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P-30

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(Hansard)**

P-30

**Standing Committee on
Public Accounts**

Special Report,
Auditor General:

Emergency Management
in Ontario—Pandemic Response

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Wednesday 14 April 2021

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vérificatrice générale:

Gestion des situations d'urgence
en Ontario – Intervention contre
la pandémie

1^{re} session
42^e législature

Mercredi 14 avril 2021

Chair: Taras Natyshak
Clerk: Christopher Tyrell

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES COMPTES PUBLICS

Wednesday 14 April 2021

Mercredi 14 avril 2021

video conference, following a closed session.

2020 SPECIAL REPORT, AUDITOR GENERAL

MINISTRY OF THE SOLICITOR GENERAL

MR. STEVEN DAVIDSON

Consideration of chapter 1: Special Report on Emergency Management in Ontario—Pandemic Response.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Good afternoon. I would like to call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order.

Before we begin, I'm just wondering if MPP Barrett can log on and identify himself. We missed you this morning. We just need you to tell us who you are and where you're at.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Yes, thank you, Chair. I'm sometimes easily missed. Toby Barrett, and I'm here at Queen's Park.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): We always miss you, Toby. Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

With that, we're here to begin consideration of chapter 1, Special Report on Emergency Management in Ontario—Pandemic Response, from the 2020 special report of the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario.

Joining us here today are the secretary of cabinet and officials from the Ministry of the Solicitor General. You'll have 20 minutes collectively for opening presentations to the committee. We'll then move to the question-and-answer portion of the meeting where we'll rotate back and forth between the government and official opposition caucuses in the 20-minute intervals, with some time for questioning for independent members.

I would invite each person to introduce yourself for Hansard before you begin speaking, and you may begin when ready. Thank you very much, and welcome to public accounts.

Mr. Steven Davidson: Thank you, committee members. My name is Steven Davidson. I'm the secretary of cabinet, head of the Ontario public service, and clerk of the executive council. I'm very pleased to return to the committee today to speak about the COVID-19 Special Report on Emergency Management in Ontario—Pandemic Response, released by the Office of the Auditor General, and the government's response.

I am joined today by Ministry of the Solicitor General officials: Mario Di Tommaso, Deputy Solicitor General of community safety and Commissioner of Emergency Management; Teepu Khawja, chief of emergency management; and Ali Veshkini, associate deputy minister. Also on the line are a few additional government officials.

A few weeks ago, I attended this committee with provincial health officials to speak about the COVID-19 report on outbreak planning and decision-making. The focus of that report was the health response to the pandemic.

Today, the report we are discussing focuses on non-health-sector activities delivered or coordinated through Emergency Management Ontario. I would like, again, to thank the Auditor General and her staff for their work on this report, as well as the other COVID-19 management and preparedness reports.

As we've discussed, the context for these reports is unique as they provide recommendations to inform our COVID-19 response, which is ongoing, as well as our comprehensive review, which will be undertaken post-COVID-19.

I'll speak to a few highlights from the material we submitted in advance of this hearing on how the province's COVID-19 response structure built on the existing emergency management framework and structures in place. I'll then turn it over to Deputy Solicitor General Mario Di Tommaso to speak further about the emergency management framework in Ontario, its role within Ontario's COVID-19 response, and the status of implementation of the audit recommendations.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis which has had, and continues to have, significant impacts, not just on the health of Ontarians, but on all aspects of our society and our economy. Like jurisdictions across Canada and around the world, the global scale of the pandemic and the broad scope of its impacts have challenged us to think differently about how we mobilize as a government and as a society.

As the disease has progressed, new and evolving science, evidence and data continue to emerge, and the health, social and economic implications continue to broaden. This, as I said when I last appeared before the committee, has required a whole-of-government approach, drawing on all ministries in an integrated and coordinated way.

It has also required strengthened partnerships between levels of government and service delivery partners, not

just in the health and emergency management sectors but across multiple sectors.

In early 2020, the province engaged in early, proactive work to review our existing plans, frameworks and structures in the context of COVID-19, and to activate our emergency plans across ministries and sectors, with a focus on ensuring continuity of government operations. We've been guided by international emergency management principles of flexibility, scalability and interoperability, how things connect and work together. Our response has been iterative and action-oriented, building on enhancing our existing structures and frameworks as appropriate.

Statutory authority, as you know, for emergency management in Ontario is provided by the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act, or the EMCPA, which establishes the legal framework for planning for and responding to emergencies. Importantly, the EMCPA, the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act, assigns the Lieutenant Governor in Council the authority to declare a provincial emergency and then to make orders to override other statutes or provide time-limited new authorities to address and mitigate the effects of an emergency.

Over the course of the pandemic, cabinet has declared three provincial emergencies, in March 2020, January 2021 and the current provincial emergency, which was declared on April 7, 2021. Cabinet meets regularly, and often daily, and has issued over 85 emergency orders and made many other regulations covering a wide range of issues to respond to the health, social and economic impacts of the pandemic.

The central coordination table, which I spoke about when I last appeared before the committee and which I co-chair with the Premier's chief of staff, has played an important role in coordinating and leveraging public service expertise, advice and resources from across all ministries, including health and Emergency Management Ontario, to support cabinet in exercising these broad emergency powers.

The Ministry of the Solicitor General and Emergency Management Ontario play a critical leadership, advisory and operational role, including as part of the central coordination table's public safety cross-sectoral working table. Deputy Solicitor General Mario Di Tommaso will speak to this further.

Finally, the government has also convened the Cabinet Committee on Emergency Management, which is an advisory committee of cabinet to discuss specific issues related to the pandemic, including the province's vaccine distribution strategy.

We've leveraged and enhanced our existing structures to respond to the global scale of the pandemic and the unprecedented scope of its impacts. As the pandemic evolves, we continue to review and adjust our approach, and we will do a comprehensive review when the pandemic is over. The learnings from this pandemic and the advice of the Auditor General's report will support our future preparedness and response activities.

I'll now turn it over to Deputy Solicitor General Mario Di Tommaso, but before I do, I do want to acknowledge

the work of the entire public service and our partners throughout the pandemic. This past year has been a challenging one for all of us, and the pandemic has taken a personal toll on the lives of Ontarians, including the tragic loss of life. The challenge is not over, and while the vaccine program continues to scale up, COVID-19 also continues to pose a real and critical risk for Ontarians. I'm tremendously proud and thankful for the hard work, dedication and resilience of our public service in supporting the government's response to the ongoing pandemic and in delivering critical services to protect the health and safety of Ontarians.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. I'll now turn it over to Deputy Minister Di Tommaso.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you, Secretary Davidson, and good afternoon, everyone. My name is Mario Di Tommaso, and I am the Deputy Solicitor General of community safety for the Ministry of the Solicitor General. By way of order in council, I am also appointed as Commissioner of Emergency Management. Thank you so much for the opportunity to address the committee today on chapter 1 of the Auditor General of Ontario's COVID-19 Preparedness and Management Special Report.

I would like to thank the Auditor General for this report. This special report has been helpful to inform our efforts to improve emergency management in Ontario. I'd also like to acknowledge the support that Emergency Management Ontario staff provided to the Office of the Auditor General in its preparation.

Ensuring that Ontario is better prepared for any type of emergency is a top priority for all of us, and Ontario is prepared and ready to respond to an emergency of any scale, anywhere in the province. Our philosophy of continuous improvement helps us respond to changing environments to ensure a full level of readiness. Ontarians and the Ontario government rely on the emergency management public safety experts within the Ministry of the Solicitor General to ensure that we remain safe and secure. As was mentioned by Secretary Davidson, Ontario's COVID-19 response structure has leveraged the existing emergency management framework in Ontario, including legislation, authorities and plans.

Throughout the pandemic, the Ministry of the Solicitor General's advice and expertise have supported the government's COVID-19 response through the central coordination table and sub-table, the Cabinet Committee on Emergency Management and cabinet. This includes ongoing advice on the use of the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act, or the EMCPA, throughout the emergency, as well as support for the development of the reopening Ontario act to address the ongoing effects of the emergency.

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As Commissioner of Emergency Management, in March 2020 and again last month, I encouraged all ministries to review their Continuity of Operations Plans, or COOPs, to support their ministries' readiness. This is

based on the emergency management principle to remain agile and adaptive, so the continuous review of response plans is critically important.

Emergency Management Ontario, or EMO, which operates within the Ministry of the Solicitor General, is a central part of Ontario's emergency management framework. Emergency Management Ontario is responsible for monitoring, coordinating and assisting in the development and implementation of emergency management programs by ministries and municipalities, and the Provincial Emergency Operations Centre, or PEOC, is a coordination facility based in Emergency Management Ontario to support emergency response activities.

As you know, COVID-19 is still having a significant impact on communities right across the province, and fighting this deadly virus remains job number one. By order in council, the Ministry of Health is the designated lead for emergency plans in the areas of human health, disease and epidemics, as well as for health services during an emergency. As such, the Ministry of Health is the provincial lead for the health response aspects of this pandemic. Through Emergency Management Ontario, the Ministry of the Solicitor General has been working with the Ministry of Health and many other ministries to coordinate the provincial activities to address health and non-health impacts of the pandemic.

I will list a few of the contributions Emergency Management Ontario has made since the onset of the pandemic, and Teepu Khawja, chief of emergency management, or myself are happy to elaborate further during the question-and-answer session.

Emergency Management Ontario has and continues to offer situational awareness and support for COVID-19 planning and responses. This situational awareness, such as facilitating numerous weekly COVID-19-related calls with federal, provincial and municipal partners, has been beneficial in assisting Ontario during this whole-of-government response. In order to assist with on-the-ground supports, we have deployed Emergency Management Ontario field staff to Windsor-Essex to assist in operationalizing isolation support centres for agri-food workers; to support the evacuation and safe return of northern municipalities, such as Neskantaga First Nation; and to assist with response efforts for COVID-19 outbreaks in Thunder Bay.

The Ministry of the Solicitor General is responsible for facilitating federal requests for assistance, and as such, Teepu Khawja, as chief of emergency management, has been the key lead in this responsibility. Through Emergency Management Ontario, Ontario has engaged the federal and provincial partners for specific COVID-19-related requests for assistance, including the Canadian Red Cross and the Canadian Ranger resources. Emergency Management Ontario has also conducted contingency planning for emergency situations during this pandemic, such as seasonal flooding and forest fires.

During this pandemic, Emergency Management Ontario has developed a set of outbreak management planning guidance resources as ministries pursued outbreak

planning for their respective sectors. In addition, Emergency Management Ontario has requested updates on the ministries' outbreak planning progress and provided support by coordinating information sharing between ministries, collaborating on tabletop exercise design and leveraging existing emergency management networks, and Emergency Management Ontario is responsible for issuing emergency alerts, such as the one issued on April 8 of this year, to remind Ontarians that a stay-at-home order is in effect.

These above-mentioned efforts have greatly assisted Ontario's response during the pandemic, and I welcome an opportunity to further elaborate on them during the question-and-answer session.

As Secretary Davidson mentioned, the Central Coordination Table was developed to support the province's whole-of-government approach to managing COVID-19. Both the chief of emergency management, Teepu Khawja, and myself have been regular participants at the Central Coordination Table and its sub-tables to provide continuous advice and situational awareness.

I was also the chair of the public safety coordination table, which is one of the three central coordination sub-tables, until last November. At that time, I took on the role of one of the vice-chairs of the vaccine distribution task force, another key area of work by the ministry since the Auditor General's report. The public safety coordination table's mandate is to lead the coordination of emergency planning and management of this critical public safety issue throughout the pandemic. Ali Veshkini, associate deputy minister, and Teepu Khawja have greatly supported me in that role as co-chairs of the emergency planning cross-functional team, reporting in to the public safety coordination table.

The purpose of the emergency planning cross-functional team is to coordinate cross-government efforts to anticipate, respond to and resolve non-health emergencies impacted by COVID-19. This team also monitors the workforce strength of fire, police and emergency management personnel. These tables have leveraged the expertise and functions of emergency management in Ontario throughout the pandemic.

I would like now to turn to the progress we have made in implementing the recommendations of the Auditor General's 2020 special report. I would start by noting that much of the support that was provided by Emergency Management Ontario is not documented in the special report. The special report looked at Emergency Management Ontario's role and participation in the COVID-19 response to non-health-sector issues, with a focus on provincial coordination. Secretary Davidson and I have spoken about this within the government's whole-of-government response.

The report identified four key recommendations, made up of 12 actions. As you can see in the summary table that we submitted, many of these recommendations build on the recommendations within the Auditor General's 2017 value-for-money audit of Emergency Management Ontario.

I would like to acknowledge that progress on outstanding recommendations from the 2017 value-for-money audit has been significantly impacted by the number of emergencies requiring Provincial Emergency Operations Centre coordination. For example, we saw significant flooding in eastern Ontario, the evacuation of Bearskin Lake First Nation and forest fires that led to the evacuation of Pikangikum First Nation; and the unprecedented and global COVID-19 pandemic continues to have significant impacts on government operations. Despite these significant challenges, Emergency Management Ontario has made considerable progress on the 2017 auditor recommendations.

I'd like to highlight some of the progress that has been made, which is included in the summary table we submitted. We've completed a comprehensive staffing review of Emergency Management Ontario, and I will proceed with seeking internal approvals for the additional staff and funding required.

The ministry continues to roll out training for Emergency Management Ontario's key stakeholders on its new online emergency management incident management system. The new system was commissioned in early 2020 and is in use in the Provincial Emergency Operations Centre. During the pandemic, the new system allowed Provincial Emergency Operations Centre staff to track and vastly improve response times to municipal requests for information, and EMO has enhanced its online emergency management program tracking tool, allowing improved tracking of municipal compliance with the legislation and adding the capability to identify trends in municipal emergency planning.

Work on both the 2017 and 2020 report audit recommendations continues as part of EMO's commitment to continuous improvement. However, the ongoing response to this unprecedented and unexpected emergency will impact the speed of work.

In conclusion: In the past, the Ontario government has conducted full-scale post-emergency reviews. For example—

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): You have two minutes left, Mr. Di Tommaso.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you.

For example, this was done through after-action reports for the 2018 eastern Ontario tornadoes, the 2012 Elliot Lake mall roof collapse and the 2013 southern Ontario ice storm. The ministry is committed to working with its provincial partners to conduct a full review of emergency management in Ontario and the province's emergency management system post-COVID-19. This review will assess areas for improvement and build upon successes and lessons learned from the management of the COVID-19 emergency.

I would like to echo what Secretary Davidson said earlier: We are all very proud of the hard work the Ontario public service has been doing, and the Auditor General's special report and its regular continuous follow-up process will be a valuable resource to inform our efforts to continuously improve emergency management in the province of Ontario.

Thank you, and we look forward to taking your questions.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thank you very much, Mr. Di Tommaso and Mr. Davidson, for your presentations.

We will now begin the 20-minute rotations for members, beginning with the opposition. But before I begin, I just want to remind members of the committee that this is your time. I leave it up to you to interject if you're feeling as though the questions aren't being answered or you want to pose a follow-up question. At the same time, I would ask members who have presented and government officials to be as direct and as concise as you can with your answers as possible.

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With that, I hand it over to the opposition for a 20-minute rotation. Madame Gélinas.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Thank you for your presentations, gentlemen. I will start, like I did last time. Secretary of Cabinet Davidson, you were there. I start kind of at the 20,000-foot level before I drill down.

I'll start with you, Mr. Davidson. The report from the Auditor General left us with a lot of questions. The EMO had many vacant positions and was working from documents that were supposed to be updated, but were not, and we ended up going for sole-sourced procurement of consulting services on March 25, valued at \$1.6 million. Given what we have there and what you've just told us, how robust was our emergency management within the Ministry of the Solicitor General?

Mr. Steven Davidson: Thank you very much for the question. My name is Steven Davidson. I'm the secretary of the cabinet. I am very pleased to talk about the relationship between Emergency Management Ontario, our preparedness with respect to the plans that you reference and the broader Central Coordination Table structure that we put in place. First—

M^{me} France Gélinas: As long as you focus your comments on answering my question: How ready were we? And I'll put in a date: In February 2020, how ready were we?

Mr. Steven Davidson: Right. So in February 2020—and Deputy Di Tommaso can speak more about the review and revisions of the provincial emergency preparedness plan—the PERP had been reviewed and revised. I certainly do acknowledge that at the time of the publication of the Auditor General's report, it had not been finalized. It was simply at the point of being translated and put into accessible formats; that was subsequently completed by December 2020. But for operational purposes, there was a current provincial plan.

Ministries—and the deputy referenced this—had their own ministry-level Continuity of Operations Plans, which they reviewed at the beginning of calendar 2020. The deputy, in fact, has just sent out his annual direction to deputies to ensure that their COOPs, their Continuity of Operations Plans, are reviewed and updated this year as part of the annual—

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay, thanks. I'll ask the same questions to Deputy Di Tommaso. I'm trying my best to pronounce it properly—it would sound really good in French, by the way.

Deputy, how ready were we in—I said February, but I should have said March. How ready were we in March 2020 in the emergency management?

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: We were ready, as I indicated in my comments when I first opened up. This province remains ready to deal with any provincial emergency, and we were ready in March 2020. I can—

M^{me} France Gélinas: Thank you. I would ask the same thing, then, to assistant deputy minister and chief of emergency management—I will try my best—Khawja, and I hope your name is close to that.

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Yes, thank you. The name pronunciation was great. My name is Teepu Khawja. I'm chief of emergency management. I would echo the comments by the deputy and commissioner and secretary that we were as ready as we could be for this unprecedented pandemic. We had a Provincial Emergency Response Plan updated and approved by the Solicitor General in late 2019. It was distributed by our deputy to all deputies. So it was in effect. We had just completed our compliance cycle for all ministries' Continuity of Operations Plans, and prior to the announcement of the declaration of the provincial emergency, our deputy had reminded and encouraged all deputies to refresh and review again their Continuity of Operations Plans as well.

M^{me} France Gélinas: The auditor also showed us that there were 20 vacant positions in your department. Does that help to be better prepared? Would we have been better prepared if we had 40 vacant positions in your department?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Thank you for the question. My name is Teepu Khawja, chief of emergency management. I will have to double-check in terms of the actual numbers of vacancies. I can say that—

M^{me} France Gélinas: Did you have any vacancies in your department?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: I'm sure we had some vacancies in our department. There are some—

M^{me} France Gélinas: Can you remember one where you would have liked to have had somebody in that position?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: No. There was none where I felt that we were lacking or there was absence. We have become accustomed over the years to being able to provide coverage with each other. Our PEOC is a 24/7, 365-day-a-year operation. It has—

M^{me} France Gélinas: Would you say you have staffed up, if you compare where you were before the pandemic in March 2020 to where you are now? Did you staff up some of those 20 vacant positions or no?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Again, I can't confirm the number, but I can say that over the course of the pandemic, we have continued as expeditiously as possible to fill vacancies. At this time, for example, I'm not aware of any significant shortages or vacancies in positions. As with

any other organization, we do have turnover in some positions, but there are none outstanding to me right now that are key.

We've made it an emphasis to have all positions filled, especially leading up to this season. That is, now we've entered the annual flood and wildfire season, and we wanted to make sure we were ready for that and—

M^{me} France Gélinas: I understand that you had started as chief of emergency management with the Ministry of the Solicitor General three weeks before the pandemic. Is that right?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Yes. I believe my start date was February 24.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. And how much experience did you bring in emergency management to this position? What did you do before?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Yes, thank you for that. I entered the OPS in 2006. Up until this position, I spent all of my time at the Ministry of Transportation in progressively more responsible roles. Towards the end, in the last year leading up to this position—sorry, that was the last four years. Three years prior, I was the regional director of the highways management division, which had a complement of 500 staff and an annual budget of over \$1 billion, and it required me to regularly interact with CEOs and elected officials across the GTHA. Then, in my last year, I was the acting ADM for that same division, with a staff complement across the province of over 1,800, with a capital budget of over \$3 billion, again, opening it up in terms of engagement with CEOs, elected officials etc. That was a regular part of my job.

I would add from the emergency management aspect, though, that the Ministry of Transportation also has order-in-council responsibilities for transportation in the province. As a result, within the ministry, in those roles I just identified, I was a member of the ministry action group, which is a requirement under the EMCPA. I did receive basic training in emergency management. Those were some of the experiences specific to emergency management I brought—

M^{me} France Gélinas: Thank you. Did you feel that you were ready and prepared to take on such a huge role? I mean, we're talking about a worldwide pandemic. You come into a department that has lots of vacancies, and here you are, in the midst of a pandemic, depending on a plan that—the only full plan we had was dated 2008. That must have been pretty stressful for you, no?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Thank you for the question. I would say at that time, throughout the pandemic, currently and going forward, I've felt very confident because I feel like I have been supported very well in terms of the emergency management efforts that I lead. I think that is critical, and I provide the leadership to that group, and with the partners and the network across the OPS. In terms of how I feel, I feel relatively confident, and I believe I have the support of the commissioner and deputy and the secretary in this role as well. But I feel as comfortable and as confident as somebody can feel entering into this position, even into a pandemic, and I continue to feel so.

1300

M^{me} France G elinas: Were you surprised to see that the cabinet emergency committee only met three times during the first wave of the pandemic?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: No. Again, the Cabinet Committee on Emergency Management is an advisory body for cabinet. Throughout the pandemic, as the secretary and the deputy minister said, we have the Central Coordination Table. That's that forum where we're able to coalesce and coordinate amongst ministries. Even in that emergency response plan, the PERP, it doesn't confer new authorities or responsibilities, so ministries still have their responsibilities and deputies advise their ministers accordingly through the CCT—perhaps others can speak more to it, but there were regular meetings of the cabinet as well, where decision-making occurred through normal channels. So I didn't necessarily feel that there was a deficiency in terms of—I believe it was provided to the Auditor General that there were three meetings, and I know that, since the issuance of the report, CCEM has met much more regularly since then. It's a report capturing a point in time, but I wasn't surprised because I didn't feel any deficiency in decision-making or advice or direction in my role.

M^{me} France G elinas: So how could you explain that the government decided to have a crisis response organization, to hire someone, as a sole-source procurement of consulting services on March 25, at a cost of \$1.6 million, to develop a new—they called it—crisis response organizational structure for COVID-19? Wouldn't that be something that your department already had? Why did we have to go out and spend \$1.6 million to put in a crisis response organizational structure, when it is your responsibility to do that?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: In terms of the EMCPA, my legislative authorities are to assist, monitor and coordinate to the extent possible. We have the Provincial Emergency Response Plan, which I believe you're referring to, which describes how Ontario would coordinate the provincial-level response to emergencies that involve multiple ministries and other organizations of the provincial government, federal, municipal etc. In terms of that plan and that body, the CCT that you're referencing as well, I believe is consistent with what is documented within the Provincial Emergency Response Plan as well. It describes how emergency response can be coordinated. It doesn't necessarily require that it is housed within the PEOC itself; it's a baseline.

In terms of decision-making and responsibilities, as I said earlier, even within the PERP, it doesn't confer new authorities and responsibilities. I think the CCT is consistent with the scope and scale of the pandemic itself. There was a multi-ministry, whole-of-government approach that was required, and it didn't impact how EMO was able to provide and coordinate responses or activities throughout COVID as well; in fact, I would say that it could augment it.

M^{me} France G elinas: Same line of questions, but for you, Deputy, now: The auditor told us that there were 20 vacancies within emergency management. How come

there were 20 positions vacant when we knew that a pandemic was coming? That's to Deputy Minister Di Tommaso.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you for the question. My name is Mario Di Tommaso, Deputy Solicitor General. As you can imagine, in all organizations there is regular turnover of staff. We have implemented a staffing review—we are taking that away—and we are seeking internal approvals to increase the staff at EMO.

Having said that, I am still of the view that we were more than competent and able to deal with the emergencies that were thrown our way. One has to remember, I think, that this was an unprecedented global pandemic, and for that reason we needed to have a whole-of-government approach. I think it would be unfair to suggest that PEOC was in a position to deal with an unprecedented global pandemic. One of the principles of emergency management is scalability and flexibility, and so in order to deal with this pandemic, one had to scale up and deal with all the ministries in relation to this pandemic, and not just PEOC, so we did that. I remember, actually, being interviewed by McKinsey, the firm that brought the CCT on board, and I remember providing that advice, that we needed to scale up, we needed a broader structure, we needed a whole-of-government approach where we brought in deputy ministers from each and every ministry in order to deal with this pandemic. That's exactly what was done. This CCT program was consistent and aligned with the IMS structure within EMO and it is consistent and aligned with PERP. So we took a whole-of-government approach to deal with this unprecedented global pandemic.

M^{me} France G elinas: How long would you say it took to get this whole-of-government approach for them to be identified, to know what their roles were?

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: I believe it was in early February, and I stand to be corrected, where we started discussions on what this CCT structure would take. I remember that there were a number of interviews of key individuals throughout the government to come up with a structure and then it was implemented, I believe, in March or April. But I stand to be corrected; it was a short period of time, from my perspective. But we were ready to go with this all-of-government approach in April 2019—2020, I should say.

M^{me} France G elinas: That's okay. You know that other provincial governments in many other provinces already had that in place. They had already identified this, but Ontario had not. Why the discrepancy? Why were others ready on an ongoing basis to have a whole-of-government approach and knew who would be responsible and knew how to communicate with one another, and in Ontario, it started in February and was put in place in March or April, while the pandemic was already there?

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Let me start off by saying that Ontario is unique. It is the largest province in Canada. We were always ready to deal with any type of emergency, and we continue to be, just like every other province that you referenced.

With regard to the whole-of-government approach, I believe that Ontario was the first to take this whole-of-

government approach, cross-ministry approach, to deal with an unprecedented global pandemic. We were the first and we were ready. I can't speak for the approach taken by other provinces, but we were ready to deal with that pandemic, unprecedented, by way of the CCT.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I still don't understand. Why the \$1.6 million to hire a consulting firm to develop a crisis response or give organizational structure? It seems to me, and you've spoken eloquently to that already today, that the fundamental of emergency preparedness is to have the structures in place, to have the communications in place so you know how to [inaudible], you know who's responsible for who. Why is it that Ontario needed to spend \$1.6 million to ask an outside consultant to come and tell us what organizational structure we should put in place?

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): You have two minutes left.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: We had the structures in place to deal with smaller-scale emergencies. I talked about the principle of scalability. This required a whole-of-government approach, and we needed to scale up.

With regard to the \$1.6 million and the consulting firm that was brought on board, I'd like to defer to Secretary Davidson to answer that question.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay.

Mr. Steven Davidson: So just very quickly, in one minute, I would just draw the committee's attention to the fact that, as the deputy has described, we have an emergency management system in place with responsibility for planning and operations of emergency management resources across the system and with partners. We also—and we haven't talked about this; we did last time—the health response table, which had been established at the end of January, in alignment with the Ministry of Health's responsibility under the 2009 OIC for managing a health response.

What we are talking about here are the pieces in the middle with respect to other measures that the government needed to take that would impact on, say, business, the education sector, sectors that had settings of congregate care or congregate living, vulnerable population cohorts. There was a whole variety of other non-emergency-management and non-health issues and policy questions which the government needed to consider, and the government needed to consider that in view of its declared state of emergency and its heightened authorities, which it had as of March 17. So that put all the decision-making authority in cabinet, in the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

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CCT, not to overstate it, didn't supplant the emergency machine or the health response team; it supplemented it—

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thank you very much, Mr. Davidson. My apologies; I have to cut you off there.

We will now move to members of the government for a 20-minute rotation. Ms. Hogarth?

Ms. Christine Hogarth: First of all, I want to thank all of you gentlemen for being here today and thank you for your service. Please pass along my thank you to your staff,

your dedicated teams that have kept Ontario's health and safety as a top priority over this very long year.

I thought it might be helpful to start with a conversation about Emergency Management Ontario itself. I think this question is going to be for ADM Khawja. I just wanted to know if you can expand on what exactly is the role of Emergency Management Ontario, and perhaps can you walk us through an example of, when an emergency is declared, what happens operationally for you?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Great. Thank you for the question. My name is Teepu Khawja. I'm chief of emergency management.

As I believe has been articulated earlier, the legislative framework for preparing for and responding to emergencies in this province is the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act. The EMCPA defines the authority and responsibilities of the various bodies and individuals in preparing for and responding to an emergency: the Lieutenant Governor in Council, the Premier, the cabinet advisory committee on emergency management, various provincial government bodies and all the ministers, municipalities, the Commissioner of Emergency Management, and myself as the chief of Emergency Management Ontario, because Emergency Management Ontario really supports me in fulfilling my authorities under legislative authority.

The EMCPA sets out requirements for municipalities and provincial government bodies to create emergency plans governing the provision of necessary time-critical services during an emergency, and the procedures and the manner in which employees and other persons will respond to the emergency. Additionally, specific ministers have been designated to be responsible for the formulation of emergency plans in respect of specific types of emergencies assigned to them.

For example, earlier it was stated that the Ministry of the Solicitor General is responsible to have a plan for "any emergency that requires the coordination of provincial emergency management," and that is a critical role that Emergency Management Ontario supports for the ministry and that OIC responsibility. To do so, we have the Provincial Emergency Response Plan, which I referred to as the PERP, which is administered and developed by Emergency Management Ontario.

Another example the deputy stated was the Ministry of Health, which has the order-in-council responsibility to have emergency plans for human health, disease and epidemics, and health services during an emergency, which is the authority for the health response to COVID-19, which is led by the Ministry of Health.

As I said, as chief of emergency management under the EMCPA, I have the authority to assist and monitor ministries and municipalities in the development of their emergency plans and programs. It's very specific to development of their emergency plans and programs, and as I said, EMO and my staff support me in fulfilling those authorities.

Within Emergency Management Ontario is the Provincial Emergency Operations Centre, also known as the

PEOC. PEOC is an operations coordination hub facility for provincial response activities such as providing situational awareness and information-sharing, and coordinating provincial resources when they are required in an emergency, which can include supporting requests for assistance to other ministries, municipalities, or even up to the federal government.

In terms of the PEOC itself, it is a 24/7 operation that is available 365 days a year. The primary site is in Toronto at Highway 401 and Keele, but we also maintain a secondary and tertiary site as well.

As chief of EM, my operational responsibility during a declared emergency varies depending on the nature of the emergency, and more specifically what the needs are of the community that's being impacted by the emergency. Obviously throughout COVID there have been a number of communities that have been impacted by the emergency that we've had to provide support to, and I can provide an example shortly.

Generally speaking, though, once I'm notified of an emergency, my role is twofold: to ensure that the executive leadership within our ministry and the OPS generally, as appropriate, are kept apprised of the current status of the emergency response being reported in by the PEOC; the second is to provide strategic direction to the operational leadership of PEOC through the PEOC commander regarding the response to the emergency and what supports can and should be provided.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Excuse me, I just want to ask you a little bit about PEOC; I don't mean to interrupt. I have one more question, and then I'm going to turn it over to my colleague MPP Barrett.

One of the observations I saw in the Auditor General's report was that some of the staff at the Provincial Emergency Operations Centre—that's the PEOC, correct?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Yes.

Ms. Christine Hogarth:—were working from home during the pandemic. I remember actually working in this building here when SARS hit. When 9/11 hit—I had an office upstairs, and I actually remember being here in the Whitney Block when the blackout happened. Technology was different, things were different, the world was different.

I guess this question, again, is for you, ADM: Did you find any challenges with your staff working from home? Today, we are sitting in this room, physically distanced, and we have people online participating in this meeting, for our health and safety. Did you find concerns, or were there reasons why they worked from home due to the virus?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Thank you for the question. My name is Teepu Khawja, chief of emergency management.

As you said, throughout COVID, we did and we continue to operate with a largely virtual presence, but not 100% virtual. There are some key, critical positions that we continue to maintain physically within the PEOC, with the appropriate COVID-19 infection prevention and control measures in place. I have not felt that there has been a degradation in terms of the supports or responses we've been able to provide. We have adhered to COVID-

19 public health guidance. We have staffed, as I said, both virtually and physically. We've instituted protocols to ensure that all staff supporting the pandemic response had the required resources to provide that support virtually, including ensuring that our field officers were able to support municipalities, even if they weren't deployed physically. As I said, I would maintain that PEOC has and continues to function in an efficient manner throughout the pandemic.

Secretary, would you like to jump in?

Mr. Steven Davidson: If I could, just to acknowledge that this was a corporate direction that I put out to the Ontario public service on—I believe it was March 16. As you have suggested, it was in direct response to the pandemic and the circumstances arising. Our reasons were twofold: We did want to ensure that those people in the public service who could work remotely, supported by digital tools—which the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services has made Herculean efforts to provide—do so for their own safety, but also to reduce congestion on the municipal transit systems and to reduce circulation out there in the broader public. You'll recall at that time, there was very, very clear public health advice for people to stay home, to shelter at home. So I do want ADM Khawja's response put in that context: that that was my direction to the system.

Throughout the pandemic, for the most part, on average, about 50% of the 60,000 public servants have worked remotely. Those who cannot because of the nature of the services that they provide or the work that they do—about 50% have continued to work in the workplace.

Sorry, I just wanted to provide a broader context.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you very much for that. It's similar to what we're doing today: We're able to work and do the same job remotely.

Thank you very much. I'm going to pass it off to my colleague MPP Barrett.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Thank you, Chair. I think I'm coming through okay.

Just to follow up on my colleague, I appreciate the presentation. I know the secretary of cabinet made mention that the response to the virus as far as emergency management was essentially built on an existing structure, an existing framework. I do know, at a previous meeting of this committee, the secretary of cabinet walked us through the creation of the Central Coordination Table. I guess my question would be to the secretary of cabinet, with respect to emergency management. I'll come at it from a perspective of an elected representative in a riding, with the myriad of new rules, regulations and requirements that come down and require compliance—we very rarely have to bring in the OPP; I'm not so sure about other municipal bylaw people. There have been some cases where they've been on deck, but I find in my riding people seem to be going along with it without necessarily being told directly what to do.

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But just with respect to the decision-making process, people ask me, "Why do I have to do this?" or "Why are

you telling me to do this?” or “Why is your government telling me to do this?” How would I explain to them the decision-making process within the existing structure? Obviously, I see the organizational chart here. I draw an arrow to the central coordinating committee. For the purposes of the committee, can we maybe get a thumbnail sketch on how some of these decisions are made? What is the process followed before it gets down to, say, my level, representing a riding?

I will say, in my riding, when a significant number of edicts that come down from the province, or the local medical officer of health, go above and beyond those rules, it really complicates things.

But could we just go back to the beginning and how these decisions are made, maybe with reference to this organizational chart?

Mr. Steven Davidson: Certainly. I would be pleased to do that, MPP Barrett. My name is Steven Davidson, the secretary of the cabinet.

If you're referring to the schematic on page 28 of the Auditor General's report, I have that in front of me here. In addition, we did send a picture of the decision-making structure in our materials presented to the cabinet, on page 8—yes, that's the one right there.

Mr. Toby Barrett: The org chart.

Mr. Steven Davidson: So we can use that one.

But I'll just pull back to MPP Gélinas's comment at the beginning around starting at the top. Again, just to position the decision-making structure within what we built upon—and the deputy mentioned scalability as a key principle—the emergency management machine, responsible for the coordination and deployment of emergency management resources across the province, and with partner levels of government, is very much in place. And then the Ministry of Health, having stood up the health table and pulled together a number of tables under that, building quite a big tent of expert clinical advisers, medical ethicists and so on—that very much is intact. What we did was bring an umbrella to that and then defined work in between.

So, MPP Barrett, to your question, let's just pick an example of a measure that the government was considering in response to public health advice that would impact on another sector. Keeping in mind that from March 17, upon the point where the government declared a provincial emergency, it all of a sudden had extraordinary powers to issue emergency orders, where it could override existing legislation or it could introduce new time-limited authorities for itself or for other players in the economy or in society. So these are very, very sensitive decisions. Each one impacts on, say, the livelihood of a sector or businesses; on people's personal rights, it imposes constraints.

If we look at this table, I will pick just an example of measures that were being considered to protect people in congregate care settings such as shelters; let's just use that as an example. Under the public safety table, you'll see a work stream that is called equity and priority populations. There was an ADM head of that working group, whose job was to bring together all the ministries that in the normal

events of things would be working together in the fullness of time to do research, analysis, to assemble discrete options and bring them forward, through a cabinet policy decision-making structure, to cabinet.

We had to move through all of that rapidly; we didn't have time for those normal structures. What the Central Coordination Table enabled was, in real time, that working table would assemble all of those players: “This is priority number one for you.” Nothing else that was happening was as important as this work. So it sent that signal out to the system.

Those ministries would come together, the ministries that represented the stakeholder groups. Where there were legal considerations, the Ministry of the Attorney General needed to be in play. Sometimes there were labour concerns because we would be looking at considerations around deploying parts of a workforce from one sector that was less under siege over to another. A lot of really, really complex policy and legal considerations needed to be taken into account.

This machine enabled that to happen really quickly. It would come up into the central coordination table for a presentation and discussion when we had the key deputies, the key ministries and central agencies represented: Are we sure we've got it all? Are we overlooking anything? Is there another aspect to this question that would benefit from including another part of our universe? At that point, we could identify that quickly, bring them in. But if it was all good, the direction went back to the proponent ministry which, at the end of the day, still owned this proposal. So whether it was municipal affairs and housing or whether it was children, community and social services, they would go back and that minister would take that submission up to cabinet, which was meeting very regularly and continues to meet regularly, and certainly in those early weeks and months met daily, sometimes seven days a week.

We had immediate access to decision-makers. It's certainly my job as the secretary of cabinet to ensure that we are fully leveraging, from across the system, all the knowledge, expertise, intel and analytical heft that we have to inform cabinet.

That's kind of a real-life example of how a file would come up through the system. The Central Coordination Table would give it a real due diligence kicking of the tires, and then we'd provide whatever direction or advice back to the ministry, or ministries if it was a joint item, and then that would travel into cabinet just as quickly as it could.

I would also add, too, cabinet acted in the form of emergency orders. So all of these are statutory instruments—these are regulatory instruments—that all needed to be drafted. A typical course would be into cabinet for the policy confirmation and policy decision. The policy minutes would go out, and then often, in rapid fire, that is, working overnight, the drafters would turn that into the legal instruments that would then come into cabinet very quickly, typically within 24 hours, and that would be the Lieutenant Governor in Council's cabinet, signed by the Lieutenant Governor, typically a regulation or an emergency order that would give effect to this decision.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Yes, thank you for that, to make it a little bit of a walk-through case study.

It was interesting. You mentioned the issue of people's livelihoods, jobs and the economy and people's rights and responsibilities. Again, we certainly get that at the front lines, or I do. Maybe it's the nature of my riding. Of course, health and safety are uppermost.

I look at the organizational chart. Below the coordinating table, it's all health and it's all safety. There's not an economic here in this flow. When issues come up—I mean, this time last year, we lost 1.1 million jobs. The livelihoods, is that discussed—within this chart, below the coordinating table, is there a group of economists that provide advice on jobs and the economy and people's livelihoods? Or with respect to rights and responsibilities, where—I mean, you have lost your rights. You do not walk into that gas station without a mask on. Is that below the coordinating committee, or does this lie with cabinet?

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): You have one minute, Mr. Davidson, to respond.

Mr. Steven Davidson: Very, very quickly, the Ministry of Finance is represented on the Central Coordination Table. To a proposal that would have negative impacts—and, let's say, negative economic impacts—it was really, really important that finance be there with their economists to do an assessment: What are those negative impacts likely to be, and then what mitigating measures might the government consider to offset the consequences of this really important public health measure that may have negative impacts, as you say, either on business and people's livelihoods—they could be very constraining—or have a negative impacts on people's mental health? Certainly, as we have looked at the situation in schools, that has been a key consideration.

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Those cross-cutting considerations get a lot of airtime at the Central Coordination Table. That's one of its key purposes: to ensure that as a proposal comes up from one part of the public service, no matter how broadly and collaboratively they're working—

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thank you very much, Mr. Davidson. That is the time we have.

I believe, Auditor General, you had a comment that you wanted to add. If you could do that briefly.

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: Thank you very much. I just wanted to clarify: Our report looked at emergency management operations in Ontario. Our first report was done in 2017, so we've been looking and reporting on it from 2017 until this past year.

We stepped in and looked at it when the COVID pandemic was starting because we had recognized that recommendations from our 2017 report to strengthen EMO in Ontario had not yet been implemented. And so, during that process, similar to what other auditors general's offices did around the world, we attempted to look at the system and provide some recommendations or see whether or not changes that we'd previously recommended were implemented.

What we actually found—and we ended that look in October 2020, so I can't really comment on what has transpired since then. We did see when we were doing the audit that things were changing as things went along in the pandemic, but at the start of the pandemic, I think what we did expect to see was an organizational structure that would have been ready to go and act on. We would have probably expected to see an IT system that would have been used for emergency management in Ontario. We would have expected to see contracts in place for PPE and other agreements—

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Pardon me. I have to cut you off. I have to move along to the independent members. They have three minutes on the clock for the officials who are before us this afternoon. I'm going to give them the opportunity.

Mr. Blais, if you could log on. There you are. Thank you very much.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Thank you, Mr. Chair. My question, I guess, is for the Deputy Solicitor General. You've mentioned a couple of times that COVID is unprecedented. The idea of a global pandemic is not some kind of new idea that just happened with COVID; there was, in fact, a global pandemic 100 years ago, we had SARS, in which Ontario declared an emergency, and there have been both risks and scares in the 20 years since SARS. How did your shop find itself so completely unprepared that it took until April to have a whole-of-government approach? If the medical table was established—I believe at the end of January is what was mentioned—and the CDC in the United States was issuing warnings since the beginning of January, how did it take almost four full months to get that whole-of-government approach locked in?

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: To the best of my recollection, the last global pandemic took place about 100 years ago. Having said that, my view is that we were prepared, but certainly not for a global pandemic that comes by every—

Mr. Stephen Blais: That's the genesis of my question, though, Mr. Di Tommaso: The idea of a global pandemic is not science fiction; it had been talked about for some time, it had been theorized about. There had been broad-based public discussions, at least since SARS, that this was a growing and potentially ever-more-dangerous concern. So given that the CDC was issuing warnings in early January, and given that your own government's health table was established in late January, why did it take another three full months for the whole-of-government approach to be put into place?

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: We were ready, and it was an issue of scalability. Once again, the ministry that was responsible for dealing with a global pandemic was the Ministry of Health. PEOC took a coordinating role. We had to scale up to deal with that global pandemic, and we did just that by bringing on board the Central Coordination Table to take a whole-of-government approach. So that took them time—

Mr. Stephen Blais: I'm sorry, repeating the same thing over and over again isn't going to answer the question. The

question is: Why did it take three months? What were the logistical, human resource, financial—what were the issues that led you to take three months to get this up and running?

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: The issues were that we had to bring all the other ministries on board as well. We had to formulate what the cross-functional teams would look like, we had to formulate what the Central Coordination Table would look like, we had to formulate policy and membership, and we had to scale up. In short, that's the answer.

Mr. Stephen Blais: If you had to formulate all that, the question, then, is: If the most important part of emergency management is preparation, why were you so unprepared? Why wasn't there a binder on a shelf—

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thank you very much, Mr. Blais. That is the time that you have.

I will now move to the official opposition. MPP Gélinas.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I will just be a few minutes, then MPP Jessica Bell will take over. I just wanted to come back to the vacant positions. Deputy Di Tommaso, you mentioned there is rollover in every department, but the Auditor General, from the 2017 report, is showing us that there were vacancies then, you've hired 18 staff, and there were still 17 vacant positions. That's 20% of the total staff allocations that was not filled. That doesn't sound like regular rollover to me, especially that we were receiving complaints from municipalities. There were only 10 field staff to support 444 municipalities, and they didn't feel supported. They would often reach out to me for answers. I was able to—and many others were able to—give them answers before EMO organized something and the field officers were able to support them. So back to staffing, Deputy.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you for the question. From my understanding, there is regular turnover in every organization—

M^{me} France Gélinas: Yes.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso:—and to my understanding, the turnover at PEOC was with the lower, junior positions for the most part. We have implemented a staffing review, we have identified staffing challenges, and I will be seeking internal approvals to move that forward to hire additional staff going forward. That will take some time in order to identify and approve the appropriate positions.

As for the municipalities—

M^{me} France Gélinas: But the chief is not really a low-level position. We've seen tremendous rollover in the position of chief and—no offence to you—in your position as well.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: The chief has been in place, to my understanding, since January of last year. He's been in place for just over a year right now. I've been in this position for two and a half years.

With regard to your earlier question about municipalities not feeling supported, I can tell you that PEOC engages in daily calls with all stakeholders, including

other ministries and including municipalities. So there is a forum where municipalities can—

M^{me} France Gélinas: Yes, but when the pandemic started, there were only eight field officers for 444 municipalities. It took months, and now EMO has 12 field officer positions filled. But in March, April, May, June, throughout the first phase, you had eight for 444. If we compare this with any other provinces, that's not very many. Why so many vacant positions?

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you for the question. We are also pursuing staff surging to deal with that immediate issue. In other words, we are reaching out to municipalities that do have community emergency management offices, and we are asking for those officers to come on board with PEOC in the short term to gain additional experience and to provide that surge capacity.

Going forward, we do have a strong appetite to hire additional staff. We have done that staffing review, and we will be moving forward with additional hiring.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Thank you. To MPP Bell, please.

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The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: It is concerning to hear that there is still a staffing issue over a year into the pandemic. That's my assessment of your response to MPP Gélinas's questions.

I do want to go back a bit. When the Auditor General was giving her report this morning, I must say I was pretty concerned by many things that were raised in the report. One thing that really struck home to me was that the Auditor General in 2017 had reviewed the emergency management office and gave 36 recommendations for how the emergency management office could improve so it is ready for a disaster such as this. What is very concerning is that in 2019 the Auditor General went back and found that only 11% of the recommendations that were made—so, nearly 90% were not implemented. Only 11% were implemented, and as a result, when the pandemic hit, we weren't ready. Why did you not proactively act on implementing 89% of the AG's recommendations to improve your response to emergencies? This question is to Mr. Khawja, as the Emergency Management Ontario representative.

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Thanks for the question. My name is Teepu Khawja. I'm the chief of emergency management.

As you said—correct—in terms of the 2017 value-for-money audit and the 2019 follow-up report, as you said, that's how it was reported to the AG. As I said earlier, I can't speak to the progress beforehand, when I assumed this position in February 2020. Having said that, I know that within the report itself, through both the 2017 and the 2019, some of the concerns, as you've said, were about the staffing levels, vacancies etc., and the need for additional staff, which impact our response during significant events. As the deputy said earlier, progress in general on a number of the outstanding recommendations continue to be impacted by events such as the evacuation of Pikangikum

for wildfires, Bearskin Lake First Nation's flooding, are ongoing impacts, because of COVID—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Mr. Khawja, just to be clear, the summary—we don't have a lot of time. What I'm getting from you is that you don't feel that you are prepared to answer the question because you were not staffed at that time. Did you do any research as to why this is one of things that was highlighted in the Auditor General's report?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Sorry; staffing being one of the items highlighted?

Ms. Jessica Bell: No, no—why 89% of the AG's recommendations were not implemented to improve the Emergency Management Office. The AG found in 2017 that the Emergency Management Office was not prepared for an emergency. The AG made some recommendations on how it could be prepared for an emergency, and 89% of them were not implemented. Why not?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: What my earlier comment was: I'm not in a position to explain the progress prior, but I can speak to my time here, and we have provided information to the AG as part of the work over the several months in 2020 and as provided in the table provided to the committee about how we've now progressed in our view up to from the previous four implemented to now 10 implemented, which, by my math, would be almost a third from that 11% you quoted. We continue to progress while managing through COVID as well as all the concurrent events that have occurred through COVID, such as a number of evacuations from First Nation communities etc. And I'm proud of my staff that they've been able to continue doing so [*inaudible*] as the deputy said, we have completed a staffing review, and I'll be working with the deputy to ensure there are plans to be able to staff up going forward.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. I do want to just clarify or ask an additional question around what progress you've made since you've been in this position to implement some of the recommendations. In our briefing this morning, one of the things that we noticed is that the government has expressed interest in moving forward on some of these recommendations. Many of them, if they are implemented, will be six years behind schedule. The government's language in its responses to the Auditor General was overwhelmingly non-committal. So words like, "We will look into this," "We will assess this," and, "We will explore this": Those were the kinds of words that were used to discuss or explain whether you were moving forward on these recommendations or not. The overall conclusion I got in my mind when I was listening to the Auditor General was that there is no real commitment to come up with an emergency response plan, to update it annually, to review it, to test it, to audit and to improve the emergency management office—and this is at a time when people are dying every single day.

So my question to you—and this is on you now that you're the staff person—is: Can you commit to updating, reviewing and testing your emergency plan annually? And when will you do it by?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Yes. Thank you for the follow-ups. My name is Teepu Khawja, chief of emergency management. I can say that as chief—you're right; I am the chief right now. Since I started and going forward, I am committed in terms of implementing the outstanding recommendations from the auditor's report. In the table we provided to the committee, we did outline six additional ones that we feel we have implemented since, including things, as you'd mentioned, about annual requirements.

The EMCPA requires the ministries and municipalities to review their plans annually and, if necessary in their purview, to update as required and inform us of that. We have our compliance reviews and processes for that. We provide feedback for opportunities to improve strengths, weaknesses etc. We provide that to ministries and municipalities.

They are required to also undertake their own exercises. One of the recommendations from the Auditor General was to implement a provincial exercise program, and we continue to progress that; we provided timelines to the committee, I believe, in the table that was submitted on that. So in terms of my view as chief of emergency management, we are committed to continue doing the work and implementing the outstanding recommendations.

I think the last points you were referencing—to me, I don't think we are being vague in some of our responses back; it's just a reflection that a number of the recommendations are complex. They require cross-ministry collaboration. We in EMO are committed to undertaking to implement them in an expeditious manner. I know we have to continue providing updates on implementation to the AG as part of the—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Mr. Khawja, I just want to emphasize, then, that when I read the Auditor General's report and the government's responses to the Auditor General's questions to you, the overall impression I got is, "Yes, we're on it, but we're not going to give you details, we're not going to guarantee that it's going to be fully funded and we're not going to give you a timeline on each of these recommendations." My request to you is that people really want our emergency management office to be fully functioning, fully staffed and doing the best they can to keep people safe, and to learn from this COVID crisis that we have.

Okay. I want to move to another issue that I saw when I read the report and listened to the Auditor General this morning. It was around the government's decision-making structure that was set up during this process. The AG raised a lot of concerns that my colleague MPP Gélinas has already mentioned: the staffing vacancies, the funding cuts, the frequent management turnover, the staff being redeployed to other departments even once COVID had begun. What really struck home for me was that a decision to set up a governance and decision-making structure began after an emergency was declared, and that the government hired a contractor, sole-sourced, that had little experience with emergency management. The structure that was developed, the AG concluded, was not as clear as it could be and was heavily politicized.

My question to you is, what are you going to do to improve your emergency response decision-making and governance structure moving forward so that experts in emergency management and emergency response lead? This is a question, again, to Mr. Khawja.

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Thank you for the question. My name is Teepu Khawja, chief of emergency management. I think I'll start with the end portion of your question. As our deputy said earlier, after prior emergencies, after-action reports and emergency reviews were conducted to inform how to improve emergency management in the province going forward; and as the secretary stated, we're committing to do similarly, post-COVID, a whole-of-government review with our provincial partners to see how we can improve the framework and the foundations of emergency management in the province. Even outside of COVID itself, we have our Provincial Emergency Response Plan, which we update every four years. That's a regular undertaking as well. We have other plans, such as nuclear emergency response plans that we update every five years.

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So we have a number of plans that we commit to updating regularly, even outside COVID, but because of COVID we'll commit to undertaking a whole-of-government review. In terms of the structures etc., I think I'll defer to the secretary, if he would like to weigh in on those.

Mr. Steven Davidson: If I could, Chair and MPP Bell. It is really important to appreciate that the central coordination structure was not mutually exclusive of the emergency management machine that was in place. As I said, if we look at this table, this schematic that was provided in the material, and we think about a world where that doesn't exist, what we had at the beginning of the calendar year were our existing structures to ensure that all the other related issues associated with responding to a pandemic with this scale of impact would be accomplished through 24 separate ministries working together, coming in to cabinet through a committee structure that is really well-suited for an environment where there is more time.

What we really needed to do here was be efficient. So there was nothing about the advice that McKinsey or the central table and four working tables underneath it provided that in any way interfered with, impacted or diminished the role of the emergency management office within our system. What it did was give everybody a quicker route to decision-makers, which was cabinet—which was convening daily. So I think that when we think about complexity and complication, I think about the normal world where we have 24 individual ministries. They're all working collaboratively, but it just requires more time. We needed to cut through all of that.

I would also say, just in terms of the timing reference, that we began immediately in late January or early February to build upon our existing processes and systems. The Central Coordination Table, co-chaired by the Premier's chief of staff and I, was the evolution of a standing policy table, which we have convened for the last number of years, which met once a week, twice a week. What we did

even before calling in McKinsey was refocused that committee because the issues of the day were all about COVID response, to focus on that.

What I asked McKinsey to do was take a look at what we're doing now. We have a health table that is leveraging public health and clinical expertise, we have an emergency management office, and we have all of these other areas of policy impact and responsibility with respect to the government in its emergency role. What are we missing, and could you comment and give us advice on how we're doing relative what—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm so sorry. Honestly, the question that I asked is very different from the answer that you're giving me.

Mr. Steven Davidson: Oh, I'm sorry.

Ms. Jessica Bell: That's okay. It's frustrating that the power of the decisions that you have been making over the last year are so significant, and we have such a short period of time to ask you questions and to hold specific departments to account, which is our job. My request is that when I ask you a question, you do everything you can to answer it as quickly and as effectively and as honestly as you can and just to stick to the question that I asked, because I don't have a lot of time and people do want to know.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): You have exactly two minutes left.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Listening to the AG's report, there's no question that your decision-making process was flawed. That was very clear, that that was what the AG was saying. The response that I'm getting from you is, "We'll be defensive. Everything is fine." I don't really, quite frankly, buy that. My question to you is: What are you going to do to improve your emergency response decision-making and governance structure moving forward?

Mr. Steven Davidson: Cabinet continues to be the decision-making body. The Central Coordination Table continues to be that overarching, coordinating entity which supports ministries as they bring forward recommendations, supports the health table as they bring forward their public health advice, to ensure that all considerations, all impacts of a proposed government measure are taken into account. I do very much appreciate the advice and observations of the Office of the Auditor General. We do continue to refine it, enhance it.

Our model is by no means one that is static. In fact, we did a review several months ago, and the result of that was to reduce the four working tables to three, because the one dealing with critical personnel, employment of broader public sector servants, OPSers, mental health—we were of a view that that no longer needed that concerted structure. We'd fold that back into the responsible ministries, and that has worked really well. We will continue to do that: to refine and ensure that the decision-making process is the leanest and most streamlined that we can do.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. Mr. Davidson, has there been any effort made to reduce the politicization of the decision-making process so that experts in emergency

management are the ones that are leading our COVID response?

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): I apologize. That is the time that we have for this rotation.

We will now move to the members of the government for the next 20-minute rotation. Mr. Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I would first like to thank everyone for all your hard work during this emergency situation. I understand that the most valuable resources that you can have are human resources. Could the chief of emergency management outline what amount of staff effort from Emergency Management Ontario and from the Ministry of the Solicitor General was required to produce this material required for this report? What kind of challenges does this pose to have this level of follow-up in the middle of an emergency, as opposed to after it is over?

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Mr. Cuzzetto, can you hear us?

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I can hear you.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thanks. Who are you directing it—

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Deputy Minister Di Tommaso, or anyone.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you for the question, Mr. Cuzzetto. The impact that this request had on us—I certainly understand the role that the Auditor General plays. She plays a significant role. It is important for us as bureaucrats to be responsive and transparent and accountable. That's an important thing to do in a democracy. Having said that, we continued to deal with the response to the COVID-19 pandemic on a regular basis. We were meeting regularly with the public safety coordination table and the emergency planning table, and we were providing advice up to the Central Coordination Table on a regular basis.

Over and above that, we were providing responses to municipalities with regard to questions that they were asked, and we were dealing with typical emergencies that one would see on a regular basis. As an example, we had evacuations for flooding with regard to First Nations. We had First Nations that were impacted by forest fires that we had to evacuate. We had to deal with requests for assistance with regard to deploying the military in long-term-care homes, and then looking after the repatriation of Canadians coming into Canada. There was an awful lot of work to be done. Over and above that, we also responded to all of the recommendations and all of the requests for additional information from the Auditor General.

With regard to the specifics, if I may, I'd like to turn that over to Teepu Khawja.

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Thank you, Deputy. My name is Teepu Khawja. I'm the chief of emergency management.

I'd like to thank the member for the question. As the deputy and the secretary acknowledged beforehand and throughout this committee hearing, I'd like to also acknowledge the contributions that the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario has made to improve emergency management in the province by continuing to provide recommended actions.

As was stated earlier, the special report was issued in November 2020, so the period of information-gathering would have occurred up till about October of last year, looking at the role of EMO in the government's COVID response with the folks on the non-health side.

1400

Throughout this period, the PEOC has three activation levels. We were at the highest of the three, which we referred to as full activation. That status level requires an all-hands-on-deck approach in terms of the level of activity that's reflected in the PEOC, and I think that has been acknowledged in prior AG reports as well in terms of how, when there is full activation, program area staff get moved off of projects and enter into the PEOC for support.

The context in which the engagement with the AG was occurring was over the course of several months during COVID. It's an important context to be aware of. During COVID-19, we have and continue to maintain daily situational awareness meetings and video conferences with key stakeholders, including those with other ministries, municipalities, First Nation communities and federal partners like Public Safety Canada and Indigenous Services Canada.

Part of maintaining the situational awareness is the development and sharing of various PEOC communication products, not only for stakeholders and partners but senior officials. They have various names. We have shared them with the AG's office throughout the information-gathering stage, which included daily consolidated situation reports, various incident management system types of products which have numbers that I won't repeat and a number of Q&A products to municipal emergency management coordinators.

Throughout COVID, as was stated earlier, we were responsible for issuing emergency alerts. We issued four throughout the pandemic: on March 27, advising travellers to return to Ontario; April 4; January 14; and, most recently, on April 8, advising that a stay-at-home order is in effect.

We've supported ministries, just leading up to the start of wave 2, by developing sector-specific outbreak planning guidance documents. We disseminated and distributed to ministries. We followed up and supported them in developing their own emergency plans for their sectors.

As the deputy said, we facilitated a number of requests for various federal supports, whether it's the Red Cross for long-term-care homes and retirement homes or, prior to that, military assistance for long-term-care homes, and having the Canadian Red Cross support and administer an isolation site for recovery of agri-farm workers who were exposed to COVID.

There was a municipality of Red Lake that was at risk due to wildfires which evacuated to a number of municipalities which we supported in coordination, and a number of First Nation evacuations as well throughout COVID. We were deploying field officers in unique situations, such as to Windsor-Essex for these agri-farm worker outbreaks, and that transpired back in July and was continuous for a number of months. As I said, Red Lake,

Eabametoong/Fort Hope First Nation, the Neskantaga First Nation evacuation due to a drinking water emergency: These are just some examples of our activities throughout COVID during the duration of the AG's special report.

Specific to the special report, within this context—and there are other examples I could provide—EMO received approximately 25 inquiries from the OAGO between June 30 and the report's publication. It was common for questions to have sub-questions, as well, such as question 1 was comprised of 1(a), 1(b), 1(c), 1(d) and so on, which I would estimate brings the total number of actual questions to well over 100. The level of effort required essentially dedicating a staff member over that period to coordinate across the various sections in EMO to solicit information to fulfill those requests.

In total, we estimate roughly approximately 300 hours of effort by staff, but that also includes management, myself as chief, the commissioner and onwards to review and ensure that we were satisfactorily fulfilling the information requests from the Office of the Auditor General. This is because many of the questions on the special report were complex and laborious in preparing responses; for example, to submit a list of all internal and external exercises that the Ministry of the Solicitor General's staff participated in since 2017, or providing meeting minutes and supporting materials for all CCT meetings, or all calls involving the PEOC. As you can imagine, those are very manual efforts. They required going into my calendar or other folks' calendars dating back several months to be able to provide those.

We also found that many of the questions were sent in an ad hoc format, usually in the form of multiple follow-ups with differing timelines, which made tracking and managing the requests challenging. There were occasions where EMO staff received multiple requests from the AG in one day, which could have been improved if there were consolidated requests for information. The turnaround times were usually quick, usually not more than a one- or two-week window, which may sound like a lot, but it actually isn't when you consider the time and effort to seek out that information, to send it up the lines and collate it and review it etc., and the number of folks involved.

As I said earlier, while EMO staff were in the process of responding to the AG inquiries, EMO staff were also engaged in the PEOC, in addition to working their regular programmatic duties. Staff had to take time away from the pandemic response efforts and regular operation work in order to respond to the questions.

I would like to highlight that despite the demands of COVID-19 response activities, supporting First Nation evacuations and addressing these AG information requests, we have also, as stated in the table submitted to the committee, continued to make progress on some of the outstanding recommendations from the 2017 value-for-money audit as well. Since the report was released, we've balanced making progress on the recommendations, many of which are multi-year undertakings, while engaging in various planning and response activities. As submitted to

the committee, we've completed 10 of the action items from the report and will continue to make progress on the outstanding recommendations, which are in various stages of implementation or consideration, and seek appropriate government decisions where necessary.

As I believe has been stated earlier, the timelines for full implementation will continue to be impacted by our continued provincial response to COVID-19. As well, we've now entered into, for example, seasonal emergencies such as the spring flooding season and the wildfire season, within a COVID-19 context, so again, we'll be balancing completing and addressing those outstanding recommendations in that context.

I hope that was helpful in terms of responding to the question.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Chair, how much more time do I have?

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): We have nine minutes and 20 seconds, and I see that MPP Anand would like to ask a question. Go ahead, MPP Anand.

Mr. Deepak Anand: Thank you, Chair—I appreciate it—and thank you, Mr. Khawja. I was listening to it, and it sounds like a lot of work right in the middle of a storm that we're going through.

Many times, we get a lot of calls. We actually get calls at the same time: One is asking why we implemented this, and the second call, at the same time, is about why we did not implement this and why we should not implement this. Going through those balancing acts takes a lot of work, to justify everything you do, so I do want to acknowledge you, along with the other colleagues who continue to say thank you, for doing an incredible job.

I do know the auditor has a job to do as well, to make sure that things are done in a way where we're accountable, so I want to acknowledge that. Thank you for that.

I want to take a look at chapter 1 of the Special Report on Emergency Management in Ontario—Pandemic Response, recommendation number 3, on page 25. It says, "Determine the critical resources needed for all types of emergencies and then enter into agreements for those resources with pre-established rates." I want to take a look at the words "pre-established rates." That's one thing which I want you to elaborate on.

I just want to ask you: The auditor's recommendation is to determine the critical resources needed at the pre-established rates. What's your point on that? Do you think it is possible to have those kind of—with everything in this storm which we've gone through and which we're actually still going through, if it was possible to get everything on pre-established rates? What's your opinion on that?

Mr. Steven Davidson: If I could, Chair and MPP Anand: Heidi Francis, the associate deputy minister from the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, is on. I wonder if Heidi could speak both to that question, but also put it in context of our broader supply chain efforts, because certainly securing PPE in a very competitive global marketplace was an absolutely critical priority. You have highlighted the auditor's advice to us on that point, so if we could ask Heidi to respond to this, that would be great.

1410

Ms. Heidi Francis: Thank you. Certainly I'll answer that. I'm Heidi Francis. I'm the associate deputy minister at the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services. I've also had the honour and the privilege to lead an integrated group of professionals over the last year on the supply chain, PPE.

Good question. I've learned a lot through the last year. These are all professionals I work with. If I can go pre-pandemic, and then I'm going to set the stage for what we had in COVID, the early days.

Pre-pandemic, we had bulk purchasing arrangements. All of the OPS has that; all of the BPS has that. We also had shared services that had contracts in place. Shared services is a group of organizations that were established or facilitated by the government many years ago, and they had contracts in place for the hospital sector. Inside government, we had VORs that you could buy off of, and they would have no commitment of volumes, but they would have commitment of or predetermined rates.

When COVID hit, it was very different. No agreements would have helped us very much at that point. The marketplace was turned on its head, and so for the whole world, supply chains were completely broken. Even if we had agreements on every single commodity for long-term or for pre-established rates, we were finding that there was a significant increase in the demand for PPE. Every sector out there was needing PPE, whether it was teachers, whether it was transit, whether it was waste management. It wasn't just the health sector, which we would normally have in our line of sight.

In addition to that significant demand, what we were finding, which was really a huge problem, was that there was a significant decrease in access to it. So if you go back to the early days of March and April and you remember from the news, we were finding that there were certain countries—whoever could pay the most got it, regardless of contract. There was a lot of fraud on the marketplace. If you could find access to it, you'd have to do your due diligence, and it was gone by that point.

We found that borders were hardening, and the European Union was one of those. I believe it was Spain; they just shut it down. You were not getting it, whether you had an agreement or not. We saw in the United States, our neighbour to the south, one of our biggest trading partners and one of the biggest borders we have in the world, presidential orders from FEMA saying, "No, you're not getting anything. It's for our citizens." So we found ourselves in a very different space than we would have been in pre-pandemic for sure.

What we did is, we put together—and this is going back to what Deputy Di Tommaso said. This was a whole-of-government approach. It wasn't the health sector; it was 74 sectors that needed help. The first calls I got were from fire and another sector that we'd never really dealt with in this way before.

The whole-of-government approach was to put an integrated professional supply chain together, and that way, the many ministries that were involved in it—that

was the shared services that was involved in it, and we started to build forward and figure out what the demand was, too.

Very, very early on, you need to know the demand of whole-of-government, because you can get maybe 30,000 things and maybe you can get 30 million things, but you can't get a million, so you need that aggregate demand. We built our systems, we built our supply chains and, most importantly, what I'm most proud of is that we built a great supply chain that's domestic, and we just saw in early April that 3M opened their plant in Brockville. It's the domestic supply chain that allows the resilience in this, the domestic supply chain and the local supply chain that allow us to actually get ahead of the pandemic's crises, because you can only stock so many things anyway in a warehouse, and you want to be able to have easy access and have safety stock and the ability to go [*inaudible*] as you need it, with the surges that will happen.

So early days, to your question, we had agreements in place with shared services. They were having a difficult time. We had vendors—

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Two minutes left.

Ms. Heidi Francis: —the manufacturer, or it could have been, sorry, an Ontario distributor that actually relied on another jurisdiction. So if you could look at—

Mr. Deepak Anand: Thank you. I need to ask more questions. I apologize.

You touched briefly on it: domestic self-reliance. I absolutely agree with you. This is something we are proud of: our government quickly acting, taking action and making sure that—and I truly believe not just for our consumption but for distribution through the world. We should not only be the consumer; we should be the distributor and we should be the producer to the world. Talking about the GTA itself, Ontario is a global village: 165 nationalities, 202-plus languages. We could be a global village for the world, to serve as well. So thank you for that.

I just want to ask you—you touched on that there was an issue, there were a lot of problems in the supply. A lot of people were calling us. They were concerned. They would say, "What is happening? What is the province doing?" Can you please be clear about what actions the province of Ontario and you guys as a group took to procure those supplies in the early days of the pandemic? Was it like a war room, or fighting going on? What was happening?

Ms. Heidi Francis: Well, we worked as an integrated team to figure out what the demand was. You have to know what you have to supply. We had leveraged every available professional we had within our ecosystem. We had boots on the ground in China, actually sourcing things out. We also had to do due diligence on the quality of what you were getting and whether the documentation was there. We had to ensure that it could get out. We had orders. We monitored them daily. Even though we had an order and even though we may have had a date, it may never have come in. We monitored the safety stock, monitored the burn rate. A lot of things were going on in—

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thank you very much, Ms. Francis. I apologize. That is the time that we have for the second round for the government members.

Before we do move to the next round for the independent members, I just want to give the Auditor General an opportunity to briefly give us some information on that last round of questioning. I believe you want to give us some points of clarification.

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: Yes, just quickly. Thank you.

I just wanted to say, the report, as read, doesn't question the decision-making, but it does say that the structure that was in place still needs a lot of improvement to get to a position where senior management and the government of the day—whatever government—can have an emergency management operation that can click into action fast.

In terms of timing and requests for information from our office, we're no different from other legislative offices that conducted audits during COVID in order to provide input to the process, because EMO is one of continuous change. We did get responses that recommendations would be implemented. The timeline, though, would suggest it's well in the future, and we do encourage a timelier implementation.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thank you very much.

We will now move to the independent member. Mr. Blais, three minutes, please.

Mr. Stephen Blais: My question is probably for Mr. Khawja; I apologize if I got the name wrong. We learned this morning that there is no intention to review, I guess, the recommendations and to begin implementing change until after the emergency is fully over. Is that your view? If so, why do you not find value in trying to make improvements on things, especially given how much longer we expect or how new information has demonstrated that we're likely to be in a state of emergency?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Thank you for the question. My name is Teepu Khawja, chief of emergency management. I would clarify my earlier comment. What I was attempting to convey was that, similar to the past, whether it was SARS or an ice storm, we at EMO did conduct post-event reviews to identify opportunities for improvement and to move forward and to improve emergency management in the province. I was drawing the parallel to what I expect will be done post-COVID.

Having said that, throughout COVID—I would turn to the secretary to speak to CCT, but he did already, I believe, comment on how there was constant update and evolution to reflect the facts on the ground.

I would say, from my view as chief of EMO, we continually improve throughout COVID what we're able to do in terms of how we coordinate response efforts, how we work with partners, how we continue to progress efforts on outstanding recommendations from the AG, which—the ultimate intent is to improve the emergency management within the province. So we continue to make those efforts.

1420

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): One minute left.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Why don't you give us an example of an improvement you've made, like a major improvement you've made?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Sure, happy to. From an Emergency Management Ontario perspective and my role as chief, as I stated earlier, my legislative authority is to assist and coordinate. Also, we have the provincial emergency plan in terms of how we coordinate response activity.

If you think of all the other non-COVID types of emergencies requiring provincial response and coordination throughout the pandemic, such as the evacuations of Neskantaga First Nation, the Eabametoong/Fort Hope First Nation, those occurred towards the end of 2020. Our response structure within the provincial emergency response plan was followed, as documented—

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thank you very much, Mr. Khawja. My apologies, Mr. Blais. We end now.

With the remainder of the time on the clock, we'll move to eight-minute rounds, starting with the NDP official opposition. Ms. Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you very much. I have some additional questions that are closely related to some of the issues I've raised already. One is the issue, actually, that MPP Blais just raised, which is around learning as you go. BC and Manitoba have committed to doing a review of their initial response to COVID in order to improve, because this pandemic is not going away any time soon. Unfortunately, Ontario has not committed to reviewing its operations as it goes. Can you commit to doing that? This is a question to—my apologies, I don't see your name—Mr. Khawja.

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Hi. Thank you. My name is Teepu Khawja, chief of emergency management. I'm happy to respond to that question. Thank you for that.

Elaborating on my answer beforehand in terms of continual learning, I'm happy to provide an example and I can commit that, for EMO, we will work with our partners to be able to evaluate the whole-of-government response to improve it going forward. We will continue to make progress on the outstanding recommendations from the Auditor General, which I would say are still applicable within a COVID context as well. So in terms of commitments, I, as chief, can commit to that.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. Thank you very much. First of all, in your response, it would be good to get a time frame for that, but in my next question—when I read the Auditor General's report, one of the things I noticed in the government's response is that they're looking at doing a review of staffing needs in the emergency management office. My question to you, Mr. Khawja, is: How many positions are open in the EMO office right now, and when will they be filled? Given that you've done a review, how many positions are open and when will they be filled?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Thank you for the question. My name is Teepu Khawja, chief of emergency management. I don't have a precise number in front of me right now, but I am confident that we have less than five vacancies, if any at all. As I said in an earlier response, we made a concerted effort to fill any vacancies, especially as we were leading

and preparing for this upcoming spring flooding season. That is one where we recognized the impact that vacancies have on our staff and we made a concerted effort.

I'm confident that we have very few, if any, vacancies at this time, today, at the committee. As the deputy and I have stated in previous answers, a review has been completed and we'll be working together to—it's not to fill the vacancies, it's to increase the staff complement across various functions. I'll be working with the deputy on that.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay, thank you, Mr. Khawja. I want to get back to the 34 recommendations that the Auditor General made to the emergency management office to ensure that it was ready for emergencies, because when she did that initial review, the Auditor General concluded that they weren't ready for emergencies.

In the government's response, the government said that they could implement these recommendations within six years. Can you commit to implementing these recommendations earlier than six years, before 2023?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Thank you for the question. My name is Teepu Khawja, chief of emergency management. I would offer that our responses to the Auditor General—through the process of the special report, we were asked to provide timelines of which of the recommendations could be completed within one year, two years, three years or beyond. There were four recommendations in the special report. Recommendation number 1 was to, as expeditiously as possible, implement all outstanding recommendations, which, as you said, were over 30.

So the timelines vary, but I believe in the table that we submitted to the committee, we committed to having them implemented by 2023. Does that mean they will all be completed by 2023? Just included in this SCOPA table we submitted, we identified six additional that we have completed as of March 31, and there are others that are on their way—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay [*inaudible*] summarize, I've asked you if you can complete these 34 recommendations quicker than the six-year time frame that you've given yourself, and your response is "maybe"?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: My response is that we committed, in the table submitted to the committee, that we would have them all implemented by 2023. However—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay, but not earlier.

Mr. Teepu Khawja: —they're comprised of multiple recommendations, and they all have different timelines within that. So some will be completed earlier. We are actually, in parallel, undertaking, with the Office of the AG, their annual audit process, so while we're preparing for SCOPA, we're also working with them on that to provide specific timelines of implementation for each and every one of those. So that process is under way in parallel.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. Well, I'm looking at [*inaudible*] information, because when I read the government's response to these questions, it sometimes wasn't clear what the timeline was or when each recommendation would be implemented. So I'm looking forward to seeing that detail.

I want to go back to the issues around the governance and decision-making structure that the government had set up during this emergency. This is a question for Mr. Davidson. One of the issues that was raised is that there was no mechanism in place to systematically report on—

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): You have two minutes.

Ms. Jessica Bell: —ongoing issues. So, Mr. Davidson, what mechanisms are now in place to systematically report on ongoing issues that expand beyond one department?

Mr. Steven Davidson: Thank you very much for the question. Steven Davidson, secretary of the cabinet. So just to clarify: to report out to whom? To report to committee members? Just so I understand your question.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Yes, so it was a recommendation that the emergency management office had no system in place for systemic issues to be brought up to central leadership, and for that to be coordinated quickly among all the participants.

Mr. Steven Davidson: Oh, okay. Thank you for that. Mr. Khawja could speak in more detail about the EMO, emergency management office, reporting, but I will say that daily, the EMO provides a situation report that goes out quite broadly across the Ontario public service. That is a summary that consolidates the input from multiple ministries and agencies with respect to the issues of the day. That's called a sitrep, a situation report. That arrives in my inbox reliably every evening, and has through the course of the pandemic.

I would also say, with respect to the work of the Central Coordination Table, which is that more broadly scoped work and reflects the work of all ministries that are bringing forward advice to cabinet, there is a meeting record that is created from each of those meetings that specifically articulates the action items. Those are created and distributed to the committee members and any other attendees at the meeting within 24 hours of the meeting.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thank you very much, Secretary Davidson. We will now move to members of the government. Mr. Crawford: Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Thank you to all the presenters today. I appreciate all your time and all that you're doing through this difficult period. We do have limited time left, so I have two questions, and then I want to pass it to a colleague as well, so if you could be relatively brief and concise.

My first question is for the chair of EMO. I know the auditor brought up about an IT solution that has been implemented province-wide and is being used in response to COVID-19. I'm just wondering if you can give some examples of how that system has been used to support the response to the emergency?

1430

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Thank you for the question. My name is Teepu Khawja. I am the chief of emergency management.

To answer your question, in 2020 we did complete the procurement of a user-friendly online emergency manage-

ment software which will significantly improve our tracking, reporting and management of incidents, emergencies and planned events. The software enables us to improve the input of necessary information to better support the monitoring of oversight, response and recovery to incidents that occur in Ontario communities and across the public sector, so not only within the COVID environment but with non-COVID emergencies as well.

We procured a vendor called Buffalo Computer Graphics; the software is called DisasterLAN, which I'll refer to as DLAN. It greatly enhances our overall situational awareness during incidents, facilitates resource requests between stakeholders, assists in debris management and disaster assessments and streamlines emergency communications. Access to the system is also available on mobile devices—which is critical in emergencies, to have that mobility—and is provided to emergency management officials within provincial ministries, federal departments, municipalities, First Nation communities and select industry partners.

We have trained all PEOC staff on this DLAN. It's currently in use in the PEOC. Training on that DLAN has also been provided to all ministry emergency management coordinators. Also, in terms of municipalities, they have emergency management coordinators. We have trained a select few of them already, the ones who represent municipalities that we typically rely on for hosting First Nation evacuees during flooding or wildfire seasons. So that training has been completed. Later this month, we have training already scheduled for territorial organizations, some emergency management coordinators within First Nation communities.

In terms of examples of its use, that's an example in terms of how we continue to roll it out and how it is implemented and how we continue to roll out the training for additional users. But to be clear, all municipal emergency management coordinators are already able to benefit from this training, regardless of training being completed, because DLAN does have functions where we are able to receive requests for information from them, which are sent to an email which the system automatically transforms into a ticket, which we assess and then we assign out to the appropriate ministry or within the EMO itself for a response. That automated function improves the effectiveness and efficiency of our ability to respond—

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Okay. I appreciate the answer here, just with limited time.

My next question—and, again, if we could keep it relatively short—is for Mr. Davidson. I just wanted to get a sense—I know we've talked a little bit today about what sort of communication there was within the Ontario government, various ministries and stakeholders, but we haven't touched on—if you could give a one-minute overview on how you characterize the communication between other jurisdictions within Canada, so your colleagues in Quebec or BC or Alberta, if you had shared communications and shared best practices so that you levered off of that in any way.

Mr. Steven Davidson: Yes. Thank you very much for the question. Steven Davidson, secretary of the cabinet. In

my position as Clerk, we did have periodic federal-provincial-territorial Clerks' meetings that were convened by the federal government, by the federal Clerk. Those were infrequent. Much more frequent—so, weekly, and these continue—are federal-provincial-territorial deputy-level calls between and amongst Deputy Ministers of Health as well as Deputy Ministers of Intergovernmental Affairs. Those have continued. They're sometimes combined for efficiency and sometimes they reinforce one another.

There are, of course, ongoing, frequent, regular weekly calls amongst the provincial Chief Medical Officers of Health and the federal Chief Medical Officer of Health, so those continue. Then there is a myriad—Deputy Di Tommaso and Teepu Khawja have both referred to the interjurisdictional communications, so regular calls, almost daily, between the province, the 34 local public health units and the municipalities. Sometimes the federal government is included in those calls, sometimes not, but certainly very frequent and regularized forums for interjurisdictional communication between the province and our partners.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Okay, so overall there's pretty good communication. That's good to hear.

I'd like to pass it over to MPP Parsa for the last couple of minutes.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): MPP Parsa, you have two minutes on the clock.

Mr. Michael Parsa: All right. Thanks very much, Chair. I just want to make sure you can hear me. I'm on mobile because Rogers is completely out in York region. Are you guys able to hear me? Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Yes, you're coming through.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Okay. Thanks. Again, as always, I want to start by thanking the Auditor General for her work and all of you for being here, for your presentations and also the work that you've done in the last little while.

One of the areas identified by the Auditor General through a number of audit recommendations was oversight and review of emergency response plans at both the provincial, ministry and municipal levels. I know the ministry identified some of the areas where progress has been made, particularly when it comes to reviewing emergency plans for currency. What I would like to know is, what kind of criteria does Emergency Management Ontario use to assess the various plans, and are there examples of best practices identified through the reviewing side?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Thank you for the question. My name is Teepu Khawja, chief of emergency management. I will try to answer as best I can within the remaining time.

The EMCPA requires all ministries and municipalities to have emergency plans to review, and they must review them annually and update them as they deem necessary.

Consistent with our authorities under the EMCPA, EMO has an annual emergency management program compliance oversight process to monitor and assist and verify whether ministries and municipalities in fact have

emergency plans in place and that they've reviewed them and updated them if necessary.

Consistent with that authority, as I said, we have a compliance process. Through that process we provide continuous feedback to ministries and municipalities with ways of improving elements on the program that they're required to complete. This includes providing guidance and advice on continuity of operations planning, exercise improvements and possible additions to their emergency management programs, and we have—

Mr. Michael Parsa: I am so sorry, I'm just going—

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thank you very much, gentlemen. That is the time that we have.

We will now move to our final round. Three minutes to the independent member. Mr. Blais, please go ahead.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Again, Mr. Khawja, this province-wide system that you've recently invested in: We were led to believe earlier that it will not be a requirement for municipalities to participate in this system. Is that correct?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Hi. My name is Teepu Khawja, chief of emergency management. Thank you for that question. It is correct that we have implemented this program. It's in place. It's available to all municipal emergency management coordinators. I don't have the authority to compel them, but having said that, they are participating in the training and its value has been demonstrated. It's in use currently. I am confident that municipal emergency management coordinators, as well as those in ministries, federal departments and First Nations, will see the value and join in. We have been using it, and municipalities have been submitting requests for information through that system already. We're ticketing them and responding as quickly as possible.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Perfect. So what power do you need in order to mandate it?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Sorry. I missed that—

Mr. Stephen Blais: What power would you need in order to mandate it? You said you didn't have the power. What power would you need to mandate it?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: Well, under the EMCPA, my authorities are specific to assisting, monitoring and coordinating. So the implementation of that system is consistent with the assisting, coordinating and monitoring, but I don't have the legislative or regulatory authority to compel a municipality to participate in an IT program.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Great. So is that a legislative change or can that be done through regulation?

Mr. Teepu Khawja: I would have to seek legal advice on that. I'm not in a position to say whether that would be a legislative requirement or a regulatory requirement at this moment.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Well, Mr. Davidson, can you commit to getting us an answer on what changes would be needed in order to compel municipalities to participate?

Mr. Steven Davidson: Yes, certainly. I do believe that it would require a legislative change. If that is not the correct answer, MPP Blais, I will correct, but I do believe that it would require a legislative change.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Thank you very much. I don't have any other questions, Mr. Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Taras Natyshak): Thank you very much, Mr. Blais. That concludes the time for questions this afternoon.

I'd like to thank Deputy Solicitor General Di Tommaso, Assistant Deputy Minister Khawja, Secretary of Cabinet Mr. Davidson and also Ms. Francis. Thank you very much for appearing before us today. You are now dismissed. Please stay safe, and we will see you at the next opportunity.

We'll now pause briefly as we go into closed session for the committee to meet for report-writing. Thank you very much.

The committee continued in closed session at 1440.

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