. If we'd actually set up a hall of fame, he would certainly be there. He's the one, basically—now we have fintech. We were talking this morning that the credit unions were looking to do fintech. Everybody's into fintech and blockchains.

I go back—I just turned 67. I actually wanted to mention I'm a coronation year baby. I was born in England on December 31, 1953, which is the coronation year. I'm not sure if anybody mentioned today at the committee—I was busy at 9 o'clock watching English TV about Prince Philip. But I did find the statement from the Premier, Doug Ford, which says—I'd just like to read out the first paragraph: "I am saddened to hear about the passing of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. On behalf of all Ontarians, we send our deepest condolences to Her Majesty the Queen and the entire royal family." I'd obviously like to join in, and I'm sure everybody else on the committee is very sad. Prince Philip almost made 100. He was a great person, and it's sad that he passed on.

Unfortunately, this is Ontario Life Line—we call ourselves Life Line and now have got a new name, Ontario Life Loan Intermediaries—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Daniel Kahan: —to publicize the fact that we're offering loans as opposed to settlements.

Now, one of the reasons why I came on today is that I'm actually waiting for the standing committee to discuss private member's Bill 219, which had second reading last October. It was sponsored by Rudy Cuzzetto, the MPP for Mississauga. I did have some discussion with the Chair a few weeks ago. It seems that the standing committee has the right to decide when they bring these private members' bills forward. So I would say that it would be nice, especially now that we have COVID, which is, I expect, sort of a modern-day version of AIDS, and before there was a cure, it was basically, unfortunately, a death sentence. Now we have the vaccines, and especially the people in long-term care, all the seniors, are being

vaccinated, and hopefully these vaccines will work. But what I'm trying to do—and that's what I did back in 1995 with the Canadian Life Line bill, was to actually come up with something which could help people, seniors, get out of their own life insurance policies.

There was an article which I sent in, which was written by CARP in 50Plus Magazine back in 2004. It's entitled, "Use Your Life Insurance for Cash Now?" Unfortunately, with COVID, we have a load of seniors who—I'm a senior, and unfortunately, the federal government only gave us \$300 last year because of COVID. I believe seniors are affected by COVID, all the extra costs and whatever it is. I was able to get CERB from the federal government, because I am working and I have been affected by COVID, but seniors, we were very lucky to get \$300 just after Canada Day—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Daniel Kahan: —[inaudible] help seniors. Again, I'm trying to help seniors who actually own property, own a life insurance policy to be able to get money out of their life policy just like they can out of their house. Nobody has a problem with reverse mortgages. It can go on your house, you can go to the bank, go to CHIP—they have a bank—and you can borrow money against it. I'm looking to do the same thing.

A few years ago, I actually had a meeting with the Meridian Credit Union in Pickering. I would be very happy to work with the credit unions. This is something where I think we need to think outside the box. Insurance companies could think outside the box if they wanted to, but for whatever reason—maybe they don't want to think outside the box.

One of the other alternatives which I did present to Bob Rae back when he was NDP Premier in 1993 was to set up a non-profit. I think the NDP would like that idea—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. I apologize to cut you off. The time has come up.

We'll now move to our next presenter, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation. If you can please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation.

Mr. Harvey Bischof: Thanks, Chair. It's Harvey Bischof, president of OSSTF, an organization which represents almost 60,000 public high school teachers and education workers from JK to university. OSSTF/FEESO is very concerned with the government's plan to reduce pandemic funding in the education envelope from the reported \$1.6 billion in this school year to just \$59 million in 2021-22. A large portion of this funding was used to hire teachers and education workers to accommodate in-school and remote learning for students.

Further to this, the Ministry of Education has communicated to school boards that they must reduce to pre-COVID staffing levels for the next school year, and as a result, thousands of adults will be released from school boards—thousands of caring adults who provide service and support to a student body currently under enormous stress from the effects of the pandemic. This reduction will result in school boards being forced to attempt to provide

a full program to the system without certainty on what September looks like in terms of the pandemic.

Coupled with this, the government is signalling that boards will have to provide remote learning options for students permanently, which also has funding implications. The overall funding reductions amount to \$800 million removed from schools, comparing last year to the next school year, precisely at a time when students need more, not fewer, supports.

Students' mental health is currently fragile. They need, and will continue to need, additional supports. Learning gaps have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Those who have fallen behind will not simply catch up on their own. Inequities will need to be addressed. It is simply cruel to allow children who are already marginalized not to have an equal chance at success, and yet this government is looking to shortchange our children and Ontario's economic recovery by throttling education funding.

According to the government's three-year medium-term outlook, the course the government has set for education in both the K-to-12 system and in post-secondary education is one that will further weaken our public education system and our economy. A \$100-million nominal increase in funding in each year of the medium-term outlook through to the 2023-24 school year means cuts in real terms compared with inflation and enrolment growth. In other words, each child will receive fewer supports than a year ago and two years ago, and the system as a whole will be eroded.

Additional funding will be required to implement de-streaming in grade 9 effectively. The last time de-streaming was attempted, it failed our students because the government of the day underfunded the initiative, and the Harris government stopped the practice altogether rather than properly fund it. Class sizes were too large, resources were non-existent and professional development was thin at best.

School boards are signalling that they want to run de-streamed classes with high class sizes rather than the 22-to-1 outlined as ideal in the prevailing research on de-streaming, or even at 23-to-1, the provincial funding level. De-streaming can be done, and if it leads to a reduction in barriers for marginalized students, it should be done, but it will require investment, not an austerity budget. It will require that this government change its course on funding for education.

For the post-secondary system, the medium-term outlook in 2023-24 in the budget only returns the funding level to the same level of funding in existence in 2017-18. Most of the funding announcements in the budget for the post-secondary system are entirely earmarked for buildings and equipment, with very little directed to supporting students, other than some positive news on funding student mental health.

A major influence on students' mental health comes down to their ability to pay for their post-secondary education; however, the proposed changes to OSAP expand the eligibility of programs, and therefore students, while—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Harvey Bischof: —[inaudible] to the program. In other words, more students will be trying to access the same number of dollars.

In the last budget, tuition was frozen, but universities were not provided funding to make up for the shortfall. This time, the government is moving ahead with a performance-based funding scheme which is not made in Ontario, as advertised, but comes directly from the US. It's clear these funding models have not proven to increase accountability or student outcomes. We need to provide funding to universities for support staff positions at a stable level so that students have the supports they require to succeed.

1410

Education is an investment from which Ontario has benefitted for years, as evidenced in the Conference Board of Canada's report, released in 2019, entitled *The Economic Case for Investing in Education*. That research concluded that every dollar cut from education removes a further \$1.30 from the economy. The reverse is true: Every dollar invested in education creates an increase of \$1.30 in the economy. Investment in education reduces the costs for health care, welfare and the judicial system. This alone should prompt the government to rethink its plan of austerity budgets.

Three times now, we have watched this government take money in through tax revenue, only to dole it out in a way that provides no accountability. By the end of this third iteration of cash handouts to parents, \$1.8 billion in funding will have been distributed, some of which goes to the richest families in Ontario. This funding belongs in the province's publicly funded classrooms. This funding belongs to the two million students in Ontario who deserve schools that have adequate ventilation and so many other services and supports.

A \$16-billion repair backlog didn't get as much funding this year. These are dollars removed from the public education system that provides a 1.3 multiplier on every dollar invested, merely to buy a few votes.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Harvey Bischof: That's [inaudible], especially at a time when it has been demonstrably proven that smart government interventions are needed more than ever. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

We'll move to our next presenter, Communitech. If you can please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation as well.

Mr. Iain Klugman: My name is Iain Klugman, CEO of Communitech. Thank you so much for allowing me to appear before this committee today.

A few things I wanted to touch on as far as this budget bill goes, one of which is I wanted to thank the government for their commitment and leadership around two-way, all-day GO. I'm sure you heard from my colleague Ian McLean previously, but this kind of infrastructure is critical for us continuing to build out the innovation economy in southern Ontario.

I also wanted to note that Digital Main Street has been a partnership of both Communitech and a number of other organizations across the province. It has been wildly successful. I believe we're going to hit over 25,000 businesses, significantly helping them to build out their e-commerce capabilities, not just for the short-term, but for long-term competitiveness. Again, the province, in this budget, just added an additional investment to the Digital Main Street program.

I also wanted to mention the fact that the Ontario Autonomous Vehicle Innovation Network program is an important piece in ensuring that Ontario captures the capability and the opportunities that we have in the space around autonomous vehicles and the commitment to intellectual property and further investment in the Special Implementation Team on Intellectual Property. We support a strong focus on intellectual property. It is, in the new economy, the way that wealth is created and maintained within the jurisdiction.

I did want to also mention the fact that organizations like Communitech and partners across the province have really stepped up, serving a much broader set of clients than we ever had in our past, working with innovation businesses, advanced manufacturers, PPE suppliers and main street businesses as well, to add our unique innovation capability in helping them reinvent themselves, get on a digital journey and determine exactly how they can compete in the economy and the post-COVID economy.

We are continuing to see a wave of start-ups and scaling firms coming out of this pandemic. It's not unusual when there is a significant economic decline that we would see a wave of start-ups. It's very consistent with what we've seen in the past. Of course, access to capital remains a critical issue for them, both the early stage risk capital, angel investment and follow-on capital, to ensure that companies have an opportunity of growing in this province.

Finally, I did want to take an opportunity—I was recently appointed as a strategic adviser to the Canada Ministry of Health on workplace rapid testing, and for the role the provinces play in helping to liberate the millions of tests that exist in deregulating and making available the opportunity for self-swabbing and self-administration of the antigen-based rapid tests, which literally take about four minutes to complete.

The combination of vaccination, PPE and, of course, rapid testing on a large scale is necessary in order for us to cohabitate with COVID over the longer term. Since January, we've seen increased rollout of this across many sectors. In partnership with the province and the feds, on Monday we're going to be announcing a very grassroots, local initiative that focuses on getting these test kits into the hands of every worker—from Linamar down to the Uber driver to the five-person roofing company—so that we can help to make a significant difference as far as shutting down the transmission of COVID.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you.

Before we go to the questions, I would like to do an attendance check. MPP Oosterhoff, can you please confirm your attendance?

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I'm MPP Oosterhoff and I'm here in Niagara West.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you.

We'll start the first round of questions with the opposition. MPP Fife?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you, Chair. Can you hear me? Okay.

Great to see you, Iain. I'm obviously a huge fan of Communitech and the work that has happened in the community.

We did just hear from Ian McLean and Art Sinclair around local rapid testing and the importance of that, so that is encouraging.

I do want to say, though, that we have had some companies in Waterloo region, and actually across the province, who have had some barriers to getting their products, their PPE and innovative products, into the sector, particularly into health care. I'm thinking of Canadian Shield and Eclipse and those companies. Can you speak to the importance of having a modernized procurement process which recognizes that innovation? Because those private companies did exactly what the government asked them to do. They pivoted. They filled a gap. And now we need to actually support those local jobs as well.

Mr. Iain Klugman: Yes, I couldn't agree more, MPP Fife, in the fact that I think part of the problem that we have as a nation, at the federal, provincial and municipal levels, is we don't fully cost the value of a domestic supply chain. By that I mean that, by and large, procurement officers and procurement systems tend to favour the lowest sticker price and the lowest cost. But when you factor in things like the jobs created, the taxes paid, and just the intangible value of having a domestic supply chain and how key and critical that service and those products are, it actually outweighs and tips the scales in favour of companies like Canadian Shield.

We're doing some work right now with Deloitte Consulting for them to actually go through and do that analysis so we can recast that conversation to be about value as opposed to cost.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I do want to commend Communitech because you have also been very supportive of women entrepreneurs. Women have traditionally been shut out of that supply chain, so look for my private member's bill coming up very soon on that very issue—which is informed, really, by a lot of the work that Communitech has done. Thank you very much for that, Iain.

I'm going to pivot over to Harvey, on education. First, Harvey, I just wanted to say to you and your members, I know that you came out with a statement saying that this budget did miss the mark on addressing the crisis and the emerging issues that have happened in the education sector during this pandemic, and tried to explain the rate of inflation to the government on the funding piece and those cost pressures that school boards have been using, because of course they had to dip into their reserves to get through this pandemic, and the government is not going to make them whole on that.

We have to plan for the future, and the ventilation piece in our schools, the lack of infrastructure, really is mind-boggling to me. It actually creates local jobs. It's an economic driver. It's an investment in the physical infrastructure of our schools and it's connected to keeping students healthy in the education system.

1420

Can you express some of the frustration that you have been feeling on this? Because the tenor of the dialogue, particularly with this Minister of Education and the education leaders in the province, really has dropped to the lowest level, I think.

Mr. Harvey Bischof: Thanks for the question. It's frustrating to have repeatedly offered consultation and collaboration since the day that school closures were announced on March 12 a year ago, on which I sent a formal letter offering our assistance to do everything we could to keep students safe and learning through the pandemic closure. We've been rebuffed at every turn in our efforts to provide constructive assistance for schools when we know what happens on the ground in schools.

I will mention, with regard to COVID funding that's now being withdrawn, the government has not stepped up.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Harvey Bischof: The vast majority of that funding came from the feds and from school boards.

With regard to ventilation, as an example, you see what happens to a system when it's put under any additional stress, when it's been underfunded to the point that there's a \$16-billion repair backlog. We have schools with no windows and radiators. There really is no ventilation under those circumstances. It makes Ontario look like a poor jurisdiction when it isn't. It's been a choice not to support it.

An infrastructure deficit is as real as a fiscal deficit. It means that we are allowing our schools to crumble out from under our students and our educators in a way that's inexcusable in this province. We've seen what it has led to with regard to the pandemic. We have schools that are simply not up to the task of providing education safely under these circumstances.

We will continue to try to engage productively. I'm not hopeful when the minister accuses us of fear-mongering when it's, in fact, public health officials who are closing down schools. That's not, obviously, within our purview. I would call that a significant expression of non-confidence in the minister's claims that schools are safe.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Just to tie back also to Ian's point around the rapid testing: This is a tool that can support local companies and the economy but also, on the other hand, on a go-forward basis, can make sure that we have a firm grasp on where infections are happening in our schools.

When the Minister of Education says 99% of our schools are COVID-free, do you think that that's an accurate statement, given the fact that we're not testing, even asymptomatic testing, or that testing has not been successful in the education sector?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Harvey Bischof: The testing, to be clear, has been dismal. It's been a completely failed effort. They were meant to test 50,000 students a week; they haven't come close to that. It's fractions of that number that they've reached. And that's a choice. That's a deliberate choice not to make the testing program strong.

The default should be opt-in for students and if a parent wants to withdraw a student from testing, that would be appropriate. The default should be non-invasive testing so that we can administer it to students of all ages. And it should be massive. Then you would actually know what's going on in our schools. I can't put any faith in the numbers that arise out of a significant lack of tests.

Ms. Catherine Fife: How much time do I have left, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Twenty seconds.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Okay. Well, I want to thank you for fighting for safer schools. The fight will continue.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): We'll move to the independent members now. MPP Hunter?

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: I want to say thank you to all of the presenters today. Daniel, thank you so much for mentioning our friend in common, Monte Kwinter. I wish him all the best. Thank you so much for just mentioning his name—it was really heart-warming to hear that—and thank you for your remarks today as well.

I do want to speak to the issue of education. Harvey Bischof, I want to say thank you to you, your other colleagues in the federations and also, of course, your members. I've heard from many of them in my community on the challenges that they have faced. But they're doing the best they can for their students. I just think it's been such an incredible year and I want you to know that their efforts have not gone unnoticed, and all the risks that they've taken upon themselves to cope with all the chaos in our schools.

As we plan for reopening, or—well, it's hard to plan, because we don't know exactly what is going to be happening. But as we hope for a reopening, I'm just wondering what your thoughts are on the unfortunate circumstance that we find ourselves in where the government has pre-emptively assumed that things will return to pre-pandemic without, really, the evidence to show for that, and also, in my view, the complete absence of recognition of perhaps who has fallen behind or through the cracks as a result of the chaotic year that we've had, despite the best efforts of your members and other educators in the province. If you could just speak to that.

Not only is it about coping with the normal challenges, but there have been gaps created. We heard today about mental health being increased, and that has affected our young populations as well, in terms of students and young people, and other kinds of learning gaps—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter:—where they actually need those adults in the room and those educators to assist in bridging those gaps so that they can have bright futures. If you could just speak to that, please.

Mr. Harvey Bischof: Thank you, Mitzie. If there was not a single case of COVID in the province come September—which is an unlikely circumstance, but if there wasn't a single case of COVID, there is no returning to pre-pandemic conditions, because we've experienced the pandemic. Students and their families and educators have experienced the pandemic. We've seen what has happened. We know that student mental health is under significant strain, and we know that the learning gaps have been significantly exacerbated.

We know that kids in communities—certain kids are more marginalized than others. Black and racialized kids, Indigenous kids, kids coming from neighbourhoods lower on the socio-economic spectrum have not had the same opportunities to participate in learning that some others may have had, and so gaps that were already there, ones that we've worked hard to close for the last decade and a half, have been widened again.

And every one of those kids who potentially falls through the cracks is a loss. It's a loss to our economy, of course, but there's so much more than the economy. It's a loss to our civic life. It's a loss to civic engagement, to democratic engagement. It's a loss to our social life. Which of those kids will be an artist, which of those kids will be a musician, will contribute to Ontario's social life in that fashion, if they aren't caught up? What we need is more educators, not fewer, in class. We need more supports. We need mental health supports. We need educational assistants. We need child and youth workers. Think about how many kids will be having a hard time emotionally with—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. I apologize to cut you off. The time has come up.

We'll now move to the government side for their first round. MPP Cho?

Mr. Stan Cho: Thank you so much to all of our presenters today—certainly some very good discussions. I have some questions for Iain at Communitech, but coming from a family of educators and appreciating all they are doing now during such extraordinary times, maybe just a quick question for Mr. Bischof. I know you've spoken in the past about having 15 students in a classroom. I'm just curious: How many educators, in your opinion, do you think that would mean that we'd need, to staff schools at that level? Just an approximate, maybe. How many educators would we need to have that happen?

Mr. Harvey Bischof: I don't have that number at my fingertips; significantly more than we have now.

Mr. Stan Cho: Yes. I think the answer is about 45,000 teachers and ECEs for elementary schools alone. Do you think that if that were the case, if we had 15 students to a classroom, we would have enough educators today to make that happen?

Mr. Harvey Bischof: I think that we haven't seen any effort to hire up to that degree—none whatsoever, in fact. We've only seen the additional hiring come through school board funding almost entirely. I don't know if we'd run out of educators, because we haven't tried.

1430

Mr. Stan Cho: Yes, it's a challenge. I know that there have been some boards that have said publicly that it's a challenge accessing teachers. So far, 3,400 have been hired and 700 to 800 were projected for hiring. That's been a challenge. In fact, one of your colleagues from OECTA said in an interview that Ontario has no way of accessing that many teachers. There weren't even 15,000, and those aren't my words.

How can we account for that, then? How would 15 students in a classroom be possible when the teachers just aren't out there to make that happen?

Mr. Harvey Bischof: The first thing we should do is hire as many as possible to reduce as many classes as possible to smaller sizes. If that requires other accommodations, then we should take other accommodations. But the argument that there aren't enough teachers doesn't, to me, present a case for having 34 students in a class, as a student from Paris, Ontario, emailed me about not too long ago, to say her English class had 34 students. Surely, the explanation that we can't hire enough doesn't justify putting students, educators and the families they go home to at risk in those circumstances.

Mr. Stan Cho: I appreciate that, Mr. Bischof. I think the reality is that there are other considerations. I come from a riding in Willowdale where many kids from the balcony can see Earl Haig Secondary, for example, but they can't go there, and this was before the pandemic. To have 15 in a classroom would force even more kids in Willowdale to be bused out of the neighbourhood, and we all know that's not a well-rounded school experience. More discussions to be had, but it's certainly interesting that some of your colleagues have said that the teachers just aren't out there to hire to that level. In Willowdale, we have capacity challenges with physical buildings.

Shifting a bit here to Communitech, to Iain, I know we've spoken in the past and had a number of conversations on how KW is just booming and what an amazing region it is. I've had several budget consultations in the area. I wondered what you could tell me about scaling up. Ontario is really great at creating some of the best businesses in the world, but unfortunately, we have this problem of not getting to that next level. SMEs are created and then we have IP drain and we have talent drain to other jurisdictions. How can we do better here in our province?

Mr. Iain Klugman: It's a really good question. I think there are a couple of factors at play, one of which is, we need to think about Ontario from a jurisdictional competitiveness lens. That's where things like red tape, things like available venture capital, the kind of talent that's available, the tax structure, both federal and provincial, factor into the decisions that people make as to where they want to work and where they want to live.

If we look at it from that perspective, there are a couple of gaps that we've had in the past—now, they've gotten better—one of which was, there was not an availability of large growth funds. If somebody was raising \$10 million, \$20 million, \$50 million, \$100 million—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Iain Klugman:—those funds were just not available at all, and so there were a lot of fire sales in the 2000s. Now, of course, companies are able to access that.

The next step is, how do we make those funds available as Canadian funds and not US-based funds? We've made some suggestions around pushing the public pension funds to commit 1% of their total holdings to risk capital, and 1% of \$100 billion or \$200 billion is a lot of money. It could go a long way to establishing some big, significant growth funds.

The same is true as far as the next wave of start-ups, around access to angel capital. That capital, of course, plays such a critical role.

The third thing is, I really do believe that the direction the province has gone with things around the work of IP—and of course, we're 100% in on that. But also, with the fact that in the world right now, proximity is optional, the one big constraint for the growth of Canadian and Ontario firms was access to talent. Of course, now, we've put in place a program where we have actually created legal entities in 160 jurisdictions around the world so that Canadian companies, Ontario companies can hire people anywhere in the world more efficiently, more effectively than any other jurisdiction.

We know that the way that we tend to recruit people to this country and to this province is a two-step process. We get them into our great Canadian firms and then, of course, they get a sense of exactly how remarkable this province is, and we get them to physically move here. But I would say the more that we can think about competitiveness as far as talent, the more we can think about competitiveness as far as access to capital, those are the two big things that will make a difference.

Mr. Stan Cho: That's very helpful, Iain. I know we're going to have to have more discussions about how to make that happen. It's hugely important.

Chair, how much time left?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Stan Cho: Okay. Not a lot of time. Maybe I can get your opinion on two-way, all-day GO. What's this going to do for your company? I'll just pause there.

Mr. Iain Klugman: I'm sorry?

Mr. Stan Cho: Maybe I cut off at the end there. Two-way, all-day GO: How important is this not just for your company, but for the region, for employment for KW overall?

Mr. Iain Klugman: I think it's critical; I really do. Being able to reduce the drag of the transaction costs of being able to connect communities together is going to have not only an economic bump and boost and boom, but also, it's going to make people's lives better. The commute time in and out of the GTA is the worst in North America, I think. It's worse than LA. This will make a huge, huge difference.

The other thing too, this sort of transportation and proximity option—I think these things are going to allow us to really open up the potential that we've got in small cities across the province—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. I apologize to cut you off. The time has come up.

We'll now go to the independents for the second round. MPP Hunter.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Thank you so much, everyone, for the conversation today.

I want to follow up with Iain in terms of what you're seeing for start-ups. I know a lot of start-ups have reached out, saying that they were disappointed in the fact that the small business grant was—they were ineligible. Obviously, they don't have the revenues to show because they're getting going.

Do you think that we need to do more to encourage start-ups? We want to be better when we get through COVID and move from simply recovery to growth. Can you talk a bit about that?

Mr. Iain Klugman: That's a really good question. Thank you, MPP Hunter. We're going to see a wave of start-ups. We always see a huge wave of start-ups, and I think that since COVID hit, we've seen close to 400 net new start-ups in our region alone.

The one big challenge they have is raising capital. That angel capital is so important early on. With the decline in real estate, the more we can get those rich people—who used to just dump into real estate and it magically made money—thinking about an alternative and getting them to put money into risk capital to support those early stage companies, the better. That's a big, big piece in being able to make a difference.

The other thing is really targeted programming around this. We've just launched something called Fierce Founders Uplift, which is our Fierce Founders program, which focused on female founders for the last 10 years, but Uplift focuses on BIPOC, and there are significant differences. Black founders don't have inherited capital. So, you really have to understand the challenges that different parts of our economy face as far as what's getting in the way of them being able to start and grow a successful company.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: In your very well-packaged answer, you've addressed some of my follow-up questions. I hope the government is listening and continues to support our circles of excellence in their efforts as well, to really pull in women, pull in Black, Indigenous and other groups who really have been undersupported and who have had such a devastating effect of the pandemic on their enterprises—and the uniqueness in which they need that help and that support.

One of the things I want to say in the little time I have left—the province has underspent its post-secondary budget as it relates to OSAP and student financial aid to hundreds of millions of dollars in the current year. One of the things that I believe we should be doing is immediately redirecting those dollars into things like summer companies, summer programs, education grants and training to ensure that young people don't have a scarring effect as a result of the pandemic.

I'm not sure if Harvey or Iain want to comment on that. It's not a resource issue, because the program money is

underspent because of the disruptions of the pandemic. Harvey? Go ahead.

Mr. Harvey Bischof: Thanks, happy to. I'm happy to let Iain jump in a bit as well.

It goes very much to what I was saying before. There is recovery to be had after this pandemic that will require an all-hands-on-deck effort to engage the whole of society in this, and we can't leave marginalized groups out of that and we can't [*inaudible*]. Aside from the personal cost, there is a societal, economic and civic cost that we have to pay attention to as well. But I'll try to leave some time for Iain.

1440

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Please unmute Iain. Go ahead, Iain.

Mr. Iain Klugman: Thank you. Thanks, Harvey. I agree 100%. I think that if we look at the experience that we've had with Digital Main Street as a program, I think this platform model is such—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. I apologize to cut you off again. We have to move to the government side now for their time. MPP Thanigasalam.

Mr. Vijay Thanigasalam: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you to all three presenters for your presentations.

I'm going to turn it over to Iain. Iain, you mentioned about Kitchener-Waterloo and especially Communitech. You have a region where the digital space is booming, and at the right time, because of COVID, the Digital Main Street program has been launched by our government. When we look at the whole of Ontario, both urban and rural settings, there are a lot of brick-and-mortar mom-and-pop shops that can benefit from the Digital Main Street program.

What's your take on this opportunity? Is it a platform where the government is meeting the local needs to bring or uplift all the brick-and-mortar stores to a digital space in an era where e-commerce and AI along with human intelligence are accelerating because of the global pandemic? How would this program help a small store either in Sudbury or Scarborough to take their business online?

Mr. Iain Klugman: Thank you very much for the question. This kind of approach, which is a platform approach, really leverages the investments that the Ontario government has made into building really strong innovation infrastructure. Every other jurisdiction in the country and across North America is jealous about the innovation infrastructure that exists in Ontario. The thing about Digital Main Street or the work that we've done with Canadian Shield and manufacturers and companies is that we can actually put that infrastructure, that little bit of innovation capability in organizations like Communitech, to work to really benefit organizations like main street businesses.

One of the things I love about the main street businesses is a small amount of Communitech, armed with these incredibly smart interns and co-ops and recent graduates, can make massive differences as far as revenue models and business models for main street businesses. But then the other side of that, of course, is this program has created

thousands of jobs for students who didn't have jobs during the pandemic.

One thing is this could be expanded significantly to more small and medium-sized businesses, and this platform where we take some of this innovation infrastructure and apply it to different industries could be applied to industries like manufacturing and a lot of the other industries which have really struggled at digital adoption and e-commerce and the deployment of technology.

Mr. Vijay Thanigasalam: Thank you, Iain. My colleague PA Stan Cho mentioned the two-way rail all the way to Kitchener and Waterloo. Our government is also investing in autonomous vehicle innovation, and we are backing it up through the Ontario excellence program to make sure we also connect the dots as we are uplifting the digital space here.

You mentioned a critical point where overall infrastructure—as you know, in our budget, Ontario is investing \$2.8 billion into broadband to connect homes, businesses, communities through broadband, which COVID-19 has demonstrated is a necessity at this point. It's a luxury no more; it is actually part of day-to-day life—bringing the provincial total investment of almost \$4 billion over the next six years, beginning in 2019-20. Will broadband help Ontario businesses pave the path for Ontario's economic recovery or Ontario's digital economic recovery?

Mr. Iain Klugman: It's the most important infrastructure that exists right now, and the jurisdictions that got ubiquitous high-speed broadband available to every part of their jurisdiction are going to win.

The other thing that I think is so exciting about this right now is that COVID and this notion of "proximity is now optional" means that we can unleash the economic potential of small cities across the province, rural and remote communities, because now all of a sudden people are saying, "I don't need to truck 60,000 public servants to downtown Toronto every day to sit in beige cubicles." They can work wherever, and that means that instead of kids graduating from university at Western, Queen's or wherever and moving to Toronto—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Iain Klugman: —we can now put them to work across the province and have a much broader economic recovery plan than before.

Mr. Vijay Thanigasalam: Thank you.

Chair, how many minutes do we have?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Less than three minutes.

Mr. Vijay Thanigasalam: Thank you.

I'll turn it back to Daniel Kahan. Thank you so much for being here and for your presentation about the living benefit that you talked about. Daniel, I just want to quickly highlight Ontario's plan from the last budget, which is eligible in 2021, our government's proposal for a seniors' renovation tax credit. I'm sure that you would be aware of this refundable tax credit that would offer up to \$2,500 for eligible seniors for their home improvements. I would highlight improvements such as wheelchair ramps, stair lifts or elevators, or even grabbing bars for toilets and tubs.

These are the renovations that seniors are eligible for through this tax credit. Do you have any comments or feedback on how this would help? Because this program becomes eligible for seniors in 2021.

Mr. Daniel Kahan: Well, I'll put it this way: Anything which helps seniors, if they need it, is fine, but it's the same thing with a reverse mortgage. Unless you own your home, you cannot get a reverse mortgage. Of seniors who are renting, if they have a life policy—or even if they can get a reverse mortgage, but it's age related—they could actually combine the two. They could actually borrow more money as a reverse mortgage and add the life insurance policy to it.

Again, there are a lot of creative ways we could do things within the system—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Daniel Kahan: —if we had a little flexibility. I'm now getting OAS and CPP; if we could lend people money like they do with the payday loans, but on a long-term basis, they would pay it back with their life insurance. Those things could be done even without changing section 115, if we could actually work with the credit unions—or the banks, but the banks are obviously a little bit too big and have their own agendas.

Mr. Vijay Thanigasalam: Thank you, Daniel.

With my limited time, I'll turn it back to Harvey. Harvey, as you know, the basic spend for education is projected to increase from \$30.2 billion in 2019-20 to \$31.5 billion in 2023-24. Can you share with us where the additional \$1.3 billion will be allocated?

Mr. Harvey Bischof: No, I don't have that information—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): I apologize. The time has come up.

We'll go to the opposition side now. MPP Arthur?

Mr. Ian Arthur: Thank you, Chair. Harvey, I'm going to spend a bit of time with you here. Just a quick comment: That quick mental math on how many teachers would be needed for 15 per is not quite accurate. It's a bit of an oversimplification, is it not? Because there are many parents who have kept their students at home, there are many classes that can have it. The target should be 15 to keep students safe, no?

Can you unmute Harvey please? Thank you.

Mr. Harvey Bischof: Well, that should be the bottom line, shouldn't it? The target should be to keep students safe, and we should be doing whatever it takes to do that. There are choices that have been made, as there was a mass migration of students to remote learning just before the start of school, for example, because parents weren't confident in the safety of the system.

What happened? Classes were collapsed, so we had completely empty classrooms sitting beside jam-packed classrooms, and that was a choice. The failure to have a robust asymptomatic testing program: That's a choice. The refusal to put money into adequate ventilation, even to have a standard, as the courts did—when they reopened last summer, they followed the ASHRAE standards. It was a choice not to implement those in the education system.

So it could have been that we would have run into a hiring problem, had there been a massive effort to staff up, but there was virtually no effort to staff up and, therefore, the appeal to insufficient staffing is disingenuous at best.

1450

Mr. Ian Arthur: Can you talk about the human effect this has? I mean, what it's like to be a teacher in Ontario right now: We went through a year of strikes. We transitioned into COVID. We probably have an over \$16-billion repair backlog; that's the number that was used in the last campaign, so it's assuredly higher now. You have to fight for teachers to be allowed to get the vaccine, and then it's only teachers who are specifically teaching special needs, which is not reflective of the fact that special-needs students are incorporated into classrooms that are not dedicated special-needs classrooms. What does that do to the teachers of this province?

Mr. Harvey Bischof: Our first thought is with students, but just for a moment, I'll be happy to talk about teachers and other—

Mr. Ian Arthur: I agree. I understand that the students are certainly the priority. But people who need to usher those students through need to be at their best so that they can deliver the best to those students.

Mr. Harvey Bischof: I fully appreciate that you would have held students at the top of your mind as well, but to take the opportunity to speak to what educators are experiencing, it is both teachers and other kinds of education workers, some of whom work up closest with the most high-needs students, students who aren't able to wear masks at times, students who may not understand how physical distancing works or why it should be invoked.

What we found from a nationwide survey of educators back in the fall—and this was only in November by the time this was conducted—educators were absolutely stressed out from the risk, from last-minute decision-making, from the fact that—I had teacher-members who told me the day before they would return to class, they still didn't know what their timetable was. That kind of chaos means they're not operating at anywhere near their best. They've been operating with full effort.

I've talked to my members who are committed to the students they serve and remain committed through all of this, but they're at the edge, and what we've seen is that mental health has absolutely suffered. The number of educators who are concerned for their mental health and concerned about their stress and anxiety levels has skyrocketed.

I once heard stress described as the second-hand smoke of the classroom. When you stress out educators, it has a kind of permeating toxic effect throughout a school building, and I think that's not a bad analogy, and it's unconscionable that that's been done.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Ian Arthur: Let's take a minute on what that's like, the atmosphere inside schools, because you often hear that kids pick up on the stress of their parents. It's a very similar experience when you're in a classroom, when you are a youth. What are the potential effects on the

education of these students? What are going to be the long-term outcomes? We know student mental health is a massive issue across Ontario. We know it's related to the safety of classrooms. Students are just as worried as teachers about the environments they're being put into.

Mr. Harvey Bischof: Yes, and the outcome of that is we lose students. In one way or another, we lose them to dropping out, we lose them to mental illness, we lose them to stress. Even if we have them physically there, even if the students are in the classrooms, they may not mentally be completely with you as you're trying to provide them with an education. So they fall behind, the gaps get exacerbated and we lose their contributions in the future. They fail to reach a potential they otherwise would have, and we lose the contributions that make Ontario economically strong, socially vibrant—all of those things for which the publicly funded education system provides the foundation.

Mr. Ian Arthur: Thank you very much. I'm going to leave it there. I think we're just about out of time. Thank you, Harvey.

Mr. Harvey Bischof: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Further questions? Seeing none, that concludes our time. Thank you to all three presenters for your presentations.

KENORA DISTRICT SERVICES BOARD
CANADIAN CENTRE
FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES
ANISHNAWBE BUSINESS PROFESSIONAL
ASSOCIATION

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Moving along to our next group of presenters, I would first like to call upon Kenora District Services Board. Please say your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation. Henry Wall?

Mr. Henry Wall: Hi. Bonjour. My name is Henry Wall, and I'm the chief administrative officer for the Kenora District Services Board.

Remarks in Oji-Cree.

Thank you very much for having me here today to speak to the standing committee about the critical need for the current budget and for Bill 269 to address our region's housing, mental health and addictions crises. I speak to you from the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe people, and we are situated on the lands of Treaty 3.

Just a little bit about the Kenora District Services Board: We're responsible for housing. That includes community housing, affordable housing for families and single non-elderly, for elders' and seniors' housing. We look after some supportive housing, transitional housing and emergency shelters. With that, too, we also deliver paramedic services. That includes land ambulances, social services, early years, employment and life stabilization. It is quite a bit that we look after.

Our district is vast. It encompasses 407,000 square kilometres and a geography that includes nine diverse municipalities, four unincorporated territories, 40 First Nation

communities and is stretched over parts of Treaty 3, Treaty 5 and Treaty 9.

I want to say that every community in our district is unique and with it brings its own culture, tradition and people. Despite the strength and resilience that our communities have gone through, many are still struggling with the same issues and challenges that we've been trying to overcome for decades. This is why the KDSB's approach to community development is with the understanding of deeper issues, root-caused issues to the current challenges. That includes the ongoing impact of colonialism, systemic racism and structural oppression, among others. Our efforts to develop and provide not just sustainable housing but sustainable community programs and services are directly linked to supporting people who are disproportionately impacted by these systemic issues and stuck in cycles of poverty and barriers that really keep them where they're at.

It's with this today that I'm saying that Bill 269 has a lot of promise. The new investments in mental health and addictions are most welcome. Meegwetch for that. However, I can tell you that without specific policy changes and a cultural change within government, these investments will not yield the results that are needed for northern Ontario, nor what I believe you are going to be expecting from these investments.

I say this having spent the last 13 years in public service in northern Ontario, and I also say this having served as the co-chair for the All Nations Health Partners for the last two years and the co-chair of the first approved Indigenous-led Ontario health team. The reasons for this being that with the mental health and addictions resources that are contained in the budget, you need the appropriate infrastructure to accompany that. You need supportive housing. You need transitional housing. You also need treatment options for those programs to be efficiently delivered, and to meet people where they're at.

I tell you, it's not for the lack of trying, but part of why I have some concern is that there is systemic policy that prevents partnerships—almost like an unwilling mindset to consider DSSABs, like the KDSB, and Indigenous housing providers, like Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services, true partners when it comes to addressing mental health and addiction, especially the crisis that we're facing in northern Ontario.

The other thing I want to mention too is that Ontario and its municipalities have spent the last generation building up one of the largest public housing equity portfolios in our collective history, equity that I believe can be used to unlock new opportunities. We can use existing resources in the budget operating resources to leverage new financing to create the needed infrastructure—opportunities that I believe that by working together we can indeed address the mental health crisis that we are facing in the north and, I think, in Ontario, as a context, but in particular in the north, and also an opportunity to work together to address the housing and infrastructure shortage, really concerning supportive housing, transitional housing and treatment.

By doing this now, especially with the infrastructure piece, we can actually help our local economies bounce back from the devastating impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having. It's with that—and just from my experience in seeing some of the siloed approaches, I think it's going to be very difficult to address the current crises if we don't start breaking down those silos through some of the policies and just a mindset of thinking that I've seen within government.

I'm here to tell you too that it's not by accident that northern Ontario jails, especially jails like the Kenora Jail, are over-overcrowded. Our jails have become part of the housing continuum in Ontario. They have become a place for those who are houseless to find housing. Those who struggle with mental illnesses and people suffering from addictions are also housed.

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So what I'm recommending to the committee today is that we use our collective resources—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Mr. Henry Wall: —and, through the investments of Bill 269, actually leverage our housing equity, leverage our collective resources and our collective expertise to address it. In return, we can bring treatment, healing back to our own communities, so that in our district, our vast geography, we can stop sending our youth and our elders all over Ontario to access support services and treatment. Very often—and I say this as respectfully as I can, but the data confirms this: All too often, our people come back broken and worse than what we sent them away with, and all too often, they come back in caskets. I don't mean to exaggerate on that piece.

The other piece that is happening as well is that because we don't have these supports right in our communities, we have jobs that go unfilled. Despite the pandemic and the fact that so much of our economy is also in the tourism industry, as of this morning, we had 386 vacant jobs in our region. These are employers who invested money to create jobs, they planned for jobs, but they cannot fill them, because we do not have the housing for families to actually relocate to our communities to take on those jobs.

With that, I do want to say thank you for the resources that are contained in the budget that concerns Bill 269, but I'm also recommending to you, as a committee, that we really look at the opportunities by thinking different, by looking at how we leverage existing community resources like those that KDSB has, and that we start building infrastructure so that the needed programs can come right back to our communities.

With that, I want to thank you for the opportunity. Meegwetch.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. We'll move to our next presenter, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation as well.

Ms. Sheila Block: Hi. My name is Sheila Block, and I'm a senior economist with the Ontario office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. I thank you for the opportunity for being here.

I'm very keenly aware that I'm speaking to this committee on a day when surgeries are being cancelled in Ontario and there are over 4,000 new cases of COVID. This is a time of crisis, when the people of Ontario are relying on public policy and public services as never before. Unfortunately, we are failing on the public policy front and failing to give our threadbare public services the support they need, and these failures are being reinforced, rather than corrected, in this budget.

I did not intend to start this presentation talking about paid sick days, but I feel compelled to, given the consequences of this government's decisions. There can be no economic recovery without getting the pandemic under control. Economists from all sides of the political spectrum agree on that. Today's Labour Force Survey showed an increase in employment in Ontario that will be reversed as a result of the province-wide shutdown order.

Businesses need a stable operating environment. They need effective assistance from governments to help them through this crisis, not the extra costs associated with false starts and premature reopenings. Consumers need to know they will be safe and workers need to know that they can afford to stay home when they're sick. The government's own scientific advisers have said that policies that have been put in place are insufficient and that paid sick leave is required.

I'm not the person to comment on the human costs of ignoring reality, which are both obvious and tragic, but I can assure you that the government's policy failure on this front will slow the recovery, along with the great human costs associated with it. This crisis makes clear that we need proactive government action now, and we will need it even more in the future.

There are some big numbers in this budget, including deficit numbers, but when you look closely, what this budget will be delivering is less government. The budget says it will not increase taxes or reduce spending, but that's misleading. Given the effects of inflation and population growth, we know that the fiscal plan presented in the budget will see real per capita spending on public services fall further behind. There will be a drop in real program spending in all the years of the government's 10-year plan.

It's important to put these decisions in context. Even before the pandemic, annual program spending per capita was \$2,000 below the average of other provinces. Ontario entered the pandemic with the lowest hospital spending per capita costs of any province, and we also had the lowest number of registered nurses per capita. The terrible toll of an underfunded health care system without surge capacity has been felt throughout the pandemic: first, with the tragedies in long-term care in the first and second waves, and now with the tragedies we see looming in hospitals and intensive care units.

But instead of learning the lessons of this pandemic, this budget will tread water for one year on health spending and retreat on education spending. The Financial Accountability Office has estimated that demand drivers for health care call for a 4.6% increase per year just to maintain services at their current levels. In education, that

number is 2.9%. And while the budget does increase health spending by 4.6% in this fiscal year, spending drops off dramatically after that.

The problem is even more immediate in public education. Ontario students' education has been enormously disrupted this year by lockdowns, online learning and quadesters. We know that students will need a lot of catching up. We also know that kids from families with fewer resources have fallen further behind and have fewer resources to catch up.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Ms. Sheila Block: The budget solution is to reduce total education funding next year and double previous cash payments of \$400 per child and \$500 for children with special needs. This major expenditure results in a whopping \$1.8-billion cost to the Ontario treasury. Seldom in Ontario have I seen an expenditure so large that lacks any discernible policy objective and is in no way targeted. These cash payments deliver the same benefit to families with parents who have lost jobs and incomes and to those who have seen their wealth increase.

The budget also fails to address the crisis of economic inequality. We've experienced a K-shaped recovery in Ontario. While employment has recovered for high-income earners, many low-income earners remain [inaudible] recent immigrants. Meanwhile, with the stark market rally and increased housing prices, we have seen heightened wealth inequality as well. The government's only response to the jobs crisis is a refundable training tax credit of up to \$2,000. That is insufficient.

If COVID has taught us anything, it's that government must play an increased role in the lives of Ontarians. This means increasing the quality and quantity of public services all Ontarians expect and deserve. Funding such a transformation calls for more revenue and that means we need a plan to increase taxes. In a rich but shockingly unequal province like Ontario, we have lots of options. Unfortunately, this government's policy to date has gone in the opposite direction. In the past three years, an assortment of tax cuts have cut revenues, not expanded them, to the point where they are now costing the province over \$4 billion a year. Reversing these tax cuts and reinvesting that money in public services is an obvious starting point. Thank you very much.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

We'll move to our next presenter, Anishnawbe Business Professional Association. Please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation.

Mr. Jason Rasevych: Jason Rasevych. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): You may start.

Mr. Jason Rasevych: Okay. I'd like to provide a land acknowledgement to respect the traditional lands of all the Indigenous people across Ontario and from where I'm calling today, Thunder Bay, Ontario, with respect to the Robinson-Superior 1850 Treaty and many Indigenous people who call Thunder Bay their home in respect to the James Bay Treaty 9 and the community's residents that find Thunder Bay their home place.

Anishnawbe Business Professional Association is an organization that works with Indigenous business and nations in northwestern Ontario to focus on providing a role for their participation in the Indigenous economy. We're pleased to be invited today to provide some comments on Bill 269 related to the province's budget.

We welcome the Ontario government's focus on economic recovery and the additional efforts to support small business. However, there are some challenges related to how those dollars have been rolled out in the past, and for consideration, some thoughts related to improving the process moving forward. We've identified the Aboriginal financial institutions providing loans and grants for Indigenous business in some of the hardest-hit sectors, such as tourism and construction, related to opportunities for remote First Nations.

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However, it hasn't always been easy for Indigenous business to access these forms of funds. The challenges that come with that are related to some of the capacity that is there, as well as some of the telecommunication that is lacking, such as broadband fibre optic infrastructure for remote First Nations. What we're recommending is an opportunity to look at these types of grants and supports for Indigenous businesses and tailor them more to the marketplace so that Indigenous businesses could participate.

When we saw the announcement that happened in the past related to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund and some of the programming that was previously offered, Indigenous businesses were not eligible to participate in some of that funding because of their structure, as well. We see First Nations economic development corporations, which are usually structured as a limited partnership model for First Nations-owned companies, be ineligible under certain program funding that requires Indigenous business to be under certain criteria. That had become a challenge in the past, and we're hopeful that that won't be an issue with the criteria moving forward.

We appreciate the government's commitment to provide every household in Ontario with broadband Internet by the year 2025, but we continue to highlight the need for reliable and affordable Internet, which is not universally available to Indigenous people and Indigenous business in northern Ontario. A recent study found that four in every 10 Indigenous people have no Internet or connection on which they can fully rely. These problems are more common for Indigenous businesses located on-reserve and in remote areas.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has noted that lack of access to reliable Internet makes it more difficult for Indigenous people and Indigenous entrepreneurs in remote and rural areas to access business training programs and be competitive in an e-commerce environment. While free online business skills training is widely available, poor Internet connectivity hinders its use and pushes First Nations peoples to the background.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Jason Rasevych: Coupled with Internet access to broadband, if there's going to be an investment towards Ontario's broadband infrastructure, there needs to be the consideration for increasing capacity for Indigenous-owned solutions and equity that will move Indigenous people forward towards economic self-determination and reconciliation. There need to be other infrastructure needs addressed, such as clean drinking water, housing support for off-reserve First Nations citizens, and considerable consideration for consultation dollars for Indigenous communities that aren't able to engage their community related to mining processes and infrastructure development because of some of the challenges with getting their community members together in a COVID environment in the pandemic.

With the investment world and capital markets looking to take advantage of infrastructure development in Ontario and Canada, we've seen a trend within corporate socially responsible investments with the ESG standards for environmental, social and governance principles that will require the "I" for "Indigenous" to be included in those investment standards. It's very important for the Ontario government to recognize our role in supporting consultation and social licence so that Indigenous nations can be a part of these infrastructure developments, that they could play a role in influencing investment into some of the equity plays that are being pursued in northern Ontario, and that that would alleviate some of the risks that are there for investors in the capital market.

These types of consultations have been lacking, not only over the course of COVID, but in prior years, and there should be a consideration in the budget related to how Indigenous nations are going to be consulted—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Jason Rasevych: —and are going to be providing the social licence to proceed with infrastructure development and other resource projects on their traditional lands if it is a challenge to engage their community in this environment.

That being said, there are opportunities within the current government system to be able to provide for policy recommendations and other measures, other mechanisms that could be put in place to support the participation of Indigenous people in these projects. As the Anishnawbe Business Professional Association, we look forward to working with government, industry, Indigenous nations and leadership, and other Indigenous businesses to participate fully in the overall economy.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. We'll start with the questions now. We'll start this round of questions with the government side. Government, who would like to begin? MPP Kanapathi.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Chair. Can you hear me?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes, we can.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you to all the presenters. Thank you for being here. I know it's a very difficult time and a challenging time. Our government's primary focus is to protect every life and every job we possibly can

from COVID-19. I often say that without healthy people, we can't have a healthy economy. That's why our Ontario Action Plan: Protecting People's Health and Our Economy is the next phase of Ontario's response to COVID-19. This is the second project to respond to the pandemic of COVID-19.

I'll start with Henry Wall. He's a CAO. You passionately talked about how we can—you know, the budget comes with money, and we have only one taxpayer, so one pocket. I know you tried to strike out a balance, how we can balance health and the economy. I'll start with you, Henry Wall. You personally talked about using the existing resources, how we can use the existing resources in order to succeed on many fronts. Could you elaborate on that and how you are doing in government support in your region or your district and how we can—you came up with some out-of-the-box thinking; people don't talk about how we can use existing resources to maximize our benefit. Please elaborate on that.

Mr. Henry Wall: Thank you very much. I'll answer by giving an example. About two years ago, the Kenora District Services Board and Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services joined together to look at creating a supportive housing project in the city of Kenora, based on the success that we were seeing in a similar project in Sioux Lookout getting Indigenous people out of the justice system, off the streets of Sioux Lookout and out of the correctional system. We acquired the land, we have acquired funding, we have acquired financing, and KDSB has guaranteed the rents to make this happen for the next 15 years. The only piece that's missing is the support services from health.

We've been trying for two years now to be recognized as health services providers to make it happen. So here's a project that's probably close to a \$10-million build. It's been ready for two years, and we simply have not been able to create the partnership with health. That's an example of where we have private sector, public sector—we're all coming together to make something happen, but we just cannot get it off the ground because we need those supports. Otherwise, we're going to set people up to fail in these housing units.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you. You're familiar with our government's commitment to focus on Indigenous health. The vaccine to the Indigenous community was a priority, Ornge vaccinating 31 fly-in First Nation communities and Moosonee in northern Ontario. You heard about some of the northern Ontario investment initiatives.

Some of the funding set aside through this budget—you talked about broadband, and the other gentleman, Jason, was talking about the Indigenous economy, economic recovery and broadband, and reliable and affordable Internet. Affordability would be an issue for the Indigenous community, low-income families and the marginalized communities, and our government is very concerned about that. Could you elaborate—our budget is addressing those issues. Do you see any positive things and positive changes through this budget?

Mr. Henry Wall: I absolutely do. Connectivity, I think, has never been more important for our communities than

right now, especially with more families wishing that they could do online learning with their children. When we went to a full lockdown, we saw a significant and disproportionate number of children who couldn't access education because they were lacking access to Internet, and also reliable Internet. So the investment in the budget is incredibly welcome.

1520

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Henry Wall: What we would hope for and are asking for is that the investments extend well into the Far North, and for government to listen to us and entertain some other technologies as well. There are some technologies for immediate rapid access to Internet: for example, Starlink. It is something with which, if it was more affordable, we could connect families immediately to have access to Internet. Having the money in the budget, what I would ask is for us to be able to work creatively with this government to get our families access to Internet.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: How many minutes left, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes and 30 seconds.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Okay. Also, you touched upon the Starlink project. You say it's a very innovative project, and it's Elon Musk. My son always talks about it. He's an engineering student and he was talking about it. When you come to affordability, the Starlink project can provide affordable Internet to the northern community. Would you have any knowledge, any thoughts on how we can promote Starlink in northern Ontario and the Indigenous community?

Mr. Henry Wall: Absolutely. I just want to give you an example. My family had recently moved just a couple kilometres outside the city of Dryden. But by doing so, we had no access to Internet. We couldn't even get dial-up where we lived. It's not unusual; actually, it's more common. So we were fortunate to be able to get access to Starlink, and immediately, we now have access to it. We see that as an example of what we can do. We don't have to wait to put poles and massive infrastructure across our environment to have other traditional types of broadband.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Henry Wall: I think, through technology like this, we can move really fast and we can move immediately, because I think that's the other piece, that our communities are starting to lag behind. I think rapid investment in technologies like Starlink is something that we can work on immediately.

Then you look in terms of the possibilities of using this technology for the justice system, as an example, and Pikangikum is one of those communities. The province is spending millions of dollars—and I've used the Kenora Jail as an example. On an annual basis, the province spends about \$5.6 million housing Indigenous houseless people in the Kenora Jail. Why does the system have to remove individuals from their community? Why couldn't we use technology like Starlink, as an example, to do court hearings and so forth right from their community, so we can prevent removing families from their community?

I see a lot of potential, and am very happy if we can work with this government to roll out some of these technologies immediately across our district.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. We'll go to the opposition side now for the first round. MPP Fife.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you, Chair. Can you hear me?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you to all presenters—very impressive and good feedback for us to hear as a committee, to hear on budget 2021. Just very quickly, because I'm going to leave the bulk of my time for my colleague MPP Mamakwa, but I just want to say, Henry, to have you describe jails as part of the housing continuum is incredibly powerful. It also echoes what we heard from the mayor of Sioux Lookout earlier around how they are dealing with mental health and addictions through incarceration. It's not a solution, and we can do so much better in the province of Ontario.

Jason, thank you very much for your feedback as well.

I do want to focus, though, today on Sheila Block. I quote you often in the House, Sheila, and the work of the CCPA. I've said that this budget is steeped in privilege, because it doesn't address the income inequality, which has only been heightened, really, by the pandemic, particularly for women and racialized folks in the province of Ontario. So I appreciate the fact that you've mentioned the false starts that have existed in the province, and also the human costs of ignoring reality and making that economic case for investment in policies like government-assisted paid sick days.

I wanted to give you a chance to address how women and racialized folks have particularly been impacted by the pandemic, and the gap that this budget leaves open on a go-forward basis.

Ms. Sheila Block: Thank you. We've seen, particularly at the start of the pandemic, this dual experience, where racialized workers and in particular racialized women and recent immigrants were the people who were both on the front line and in this new definition of "essential workers" that we have now. So these are the people who were providing care in long-term care, were providing home care. They were also the people who are working in the Amazon warehouses and making those Uber Eats deliveries. The heightened inequality that we see in Toronto in particular as a result of the pandemic is truly distressing.

What we've also seen is the collapse, in some ways, of the caring economy. We see that through long-term care. We see what's been happening to child care. We see what's been happening in education. Again, that disproportionately affects women, both because they are more likely to be working in those jobs, but also, as we've seen very clearly, they are the ones who are left to pick up that unpaid work when these systems aren't working or when there's a stay-at-home order.

We most clearly saw this for single mothers in terms of withdrawals from the labour force, and we are also seeing a particularly bad impact, actually, on young women workers, in comparison to young men. That's particularly

concerning because that transition from work to school can really have lifetime impacts on earnings.

So absolutely, in terms of the dangerous work and the health impacts, we're seeing an unequal burden of this. We're also seeing an unequal burden, conversely, in where the job losses are, and those are concentrated among racialized and women workers.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Yes. The mechanisms that are actually in the bill—because a lot of the things that the government is talking about are actually not in Bill 269, especially schedule 10, which deals with the tax credits. Normally, tax credits are a very accountable mechanism to hold government spending accountable, if you will, but the child care tax credit, which is only a \$250 bump-up, doesn't recognize or acknowledge the high cost of early learning and care for folks to get in there. And then, of course, having a tax credit for a child care space that doesn't exist is obviously problematic.

Can you also talk about the jobs training tax credit, which also is a barrier for women?

Ms. Sheila Block: The jobs training tax credit provides a refundable tax credit for 50% of costs up to \$2,000, and we know that that is not going to be sufficient to allow people to do the kind of retraining that we think will likely be required, because it doesn't provide sufficient supports for it. What we really need, because of the combination of a climate crisis and a care crisis, is government investment in climate mitigation; we need government investment in caring jobs. That's really where that jobs recovery needs to be directed.

If I can just reinforce what you said about the enhancements to the CARE credit, aside from not resulting in a single additional child care space, I think we worked out that that it would work out to about \$33 a year. As I recall, infant care in Toronto is up at about \$20,000. I really feel like this is about the appearance of support, rather than giving concrete support to women to re-engage in the labour market.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Yes. The budget speech did mention women 27 times, but as the YWCA also pointed out, it fails to actually back up that support for women. And if we are experiencing a she-cession, if you will, then we do need—I think this is your terminology—a she-recovery. Can we recover as a province without women being a major part of that economic strategy?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Ms. Sheila Block: No. For the last 20 years in Ontario, families have required two income earners just to tread water, just to stay in the same place. And absolutely, it's women's participation in the labour force that is crucial and will continue to be crucial for a recovery to happen.

1530

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you very much, Sheila. Very quickly, just on broadband, for the other folks: This needs to be a public infrastructure investment. The government thus far has tied it to for-profit corporate partnerships. Companies are not going to go to Sioux Lookout and expand broadband if there's no money to be made. So that needs to be the focus on a go-forward basis, I think. Thank you very much for your time today.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. We'll now go to the independent members. MPP Hunter.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: I want to thank all of these presenters. I think it has been a phenomenal review that you've given us. I just really can't thank you enough for all of the work that you're doing. It's very hard to direct the questions, because I think you each really need to have the audience here today and for this committee and this government to hear the impacts of the budget on the people you are working with on a day-to-day basis.

I would like to perhaps start with Henry Wall, who has appeared before this committee and always with very specific effects of decisions that have been made on the people you represent in the Kenora district and in the north. I wanted to ask you about what resources you feel would help to mitigate these very precise shortfalls in terms of service to community, whether it's housing, X amount for new-build housing, or giving the people the affordability to be more portable in where they live, the services around mental health and addictions. It's very disheartening to hear that people have to travel so far, and because of the disruptions to their lives, it doesn't allow them to be better off in terms of their well-being and their mental health. Can you please just articulate for us what your solutions are?

Mr. Henry Wall: We could spend quite a bit—there's quite a bit there, so I'm going to focus on two very specific things.

And again, it's very nice to see you, Mitzie. It's always a pleasure.

I think, for one, to look at the northern Ontario and the Far North contexts, we have to look at deindustrializing mental health and addiction options. It's very similar to—it's set up in large urban centres with very specific and focused treatment, but for our young people and our community members, it's very difficult to have to uproot and travel hundreds of kilometres, sometimes thousands of kilometres, to access services, say, treatment. And then the question is, what happens post-stabilization? That's where we see individuals just fail, and it just doesn't work. So one is we really need to start looking at deindustrializing treatment options, actually bringing treatment and healing back into our community. That would be number one in terms of the mental health and addiction piece.

On the other front too is housing affordability. We can have housing benefits, we can have housing allowances, but if families have no place to actually spend or put that money towards rent, then it doesn't matter. The long-standing housing crisis in the Far North: It has been in the making for a couple of generations. I think we have to look at it in terms of, how do we afford it as a collective, as one taxpayer, as it was mentioned?

I want to use this as an example: When I took on the role of CAO of the Kenora District Services Board, our EMS budget was just under \$12 million. It was a relatively small service. Our 2021 budget is now almost \$21 million. We're talking about almost a doubling of just EMS—lights and sirens—over a course of six years, and this is

cost-shared 50-50 between the province of Ontario and our municipalities.

So my question to our municipalities and to government is, what if we could have used that \$10 million to actually invest in housing? We know that works. We've done a number of projects now without support from health. We just know it's the right thing to do. We've created a safe bed program in partnership with CMHA Kenora in Kenora, and what we've seen is, yes, it is an effective ER diversion strategy. It works. We've done a supportive housing project with Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services in Sioux Lookout. What we saw is: We did a bit of an analysis, four months pre-move-in and four months post-move-in, and immediately the calls for services, whether it was policing or EMS, were reduced by almost 60%. In other words—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): I apologize. The time has come up.

I will now go to the opposition for the second round. MPP Mamakwa.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Maybe, Henry, can you continue that conversation now, what you were trying to complete.

Mr. Henry Wall: Thank you very much. In terms of when we look at housing and making housing happen, I think we need to look at that as this is our collective interest, both from a local government standpoint but also from a province of Ontario standpoint, and looking at where we are spending money. There's a lot of money being spent in the north on lights and sirens that I think if it were redirected to infrastructure, getting housing happening, we could actually reduce the long-term dependency, the ever-increasing cost to lights and sirens and that reactionary mode.

So, if I could leave the committee with one thing, that would be that, is to really look at the north in terms of thinking differently, knowing that we have a couple of generations worth of infrastructure deficit to address in order to just meet the status quo. Thank you very much.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you for that.

Jason, Sheila and also Henry, thank you for those presentations.

For me, coming from far northern Ontario, from the Kiiwetinoong riding, I see how colonialism works, I see how oppression works and I see how racism works. Sometimes we deal with that jurisdictional Ping-Pong that is played in the lives and the wellness of Indigenous people in the area, and I see it as structural violence, I see it as structural racism. I think sometimes when we talk about some of that, that these decisions are fiscal-driven decisions, sometimes we forget about the human deficit, the human cost that it has.

Maybe I'm going to go to Henry really quickly here on policy changes: I know one of my colleagues from the government side asked about the policy change with becoming a part of the health. Can you elaborate on that a bit, Henry?

Mr. Henry Wall: I certainly can. Just with respect to looking at how to finance, how to actually use our current economic development tools—and we have another co-

presenter that's in a development business. If housing providers like KDSB and other economic development organizations actually had access to the rent subs that are part of the mental health and addictions budget, what that would allow us to do is actually be able to finance new infrastructure development, because without it, it's very difficult to be approaching private sector banks or even CMHC through the co-investment fund without that commitment. So it is a policy change that doesn't cost any more money necessarily, but what it does is, it brings the housing balance sheet into the expenditure income statement that we need to do and actually puts them together as one to create one community infrastructure piece to help people.

That is one where I see across Ontario that there is—well, just in the district of Kenora, we're sitting on well over a hundred million dollars' worth of housing equity that's been paid off. It is nearly debt-free. Why can't we leverage that by partnering formally with various ministries? That's where I see some policy varies and that thinking just isn't quite there yet.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you for that, Henry. I know the Kenora District Services Board has done a lot of work with municipalities—not only that, First Nations' partnerships—in trying to move forward in addressing these very issues.

Jason, I want to give you a question on some of the Anishnawbe First Nation business side of things. As part of the economic recovery from COVID-19, one of the things that this government is focusing on is northern development. I know you spoke about how First Nations Indigenous people need to be part of the decision-making process.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes. 1540

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: What advice would you have for this committee to implement in trying to address that Indigenous people are part of the decision-making process when we talk about development?

Mr. Jason Rasevych: That has been a long-standing challenge, whether it be comprehensive planning that isn't being integrated into provincial planning, whether it's the Ontario long-term energy plan or other intermodal transportation and corridor planning. But a lot of the community-driven processes are not being recognized, and that creates risks and challenges later in regard to permitting, environmental assessments and regulatory processes for improvement.

What I mentioned in the presentation—because of COVID, it's more challenging now and near impossible in remote First Nations, rural First Nations to be able to consult with our community members regarding these legacy infrastructure and other developments that are happening in other sectors. We're seeing more communities step up, advocating for the need, but we're not seeing any action on that. We're seeing more communities step in related to litigation and other issues relating to the permitting process, which doesn't meet standards for meaningful consultation.

Part of the recommendation would be to have more of a proactive approach related to policy and related to funding that could be there providing support for participation of Indigenous people in more of those planning processes early on. The announcement related to the Canada Infrastructure Bank of dollars that are going to be there, 80% capital for Indigenous infrastructure: That's going to require a business case. That's going to require First Nations to develop a business case—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Jason Rasevych:—and there needs to be some thinking related to where Ontario's commitment fits within these capital infrastructure projects, or perhaps assisting communities to prepare their business case, to be able to apply for those federal dollars. Those dollars are not going to be accessed if there isn't an opportunity for levels of government to work together and not play the political Ping-Pong that you talk about related to jurisdiction and funding programs, as well as other infrastructure projects that go to certain companies that are better positioned.

Where we are seeing more of a need for Indigenous ownership and equity in these projects—I have been involved in a few related to broadband infrastructure where it seemed to be the big public company that wanted to own the long-haul network for fibre optic, but not provide the opportunity for Indigenous nations to own that, which creates certain challenges in moving forward to get access to fibre. It puts the community in a tough position to say, “We need this”—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. I apologize to cut you off.

We'll now go to the independent members for the second round. Any questions from the independents?

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Yes. Sorry about that, Chair.

I wanted to shift to Sheila. Pretty much everything you've said needs to be said and needs to be heard and acted upon so that we can have a more inclusive recovery for all people, especially those hardest hit by the pandemic. That's really important when government is putting forward solutions and budgets.

I actually just really want to give you an opportunity to continue to help us see a fuller picture than what is captured in this budget. I agree with you when you flag that the FAO has sort of given a forewarning that if we don't pay attention to how programs are being spent and managed, there is going to be a gap at the end that forces us to make the hard choice of reducing the quality of service to the people of Ontario, which we don't want to see happen. If you could just continue to share the insights that you have with the committee.

Ms. Sheila Block: I think it's important to recall—because the pandemic kind of does strange things to our memory, you know? There's kind of the before time and there's now that the government has baked in about \$4 billion's worth of tax cuts. In combination with that and with a longer-term underinvestment, I'd say, in public services, what has become very evident during the pandemic are these two crises, nationally and particularly

in Ontario. One is an incredible inadequacy of public services, and the most tragic way that we're seeing this was in long-term care and now is in hospitals, where you do not have surge capacity. But I think the education sector is really one that we are going to see these longer-term knock-on effects. I was really struck by some of the other presenters talking about, in very real and personal terms, the impact of having no Internet access when your kids are supposed to be learning online.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Ms. Sheila Block: We need a shift, a fundamental shift, for the ongoing climate crisis and for the crisis of inequality to be addressed. And we need a shifting in priorities and a shift towards more of a priority to what's sometimes called the caring economy, which is taking care of older people, taking care of young people and taking care of sick people. That is going to require resources, and to spend those resources. We need to not be decreasing taxes but increasing them and not looking—what really strikes me about this budget is it looks so much to private solutions to collective problems. The \$400 in your pocket for each one of your school-aged children is a private solution that cannot begin to address what we will be facing and what will be facing children. It's the same thing with the education tax credit and in particular with the enhancement to the CARE credit: It's all individual, it's all personalized. And what we need are collective solutions to this crisis.

I guess I just want to leave with the incredible inequality that the health outcomes are having on racialized populations. It fills me with shame, actually, that this is happening and I am a bystander to this in this province, and it is continuing to happen. We need protections for essential low-wage workers.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

We'll now go to the government side for their final round. MPP Piccini.

Mr. David Piccini: Thanks, Chair. Thanks for unmuting me.

Thank you to all the presenters. Henry, it's good to see you again. I appreciate the work you're doing, Sheila, and your advocacy, Jason. This is so critical to Ontario's long-term economic recovery.

I appreciate some of the things you touched on, Sheila, and your advocacy. I know you talked about a caring economy. Of course, the additional \$1.8 billion into health care to support our small and medium-sized hospitals; investing in preventative management; caring for people in-home with community paramedicine, which was expanded in the budget; investing in long-term care and new and modern spaces to support our loved ones; and the 27,000 health care professionals are just some of the things.

Your child care piece was well said. I think a marked pivot from the closure of schools—we're now seeing, I think, 35 child care spaces in Norwood that just opened up thanks to investments the government is making at schools that would have been shut down before. Your point about

child care, about making sure we're caring for Ontarians not just in the city centres but in rural ones is so important. I think we certainly see that in this budget.

Finally, on race-based data and investments into Indigenous in our north, with expanded OSAP eligibility; working with culturally-based learning with our Indigenous institutes and race-based data—we heard from Smokey Thomas this morning, applauding the work that Premier Ford is doing on that, and working together, really, all levels of government. A shout-out to MPP Hunter and the work that the previous government did on this and building—I think we've got to find a common thread going forward.

My question—sorry for the long ramble. Henry, on that Indigenous piece, I think your poignant examples—a memory came up on Facebook from finance committee: Sol standing with me up at Meno Ya Win, and I'll never forget that trip. We saw expanded OSAP eligibility for Indigenous institutes. Part of reconciliation—the understanding I saw up there was critical. The cultural learning, the teachings with one's elders and expanded OSAP eligibility for the first time for Indigenous learners: Can you speak to that in the budget and how critical really letting elders and our Indigenous community lead in that recovery will be?

1550

Mr. Henry Wall: I think it's critically important. With that too, on the topic of education, there's the financial access to education and then there's the actual access to education. In part, what we're finding is that so many of our young people have to leave their community to access high school. Is there a means that we can actually use technology to prevent young people from having to leave their community just to get a high school education?

Then we have the situations, whether it's in Sioux Lookout or in Dryden, as an example, where we have a high school at half capacity. Part of the reason it is like that is that we lack housing for families to come together as a collective to go through the education experience with their children.

I think those are all really important pieces, but really looking and saying, "How do we create access in the north, actual physical access to education?" Because many children—I remember what I was like before I entered grade 9, and I would not have been prepared or as brave as so many of our Indigenous young people are to leave not just their community but their family to go to high school.

I see two things: looking at broadband to prevent more travel, to give access to students, but then also looking at infrastructure investment on, say, student and family housing, so it's a collective, shared experience through the education system.

I heard a young Indigenous girl say this to a group of us once: "It was education that got us into this. It will have to be education to get us out of this." She was speaking about the impacts of the residential school legacy. So I think that's really important.

There are really good things, but I think, as a collective, there are ways we can actually work together to ensure that when it comes to access, it really means access.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. David Piccini: Henry, you touched a bit on the broadband piece. I think it's really underscoring what is the largest investment in Canadian history into broadband. And it's more than just that. I think to my local community. I've got two Indigenous communities, 10 municipalities. We've seen co-ops funded through this. We've seen Indigenous communities funded through ICON. Building on that, I don't think it's an either/or of in person. I think you've got to have online, and you've got to have access to grow business. I think to the proud cultural agricultural tradition in the community I represent. That's dependent on technology now, and online.

Can you speak to the importance there of the broadband investment, what is now the largest in Canadian history, a historic investment, and how that can help? Because you've spoken so eloquently on the Indigenous experience in the north too.

Mr. Henry Wall: If I could on that, there is a lot of promise in the budget with the investments on broadband. What I would recommend to the standing committee is to really work with us, work with organizations such as Jason is representing in terms of, "How do we ensure that this will happen, to give families and businesses rapid access to it?"

We don't just have to look at traditional, pretty significantly invested infrastructure. We have new technologies now that we could utilize in the north. I would say, work with us to give our communities access to these investments, so it doesn't risk going just to a select few fairly large organizations, as we have historically seen.

It is quite expensive to—sometimes, that last mile with a land line and so forth, it could cost a couple of million dollars. Well, perhaps through other technologies, that couple of million dollars can actually connect tens of thousands of households to it. That was something that I want to leave the committee with, is that really looking at solutions coming from our region when it comes to this topic.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. David Piccini: I think the ICON program—the grassroots up, really. The two intakes that we see with ICON that are grassroots community-based—I think again to Indigenous applications that have come in locally, municipally-led.

What about the barrier reduction on hydro poles and municipal rights of way, which has been included in legislation from the government as well, reducing those barriers? Is that meaningful for the north?

Mr. Henry Wall: I would defer that maybe to some of the other presenters, in that while I know quite a bit, I also need to acknowledge my limitations to certain aspects of it. I don't know if any of the other presenters might have some thoughts on that. Thank you. Sorry about that.

Mr. David Piccini: No, it's okay. Thanks very much, Henry.

Chair, how much time?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Twenty seconds.

Mr. David Piccini: Okay. Well, thank you, all. It's always the darn clock. But thank you for your presentations today.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. That concludes our time. Thank you to all three presenters—

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes, MPP Hunter?

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: If I may, I have a request for our research team, especially with the presentation that we just heard from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. I believe that it is important that this committee—through you, Chair, to research—request that the Financial Accountability Officer provide his written submission to the committee on the budget and that that can be made available to all members as well.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): For this to be an official request, MPP Hunter, we need an agreement from the committee. Is there an agreement from the committee on MPP Hunter's request? Agreed? MPP Cho?

Mr. Stan Cho: Chair, if I could suggest, these are relevant topics to discuss as a committee perhaps outside of deputations, because I think the floor here belongs to those coming to present and to give their opinions. Maybe this is something we can discuss with members only at a future time.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Hunter?

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Chair, I do think that—I'm asking for this information to be shared, and I would appreciate if it was done at the committee level; or as a member, I can ask for the research to be done as well.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Hunter, this is the time for the presentations, so we'll discuss it after the presentations are done.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Sure. We can come back to it after the next round. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you.

I would like to thank the presenters once again for presenting before the committee. Thank you so much.

ONTARIO CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
ONTARIO BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT
AREA ASSOCIATION

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Before we move on to our next group of presenters, just a quick update: For the Ontario Business Improvement Area Association, Doug Sams should be listed as vice-president of the OBIAA and as Kerr Village BIA's executive director. It's just a quick correction of what we have on the agenda.

We will now start with our first presenter this afternoon for the 4 p.m. slot, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce. If you can please state your name for the record, and you will have seven minutes for your presentation.

Mr. Rocco Rossi: Merci, monsieur le Président. Thank you very much. It's a great pleasure to be here. I'm Rocco Rossi. I have the great honour of being the president and

CEO of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce. I am joined by two brilliant colleagues, Michelle Eaton, our VP of public affairs, and Daniel Safayeni, our VP of policy, so any hard questions should be directed to them.

I want to start with a shout-out and thanks to all parties. This, as has become a cliché to say, has been a time without a playbook, and so it's been crucial, the willingness to collaborate, to co-operate, to be open to a give-and-take, to take your best shot at policy and then be open to improving as we go along. We and our 60,000 members in every corner of this province are delighted with the openness we've had from all political parties and from the government on this.

Before I get into the budget—because it's a perfect case in point. We had the budget and then we had the third lockdown. There is a regular pace of policy development, and then there is policy in the time of COVID. There are a number of things that we absolutely love in the budget, and I will speak to those, but I do want to stress that with the third lockdown, without further supports, these new restrictions are going to have a devastating effect on Ontario businesses and on main streets in towns in every corner of this province.

Look, I'm delighted that the budget focused on a couple of key areas that were of particular importance, and I'll refer the committee to the OCC's submission; I'm happy to send copies of that if you don't have access to them already—but really understanding that the business community needed cash and not more loans. So the extension, that second round of the small business grant, the \$10,000 to \$20,000, particularly the fact that it was made automatically and didn't require additional paperwork, was really, really crucial. Given this new lockdown, we certainly will hope that the government considers a third round, because it will most definitely be needed.

1600

The fact that there's an added focus on the hardest-hit sectors and communities and much-needed aid for women, who, as we've laid out in our she-covery report, have been deeply impacted by the pandemic; initiatives relating to tourism, training, and what you've been speaking about, the broadband infrastructure—really crucial not just to an economic rebound but, quite frankly, to a world of both online learning. Thinking about training and retraining widely across this province, going forward we're simply not going to be able to do that on dial-up. We certainly don't want to see students having to seek out McDonald's parking lots to be able to do their work and get access to broadband. So that historic investment is something that we deeply applaud that the government has undertaken.

On the small business front, again, we really, really appreciate the use of the automatic top-up. Small businesses and SMEs are in need and often don't have the capacity to go through all kinds of forms and red tape, and so making that simple in this critical time was really crucial. We very much applaud that. And the fact that it's in cash, that it's grants and not more loans—also crucial.

From the standpoint of the hard-hit women in our province through this, investing in child care, advancing

inclusive economic growth, fighting gender-based violence—important steps to women’s economic empowerment. This isn’t simply a justice issue; this is an economic issue, fundamental. We are at participation rates by women in the economy that we’ve not seen since the 1990s. That is not the way that we’re going to get back to full recovery, and so these steps are very, very welcome.

I’m encouraged by the fact that, essentially, the small business grant program was extended by having some key tourism categories. It’s set up as a separate program but, in effect, has a similar impact—very, very welcome; along with steps that have been taken to underscore and understand that not all regions have been hit in the same way, not all regions will recover in the same way. So, the regional opportunities tax credit and the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. work with rural and northern communities are really crucial in those areas. I cannot underscore the impact on tourism. People talk about the K-shaped recovery—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Rocco Rossi: It’s been a K-shaped recession, and tourism has been at the lowest end of the lowest ebb, so really, really crucial. Workforce development: so important. The Ontario Jobs Training Tax Credit to support 50% of eligible expenses I think is just absolutely crucial. We highly support this, both now and for the recovery.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

We’ll move to our next presenter, the Ontario Business Improvement Area Association. Please state your name for the record, and you can get right into your presentation.

Ms. Kay Matthews: Hello. My name is Kay Matthews, and I’m with the Ontario Business Improvement Area Association. I’m their executive director. I’m joined by our committee advocacy chair. He’s also our vice-president and executive director of Kerr Village BIA.

OBIAA is staff-poor but volunteer-rich, so we don’t have advocacy committees—well, we have committees, but we don’t have staff. We call ourselves OBIAA, and we do represent 315 business improvement areas in the province of Ontario. These are Ontario’s main streets, and our BIAs have members from almost every sector of business, whether it is the small sole operator, which you would call the ma-and-pa shop—we like to call them main-street class—to large hotels and industries. Our members are key participants in foreign trade, supporting tourism and investing in their local communities, and that is specifically in public realm investments. They make the areas beautiful places to visit as staff, as tourists and as visitors.

The OBIAA board and committee are working to be the voice of our BIAs and our members. We believe no business that is feeling the impact of the pandemic should be left behind. There’s no competition for hardest-hit; each and every one of us is feeling some sort of pain from this, whether it’s economically, whether it’s physically or whether it’s mentally. This submission is for all of the hard-working businesses and our hard-working BIAs.

Getting right to the point, I want to talk about six different aspects: (1) Digital Main Street, (2) the Ontario

Small Business Support Grant, (3) the Ontario tourism small business support grant, (4) support to Ontario’s BIAs, and (5) support to the main street community, as well as the main street tax class.

Coming back to the first point, Digital Main Street, I want to thank you and commend you for again giving some finances to Digital Main Street. It has been incredibly impactful. Even before this pandemic hit, it was really starting to make huge inroads in helping some of our main street businesses become and transform their businesses digitally.

The one thing—and we talked about broadband at the beginning of this—is that as those communities come onto broadband, Digital Main Street cannot go away. It has to continue as we have that connectivity. It needs to be that thread that continues. It cannot just be a one-year program, year after year, where we start to roll down and then we start to move back up again. It has to be in concert with that \$2.9 billion of broadband investment that you’re making.

We’re also a little concerned about the amount that was placed in the budget for this one. In the second aspect of Digital Main Street, every business was trying to get that small grant, to get that digital transformation training. So we are a little concerned about that amount. I’m happy to talk about that as well.

Moving on to the Ontario Small Business Support Grant, wonderful support, and we applaud you and thank you for that. But we would encourage you to change the eligibility to all businesses that have received a revenue loss over this year rather than a list of businesses, because it means that some businesses are being left out. A for-instance on that would be the dry cleaner. The dry cleaner is deemed essential, but nobody is going and getting their suit jackets or their ties or their shirts done, so their revenue loss is significant, but they can’t get this grant. So, I would really encourage you to consider that. Look at that eligibility list, throw it out and just say, “If there’s a revenue loss, let’s help them,” and not leave anybody behind—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Ms. Kay Matthews: Thank you—especially for areas in Toronto and Peel, which are the most expensive places to pay rent, yet they’ve gotten the same amount as Pembroke or Sarnia.

The other one is the Ontario tourism small business grant. Again, we really urge you to get that out. We really thank you about that, but we’re concerned that the \$20,000 will not be enough, because many of those businesses have never received any support. Take the local travel agent, who has been giving refunds and cancellations without any investment from people bringing in new business, new travel, new tours. They have really been challenged, and they have not received any support.

The last three, I’m just going to quickly go through. The BIA support: BIAs are local boards of council, and although you’ve given a great deal of funding to municipalities, very little to none of it actually trickled down to the BIAs, which are investing in the local community.

They're the ones who are helping with the homelessness issues, because they're the feet on the street. Even your most recent Ontario Trillium Foundation situation—it's not a situation, but a community-developed building fund. It's an Ontario tourism, or OTF, fund and they can't qualify for that. So many of these things are being missed when it comes to BIAs, and they need to be able to have access to funding in order to help their business communities.

1610

I mentioned the homelessness and opioid crisis. We did not really see this in the economic budget but would like you to realize that our main streets are the ones that are dealing with the impacts of this. They're the ones that are trying to help their businesses understand how to work with the homelessness.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Ms. Kay Matthews: Many of those business owners come to their businesses in the morning and they find somebody who has had an opioid crisis right in front of their business. There need to be supports to BIAs from that point of view, as well as support to our communities to help us move through this homelessness and opioid crisis.

And the final one I want to talk about is the main street tax class. That main street tax class is brilliant, and we so thank you for listening to us and giving us that opportunity. We're really asking that when you're working with your budget to determine and give some sort of parameters on what that definition of the main street small business tax would be—so that our municipalities can actually start from there and then build their own definition.

Finally, we would like to thank you for all your support to our business sectors. Main streets have been decimated for the past year, but we do know they will rise again—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. I apologize to cut you off. The time has come up.

Before we start with the questions, I would like to do an attendance check. MPP Pang, can you please confirm your attendance?

Mr. Billy Pang: Hi. MPP Billy Pang here, Mr. Chair. I'm in my riding of Markham–Unionville.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you.

We'll start with independent members for questions. MPP Hunter.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Thank you so much to all of the presenters. It was a nice balance of ideas that came forward, and I really appreciate it.

I actually have been talking about the small business support grant, because as a small business owner—that's how I started off in the business world, starting my own company—I know how important it is, regardless of size, that when there is such a shock that we've had to our economy, that businesses feel that support, especially small enterprises and microenterprises as well.

As we have the discussion, I want to hear both presenters. The Ontario Chamber of Commerce: Rocco, you talked about the automatic nature of it being really great for business, of course, reducing that burden of administration. But what that automatic renewal does is that those

that were not eligible or didn't know about it—I mean, I think over 100,000 have received it, but hundreds of thousands more have not. They should be given the opportunity and the option to participate in this and get the benefit of the first, second and, if there is one, a third round.

Can you maybe speak to that need in the small business community to receive that liquidity and that support so that we can get to the recovery and growth we all want to see post-pandemic?

Mr. Rocco Rossi: Well, as my honourable colleague from OBIAA put it so well, we'd obviously love to see the category expanded. We were delighted to see it expanded into the tourism sector—under a different name, but effectively the same program—so there was an expansion in the qualification to many more businesses than had been captured in the first. We also, as people who are concerned, yes, with support today but ultimately as well with the debt and deficits that get built up over time—to see also the combination of what all levels of government are doing to support businesses.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Mr. Rocco Rossi: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. Was that it?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Thanks for that. Maybe we can have Kay also chime in. I loved your phrase. I wrote it down: Throw out the eligibility list and bring in those businesses that have been affected so that they can survive, really.

Ms. Kay Matthews: Thank you. Yes, it has been a real challenge, because from our point of view, we're hearing from all of these businesses, whether they're sole proprietors or whether they're a little bigger, that they're not eligible, and then they're done. That's been a real challenge all the way through. But they are eligible, because they have been feeling the impacts just as much as everybody else has.

I think beyond that, there needs to be a third round. Rocco, you're absolutely right: There needs to be a third round on that one. We really need to make sure that no business is left behind.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: That's great. Thank you.

How much time do I have, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Forty-five seconds.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: I want to thank both of you for your advocacy on behalf of businesses of all sizes and in all regions of the province. There's no question that with this pandemic, we have to see the health crisis brought under control. Just yesterday, we had the second-highest positivity rate in terms of cases since the pandemic began, so that has to be the focus. But once we do that, that recovery and that growth for Ontario are essential, and the role that you play on behalf of your members is really important. So, I want to thank you for your advocacy and the great work that I see you're doing. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

We'll go to the government side now. I'll start with MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thanks, Chair. I really appreciate that.

Kay, I'm going to start with you, if you don't mind. You talked a little bit about Digital Main Street. I've said it a few times in the House; I have said it a number of times outside of the House. I will freely admit I am stealing the line from Oracle Corp.: If you're not in e-business, you're going to be out of business.

When we're talking about Digital Main Street, the ability to bring so many of those small businesses, the mom-and-pop shops, as we have talked about—our the main street, as you have mentioned—online is something that will absolutely help during COVID. But can you expand upon how that is going to help once COVID is over?

Ms. Kay Matthews: Absolutely, and thank you for that question. We started this project long before COVID hit, and what we discovered was that those businesses that had taken the first round of funding—that was in 2018 and 2019—were in a better place from which to move forward.

But what we're seeing now is businesses closing. What we're seeing now is businesses pivoting. What this means is that we're going to have a whole round of new businesses opening—because they will open, and I trust in that. I trust that our economy will rebuild and we will rebuild, because main street is the backbone of our economy.

So, we need to make sure that those new businesses, those new entrepreneurs, those businesses that are retiring and handing over the reins to the next generation keep up with technology, move with technology and are ready and nimble, especially with broadband coming into that amount. For many of the communities that don't have it now and don't have that ability, I see Digital Main Street as a great solution. It's that whole adage that if you teach somebody to fish, it's far better than giving them the fish, and that's what Digital Main Street is. It's teaching people how to use technology and then they're able to customize exactly what technologies they need to fulfill the goals of their business.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thanks for that. I'm going to take something you put in there near the end of that, and that was about the rural broadband aspect. In my riding I've got the city of Peterborough, which is considered an urban centre, but I also have six other municipalities which are not urban centres. I myself live less than five minutes from the city of Peterborough, but I don't have reliable high-speed broadband.

I have got some of the most beautiful tourist areas in all of Ontario. Coming up to Buckhorn, spending some time on Stony Lake, travelling along the Trent-Severn system: All of those areas are absolutely the most picturesque places in all of Ontario. I defy anyone to disagree with me on it. We have everything that you can get anywhere in Ontario here. The biggest problem we have, though, is they do not have high-speed Internet.

It is a game-changer, having high-speed broadband expanded into these areas. I have said myself a number of times that you can have such a high quality of life living

in one of these areas if you have access to the entire world. If we expand that broadband so that you can be sitting on your deck on Stony Lake, enjoying everything that we have to offer, and be connected to a company in the Czech Republic or a company in Brazil or a company in New York state, or just Toronto, it is a game-changer.

1620

Do you mind expanding a little bit on what you think that additional broadband access will mean for those small businesses in all of the rural areas of Ontario?

Ms. Kay Matthews: Absolutely. Don't get me wrong: Having our main streets there is a huge part. You mentioned Buckhorn, and so many of those areas—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Ms. Kay Matthews: —but you still need community. You still need a place to go, and our main streets are always going to have that. They're always going to be your morning farmers' market. They're always going to be your connection with people, having your coffee and so on.

But if you're able to take your beautiful product that you have, and you're in a hamlet or a small area, and you're now able to make those connections by connecting through Digital Main Street, whether it's the ShopHERE program or those sorts of things, you're going to be able to have that connection far beyond your community, which is a wonderful way, obviously, to help and encourage your own economy and to make yourself more self-sufficient.

That broadband is going to really expand beyond our main streets, for sure, but I truly believe our main streets are still that community place that we want to come to, we want to celebrate and we want to have that interaction. I'm not sure if that 100% answers your question, but it's my kick at the can.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Chair, how much time is left?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm going to pivot, then, to Rocco. Rocco, it's good to see you again. Thank you very much for coming. One of the things that you had talked about with all of the different grants that we have, the small business grants in particular—I appreciate the positive feedback that you gave to us on that.

Do you mind picking up a little bit, though, on the fact that there isn't another round of applications that people will actually have to go through, that if you've already gone through the process, if you had already been approved—again, I don't want to sound like I'm saying anything negative about any of the small businesses. I was a small business owner once myself. I looked at running my business. I did not want to have to be tied up doing paperwork, filling out forms and applications to get things from the government in order for them to support me. Do you mind touching on how it's going to make it easier, then, for those businesses?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Rocco Rossi: Again, I did raise it in my comments, and I would repeat it, that people need help, not paperwork. MPP Hunter raises a decent point, which is that it's

great for those who qualified in the first round that there isn't more paperwork to get into the second round, but then that limits the pool for additional eligibility. So, I'm really glad to see the tourism piece added. Those were important things that we were calling for.

But again, this is what the government is doing in total around a more digital-first and streamlining of government, to make it a one-window world. It's beyond just this grant; it's thinking about having a mindset that for a small business, they carry all of the hats.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

We'll now go to the opposition for the first round. MPP Fife?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thanks to all the presenters. I feel like we've been having this conversation for a full year, because we have been having the conversation for a full year.

I want to address Rocco and Kay, because I was economic development critic, so I heard from businesses across the province. I know that one in six are on the verge of closing. The announcement on Wednesday may be the last stop for them. At the very beginning of this pandemic, the government offered loans and deferrals primarily, and then in the fall, the small business grant.

The eligibility piece has already been addressed by my colleagues, and I did ask the finance minister this morning if he would be amenable to changing that and widening the eligibility to apply for the small business grant. I didn't receive an answer on that, but I do think it's important for us to try to ensure that other businesses, especially given the state of emergency and where we are as a province, have the opportunity to at least apply for that funding.

Businesses now, though, on average have about \$170,000 worth of debt, and I wanted to know how your members are dealing with that reality and what they're looking for from the government on that debt load, because it can be pretty crippling. One Ottawa business that I've been working with did take the deferral of the taxes, but they supply their brewery and they supply restaurants and, of course, that restaurant industry has not recovered. Now the Ministry of Finance is actually charging them 7% interest on those deferred taxes. I don't feel that that's helpful to those businesses.

I wanted to give you an opportunity to offer some feedback on that. Rocco, you can go first, or Kay.

Mr. Rocco Rossi: Sure. Thank you so much, MPP Fife. You've been a great interlocutor in all of this and a great champion for small business.

The point you made in the set-up that a big chunk of the early assistance, particularly from the provincial government, was in the form of deferrals—that was incredibly welcome and very useful for cash flow purposes in the short term. But long-term, as you said, that effectively becomes debt on the balance sheet—by another name, but it is debt—and it's a big chunk of that \$170,000.

One way of effectively expanding the qualification, if the government was in a position financially to be able to expand and assist, would be to see about writing down

some of that deferral, which effectively would turn it into a grant from what it was, which is short-term, no-interest debt. Hopefully, with a lot of the contingency lines that have been built into the last two budgets, there might be room to do that, because that, in effect, would be the fastest no-paperwork way of dealing with a new infusion because that will change the calculation for lots of businesses that have to determine, "Should I, in fact, reopen? Based on the debt that I have and what margin I'm likely to get when I reopen, how long will it take me to pay that back?" At a certain point, the math becomes overwhelming and you just hand over the keys, because to do otherwise would be to accept indentured servitude, and that's not going to happen.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Kay, what about you?

Ms. Kay Matthews: Well, I think Rocco hit it right on. I'm watching, even in my local community, a restaurant that we've had for 20 years close. They said that the third wave was just—that's it. Not only are they closing, though, you have to remember that they probably already have a mortgage on their house—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Ms. Kay Matthews: —to keep their business going. They probably are barely paying their food every night. And now these loans are being called in—and they are being called in—so it's beyond that. It's people not having a way to actually provide going forward.

A year ago, it was another story. Now we need to defer that and write off, as Rocco said. It's desperate and it's going to cause even more on the economy if we don't help them.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Okay. I think that's really important for the committee to hear on a go-forward basis.

Also, Kay, I just want to thank you for raising the opioid issue. It's come up throughout the day through various delegations, and it's a crisis, right? I know that those main street businesses that you represent have seen the impact on almost the culture of the downtown core, so I wanted to acknowledge that.

Also, just on the she-cession, because I have to be consistent in my advocacy, the government mentioned women 27 times during the budget speech, but organizations like the CCPA and the YWCA have indicated that the job tax credit, for instance, which offers 50% of tuition, up to \$2,000, is still a barrier for women to re-enter the workforce, because those upfront costs for tuition are still very high.

1630

I'm hoping that the government hears that feedback and amends the nature of that tax credit, because we do need women—and I want to thank the chamber for your advocacy on this. The she-covery needs to happen in order for our economic recovery to happen. Have you received any feedback on that? I know you said that on paper, it looks good, but it's the application of these ideas that sometimes becomes the barrier to a good idea.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Rocco Rossi: What I would say is, one of the great virtues that all levels of government have demonstrated

over the course of this crisis is that they put out a policy idea, they see what the uptake is, and if it's not delivering the value that it was intended to do, that there be an opportunity to amend, adjust and go forward. This is an area where I think we should be looking at the feedback, look at what the uptake is as it happens and adjust accordingly.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Yes, I wish that that had happened with the low uptake, actually, on the federal sick day program, because I think the government could have pivoted and supported small businesses with those costs of paid sick days so that, potentially, we wouldn't end up with—we're at over 4,000 new cases today. So, I like your optimism, Rocco, and I'm hoping that, if there's low uptake—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. The time has come up.

We'll now go back to the government side for their second round. MPP Pang, I believe?

Mr. Billy Pang: I have a couple of questions to both of the presenters. I think there are different concerns regarding the government funding. As you may notice, in the 2021 budget, Ontario is investing an additional \$400 million over the next three years in new initiatives to support the tourism, hospitality and culture sectors. This bill and the previously announced investment of \$225 million bring the total to more than \$625 million since the pandemic began.

Will this direct support help businesses hardest hit by the pandemic? Either one can answer. I want to hear from both of you.

Mr. Rocco Rossi: Thank you for the question, MPP Pang. As we've mentioned, and as Kay has talked about in her advocacy throughout this crisis—and the OBIAA has been fantastic—tourism is one of the hardest hit. Tourism, hospitality, anything that's high touch clearly got hit right from the get-go and will be the last to come out of it. So all assistance aimed at that area is helpful.

But, to be clear, the key way, ultimately, is, whatever we can do to accelerate a vaccination rollout, because you look at what's happening with respect to the border—American tourists are key to tourism expenditures in many areas of the province. The US has been far more successful than we have in rolling that out, to the point where the discussions around reopening the border will be, “Well, once Canada gets up to speed, then we'll talk about it.” That's going to be really crucial, well beyond the support dollars that are being provided just to keep people's head above water.

Mr. Billy Pang: How about Kay?

Ms. Kay Matthews: A couple of things on this one: The Municipal Act oversees business improvement areas. The job of a BIA is not to make any one business better. The job of a BIA is to make the area a better place in which to do business. Because of that, they actually do public realm investment: the flowers, the benches, the festivals—all of the different things that we do. Again, if none of that tourism funding goes to BIAs, then no, it's not really going to help. But it will help the small businesses, because those small businesses are the ones that are supporting tourism.

They're the ones hiring the musicians to stand out in the bars and to sing. They're the ones that are supporting the arts. Many of our businesses themselves are tourism businesses. So, yes, that funding is going to significantly help.

But having said that, we do have some BIAs that are 100% tourism, such as Fallsview BIA in Niagara Falls. It's made up of a group of hotels. Until we can get consumer confidence back to filling those heads on beds, no amount of money is going to work, because that confidence needs to come, as Rocco said, from those vaccine rollouts, the rapid-speed testing, and most significantly, a message from all of us saying, “We are confident. We are safe. We have been implementing all the protocols.” That needs to happen very, very quickly, that sort of confidence-building aspect to it.

The final thing is there is really no funding that goes to BIAs as destination organizations, yet we always invest in the destination. So, I'll bring it back to that one and say yes and no.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you. As both of you have also mentioned the vaccination rollout: I just had my own vaccination earlier before I joined the meeting today.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Three minutes.

Mr. Billy Pang: I assume you noticed that we achieved 105,000-plus doses yesterday, as of April 9 at 10:30, and we will ramp up to 150,000 very soon, pending supply. How do you feel about the ramping up, the speed? We are looking at, if we have enough supply, that we could have more than 40% of Ontarians being vaccinated after this, another state-of-emergency lockdown.

I want to hear from you about your perspective because, as you mention, tourism is the first being impacted and the last that will come out. What do you think about the vaccinations?

Ms. Kay Matthews: First of all, I'm going to say that I have confidence enough in it that OBIAA is going to be presenting the majority of its conference at the end of September in person. We're trying to put our money where our mouth is in trying to create that confidence. We've booked our hotel. We've booked our convention centre. We're going to offer some virtual aspects of it, so it has made us change and pivot, but we need to step forward and say we're going to be ready. I think it's been a slower rollout than we had anticipated. I'm not sure it was really anybody's fault but basically one of those perfect storms. But I believe we will get there. I wish we had gotten there a lot faster.

Mr. Billy Pang: Rocco?

Mr. Rocco Rossi: This is so important that we have stood up a council of over 250 businesses, colleges, universities, associations and labour unions with one single goal in mind, and that is doing whatever we can to accelerate the rollout of vaccinations.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Rocco Rossi: Just one example that I'm particularly proud of: Two days ago, the number one highest-volume vaccination site in the entire country was a hockey arena in Hanover, Ontario, that was redesigned, retrofitted

by our co-chair of our vaccination support council, Bruce Power, and donated to the Grey Bruce PHU. They did almost 3,500 vaccinations in one day, more than any site in Toronto or any of the cities in Canada, and over 10% of what the city of Toronto as a whole did.

So, business is there—our members, our colleges, universities and even labour unions—to do whatever we can. It's great to have three days over 100,000. We need to be doing 150,000 a day to deliver, and we're confident we're going to get there, and we're going to lean into it.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

We'll go to the opposition side for their second round of questioning. MPP Arthur?

Mr. Ian Arthur: Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for joining us, Michelle, Daniel and Rocco. It's great to see you, Kay; lovely to see you.

Catherine talked a little bit about this, but I want to talk about that one-in-six number with this third wave. Businesses have patched it together, they've made it through and there is that light at the end of the tunnel. Kay, you talked about how you are going so far as booking a convention; that's the most ambitious thing I've heard recently. I really, really, truly hope you are there.

But why it's almost more important for this final stretch to protect businesses—I love your line, “Throw the list out. Get them the money they need so they're part of our recovery.” Can you talk about the importance of that a little bit? I guess Kay first, and then Rocco.

1640

Ms. Kay Matthews: Where do you begin? Our small main street businesses have invested their whole livelihoods in it. They're not getting a salary; they're not getting a pension. They're getting no support, other than the sales from their business day-to-day. With those sales from their business, they're paying staff, they're paying their rent, they're paying their mortgage and they're paying their nightly groceries to feed their family. And at the same time, they're trying to educate their children.

As Rocco said, they do everything. They wear all the hats, which is exactly what it is. They don't have HR departments to fill out those forms. They don't have any of the infrastructure that a bigger corporation with deeper pockets and more staff has. If we don't get support to them really soon, we're talking more than just businesses lost; we're looking at lives and we're looking at livelihoods lost, of real people.

BIAs and what Rocco does—we're all in the work of human interaction, so our BIAs are seeing that pain every single day. They're talking to them. They're trying to guide them. They're helping them to understand all of the communications that are coming in, the frustration when they've bought enough food for a weekend to open their restaurant, just to find out that they're closed and all of that perishable food has to go out the door. They're spending money on beautiful igloos that are safe, protocol-safe for people to come and dine in, and then are being told they're not allowed to be open.

They don't have that money to invest. They're doing it because they need to keep feeding their families. That one in six is incredibly painful every day, and our BIAs are fatigued and exhausted from trying to help and support them, from hearing their stories and from being their day-to-day support. If we don't support them, they will never be there to support your kid's soccer team. They won't be there to support your community. They need to be there, and they need to be there and walk away without thousands of dollars' worth of debt.

It's so painful in our world right now, because we're there. We're there talking to them every day. Twice a week, I have a Zoom call with all of the BIAs across the province. They're sharing their pain, they're sharing their successes and they're sharing their solutions with each other. Sometimes we laugh; sometimes we cry. But it's always with so much empathy and compassion for what's happening to those small businesses across the province of Ontario.

Mr. Ian Arthur: Rocco? You're still muted, Rocco.

Mr. Rocco Rossi: Thank you for the question, Ian, and thank you for the work in your new role with the party.

As Kay has put it so well, people often try to put this as a dichotomy between money and the economy on one side and health on the other, but it's far more complex than that. There are enormous health issues generated in our membership and beyond. Mental health, which we all talked about as a very, very important question before the pandemic: Imagine where it is now with the anxiety, the worry, the pressures. Substance abuse: We talked about the opioid crisis. A lot of that is linked.

Support is absolutely critical to get through to the other end. We see the light at the end of the tunnel. Let's get as many people as possible, but let's understand that this is a shared responsibility. The province alone is not going to save everyone, nor is the federal government nor municipal governments, but all together, they are to be called on.

That large chunk of deferred taxes and fees from all levels of government really has to be revisited—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Mr. Rocco Rossi: —because if all of that gets called, one of three things happens: (1) You get pushback and you have to kick the can around repayment even further, (2) governments decide to write some or all of it off, or significant amounts of it off, or (3) we will see the real wave of bankruptcies that we've not—even those that we've seen to date will pale in comparison.

At the beginning of this crisis, we pointed out at the OCC that the average SME had 30 to 60 days of cash on hand. I'm often asked, “Rocco, we're a year in and they're still here. How is that possible?” Well, all of that deferred tax and fees etc.—that's been spent. It's not sitting in a bank account anywhere, waiting to be paid back. So when you call for it, that is when the real pain is going to begin.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): One minute.

Mr. Ian Arthur: Do you have a number value on what that deferral would be for SMEs across Ontario? Daniel, maybe?

Mr. Rocco Rossi: Maybe Daniel has it. It's certainly with a “B” in it.

Mr. Daniel Safayeni: We don't have a specific number on that, Ian, but I'm happy to follow up with you afterwards, if we're able to put our thumb on it.

Mr. Ian Arthur: Yes, and I certainly appreciate it's probably a "B" number. But when we look at total spending and what it is going to do to our economy, it would be nice to know what the ask of the government is. If we said we're going to write it off to support those businesses, to help them get through, to help them get on the path of recovery, what number are we asking the government to actually put forward with that? So, yes, if you could follow up, that would be fantastic.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much.

We'll go to the independent members: MPP Hunter, for the last round.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: I do want to say that the \$10 billion in deferrals that the government initially provided to businesses that became due last October is part of the pressure for those small and medium companies, in terms of how do they find this cash when they have not been able to—we've been from one wave to another; we're now into the third. We've been from one lockdown to another, but we haven't really kept up with our economic policy response from the government of Ontario itself. So, I do think that that other shoe is going to drop for those businesses unless the government realizes that the businesses just cannot do that and then restart and grow. Something is going to have to give. My understanding is that the government has been on public record saying that they are going to collect every penny of that, but that's at a cost of business survival.

I do want to give both groups an opportunity to talk about the role of child care. Some of the leading women in finance are Janet Yellen and our own Chrystia Freeland, and they have said that child care is essential to the economy. I really want you to speak to that importance to the businesses that you see in terms of the need for quality, affordable, accessible child care for your member organizations on main streets across our province.

Let's start with Kay.

Ms. Kay Matthews: I'm not sure if Doug has anything to answer on that one specifically, because I'm no longer on the street talking to—in a non-crazy way. But Doug is more involved in the day-to-day of businesses and he might have a better answer to that one. I'm also a grandma, so I don't have [*inaudible*].

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Two minutes.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Go for it, Doug.

Mr. Doug Sams: We actually have a child care centre right in the middle of Kerr Village, and they've gone to a full-service child care. I haven't heard any issues, other than I helped them through a little bylaw thing that they needed. They needed an outdoor play area, so we got it for them. But they're only open certain days of the week. It's very important for the families to be able to drop off their kids so they can go to work and earn a living.

I haven't heard her say specifically anything, but it's something that needs to be addressed and considered, I would think.

1650

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Thank you. I see Michelle nodding. I'm not sure if that means you want to speak, or if Rocco is going to address—

Ms. Michelle Eaton: Thank you, Mitzie. I appreciate that, because I was trying to unmute—unsuccessfully—so I appreciate that you saw me nodding.

The economic impacts of the pandemic have been direct and immediate for women in Ontario. That's a combination of your temporary business shutdowns during the state of emergency being most severely effected on sectors that employ women, and then a lot of these new restrictions on child care—they went on families, but mainly on women again.

Our recent report on the she-covery underscores the importance of making sure—and child care is tricky. It requires a short-term strategy to weather the pandemic, and in the longer term, system-wide reforms to improve accessibility and affordability. It's not a one-size-fits-all issue; it's complicated. We recognize that. My amazing colleague Claudia Dessanti did incredible work on this report. But certainly during a time when our work and home lives have collided, child care is something that will certainly help. We don't like to think of it as a women's issue. It's an economic issue—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you so much. I apologize to cut you off.

That concludes our time. I want to thank all the presenters for appearing before the committee. We appreciate your presentations. Thank you so much for coming.

MPP Hunter, I'm coming to you. Just give me a second. MPP Hunter?

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Thank you, Chair, and—I guess I can thank the presenters as they are dropping off.

So, Chair, I was putting forward a request for research to ask the FAO for a written submission on the budget to be shared with the committee.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Cho?

Mr. Stan Cho: Thank you, Chair. I move that the committee enter closed session for the purpose of organizing committee business and that broadcasting staff be permitted to remain in the closed session meeting for the purposes of operating the electronic meeting today.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): To MPP Hunter's question: I think in order for that to be an official request, MPP Hunter, we need an agreement from the committee.

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Since we have previously started this discussion, I would need agreement from the committee on MPP Hunter's request.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Catherine is trying to speak.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Is there an agreement from the committee?

Interjections.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Go ahead, Catherine. I think they've unmuted you.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Okay.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): So is there an agreement on MPP Hunter's request? No?

Ms. Catherine Fife: I wanted to speak to it.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): There's no debate on this one. We were just asking for an agreement.

MPP Cho, we'll move to you now.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Sorry, Chair, I did also, when I spoke initially—sorry, I'm not able to hear whether—is there an agreement on the request? Because I also had said I would make that request of research myself as a member on the committee.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): No, MPP Hunter, the committee has not agreed to your request.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Okay. Therefore, Chair, I would ask for this to be done as a member of the committee. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): If you're asking for something from the FAO directly, you need to contact the FAO directly for that request, because the committee has not agreed to your request.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Sorry, Chair. My request is for research to ask the FAO for that, as a member of—

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Hunter, in order for that request to be an official request, we need an agreement from the committee, and the committee has not given an agreement on that.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: But I can make that request.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): You have to contact the FAO personally, directly, in order to make that request.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: But, Chair, the services of this committee, through research, are available to members of the committee—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes, MPP Hunter, but the committee has to agree on that. For the official request from the committee, the committee has to agree on that request.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: [*Inaudible*] because that's not my understanding.

Mr. Stan Cho: Chair, I think Sandra has her hand up.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Hunter, for that request, you can contact legislative research directly or the FAO directly, but—

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: There's a research person with her hand up, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Legislative research or FAO—Sandra Lopes?

Ms. Sandra Lopes: Yes, hi. Can you hear me?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes, we can.

Ms. Sandra Lopes: If you'd like, I can reach out to you and we can discuss this research offline.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): All right. Good. Thank you so much.

MPP Cho, you have a motion?

Mr. Stan Cho: Yes. I'll repeat the motion. Thank you.

I move that the committee enter closed session for the purpose of organizing committee business and that broadcasting staff be permitted to remain in the closed session meeting for the purposes of operating the electronic meeting technology.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): A motion has been moved by MPP Cho. Is there an agreement?

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Is there any debate? MPP Hunter.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Sorry, I was hoping that Catherine would finally be permitted to give her comments, because she's been trying to speak.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Any debate on MPP Cho's motion? MPP Fife.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you, Chair. I don't understand why MPP Hunter's request would not be acknowledged by the committee in public session. I mean, the Financial Accountability Officer is a resource to the finance committee. It is not an unusual request for a member of the committee to request an official response to the budget.

This committee constantly wants to do its work in camera, which is also a huge departure from how the finance committee has worked in other years. The resistance is really dumbfounding, actually. There's no good reason for it to happen. We serve at the pleasure of the public of the province of Ontario. The conversations even around organization should happen in public session.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you, MPP Fife. We have already discussed this with the committee, so we are now discussing MPP Cho's motion.

Is there any debate on MPP Cho's motion? MPP Hunter.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Sorry, Chair, I believe that's exactly what we are speaking to. The opportunity for us to hear and receive information on the province's finances by an independent officer who serves this committee—I remember the initial briefing we received as a committee is they are to be of service to the committee, and that's the request that we have. It's been made in a transparent way so that we can have a full and whole perspective of the budget, with the opinion of the independent officer through the Financial Accountability Office. That's the simplicity of the request. It is something that is open to the committee and should be done in an open and transparent way in public session.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you. Any further debate on MPP Cho's motion? Seeing none, are the members ready to vote on MPP Cho's motion? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed—

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Hi, Chair. Sorry, can we have a noted vote on this—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): I have already asked for the vote, MPP Hunter. You can only ask when I was asking for a vote—

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: But Chair, I was signalling and I'm muted, so I'm not sure how you'll see that unless you're watching me on the screen, that I am asking for—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Sorry. I'm looking at the screen, but I didn't see your hand, so I apologize. But I have already asked—

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: But Chair, I had—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Hunter, I apologize. I already asked for the vote to be conducted, so—

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes, we are already halfway through the vote.

All those opposed, please raise your hands. The motion is accordingly carried.

We will move to the closed session now. It will take us a few more minutes in order to go to the closed session, so let's recess for two minutes and we'll come back in two minutes.

The committee recessed at 1700 and later continued in closed session.

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Mr. Stan Cho (Willowdale PC)

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