

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

E-40

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

E-40

**Standing Committee on
Estimates**

Ministry of Children, Community
and Social Services

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Friday 11 June 2021

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère des Services
à l'enfance et des Services
sociaux et communautaires

1^{re} session
42^e législature

Vendredi 11 juin 2021

Chair: Peter Tabuns
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Peter Tabuns
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

Hansard on the Internet

Hansard and other documents of the Legislative Assembly can be on your personal computer within hours after each sitting. The address is:

<https://www.ola.org/>

Index inquiries

Reference to a cumulative index of previous issues may be obtained by calling the Hansard Reporting Service indexing staff at 416-325-7400.

Le Journal des débats sur Internet

L'adresse pour faire paraître sur votre ordinateur personnel le Journal et d'autres documents de l'Assemblée législative en quelques heures seulement après la séance est :

Renseignements sur l'index

Adressez vos questions portant sur des numéros précédents du Journal des débats au personnel de l'index, qui vous fourniront des références aux pages dans l'index cumulatif, en composant le 416-325-7400.

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



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

CONTENTS

Friday 11 June 2021

Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.....	E-1017
Hon. Todd Smith	
Ms. Jennifer Morris	
Hon. Jill Dunlop	
Ms. Janet Menard	
Mr. David Remington	
Mr. Rupert Gordon	
Mr. Nelson Loureiro	
Ms. Karen Glass	
Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère	
Mr. Trevor Sparrow	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Friday 11 June 2021

Vendredi 11 juin 2021

The committee met at 0902 in room 151 and by video conference.

MINISTRY OF CHILDREN, COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good morning, everyone. We're going to resume consideration of vote 701 of the estimates of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. There is now a total of 13 hours and 21 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates.

When the committee adjourned on June 10, the official opposition had 11 minutes and 15 seconds remaining. I will go to the official opposition.

MPP Armstrong, the floor is yours.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you so much, Chair. I just wanted to finish the round of questions here.

Welcome, Ministers and ministers' staff, legislative staff and my colleagues, of course. Thank you so much, everybody, for being here this morning.

There were a couple of things I wanted to dig a little deeper on. One of them is the question that I asked yesterday. I didn't get an answer to that question, so I'd like to have the numbers for that. How many children are currently on the waiting list for autism?

And the second question that I also wanted to dig deeper on with the numbers—the prevailing view of families is that the \$600 million that has been promised is not, in fact, the number that has been allocated. So the question is about the global budget. I'm asking the minister: Of the \$600 million in funding that was promised by this government, how much has been spent on things like therapy and maintaining pre-pandemic capacity levels? Also, how many kids are receiving interim funding, and how many kids didn't have access to therapies that they needed?

Basically, I can give a written list to the Clerk and ask specifically what areas got that \$600 million that the minister has said has been put towards autism, but I'd like to know what was spent, allocated, from that \$600 million. I can give that list to the Clerk. But I would like to know how many children are currently on the wait-list for autism—and if the minister does have any of those questions about where that \$600 million has been allocated, because families want to know if that actually has been spent.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, MPP Armstrong, and good morning. Good morning to Chair Tabuns and the committee, as well. It's good to pick up where we left off.

I can just remind all members of the committee and the public that our government did double the amount of funding to the Ontario Autism Program from \$300 million to \$600 million, and we're committed to spending \$600 million each and every year. That's the commitment that we made, and that's what we intend to do. It's being spent in a number of different areas—actually, far more areas than autism families were eligible to spend their funding in in years gone by. With the new Ontario Autism Program, as I mentioned yesterday, not only are ABA services available, but you're also able to access speech-language pathology, you're able to access mental health supports, occupational therapy, and there are all of the other pillars of the new program that are either available now or will be available in the future.

Foundational family services have been up and running for some time now, and I believe there are over 22,000 families in Ontario who are accessing foundational family services. One of the things that I heard from families when I was touring the province back in the summer of 2019 was that, upon receiving a diagnosis for their child that they were on the ASD spectrum, they didn't know where to go. There were no services available. They can immediately register with the Ontario Autism Program and access foundational family services. Plus, when they get their allocation of funding, either the childhood budget or the interim funding, they're able to spend it on those areas that I listed earlier.

I think, as ADM Morris mentioned yesterday, families will reconcile their spending, and then we'll have a better idea as to where that money actually has been spent. Maybe she can pick up and just elaborate on that in a moment.

I can tell you that there are 36,000 children in Ontario who are receiving services or support now from the Ontario government. You'll recall, MPP Armstrong, and I was there, too, on the front lawn at Queen's Park, when families were protesting and only 25% of families in Ontario were receiving any kind of support at all from the provincial government. Three times as many children are now receiving support, and the list of services that are available to them is much greater.

I can turn it over to Jen Morris, if she wants to introduce herself to the committee again today and pick up where I left off there.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Thank you, Minister.

Good morning. I'm Jennifer Morris, ADM, children with special needs.

I'm happy to pick up the question from yesterday. I'll take folks back to the end of March 2019. At that point, we had just over 10,000 children and youth receiving services through the Ontario Autism Program. Almost 6,000 of those children had active OAP behaviour plans. This is the group of kids that we sometimes refer to, or you've heard referred to, as the legacy children. Those are children who have been in behaviour plans for a number of years. At the end of March 31, 2019, almost 6,000 children were in behaviour plans. The remaining 4,000 children of the 10,000 who were in service at that point were children who were in a phase called generalization and maintenance. That means they had previously been receiving behavioural services through a behaviour plan but had moved into a phase where they were now practising their skills in new places, in new environments, with new people. All of those children and families who were in that generalization and maintenance phase were invited to receive a childhood budget. That's the 10,000 children who were in service on March 31, 2019.

In addition to those children, in 2019-20, just over 4,900 invitations were issued for childhood budgets, and just over 19,000 invitations were issued for one-time funding.

As of March 31, 2020, so a full year later, we then had 4,800 children who had an active behaviour plan. That's down from the 6,000 I noted in the previous year, and that decrease can be attributed to a number of factors, including some youth who turned 18 and aged out of the program—so there's a natural transition out of the program—and families proactively choosing to end their behaviour plans and receive either a childhood budget or interim one-time funding instead.

It's important to note that the ministry and the government have publicly committed on a number of occasions, since childhood budgets were implemented, that children who were in those behaviour plans could continue in those plans until they transitioned into core clinical services. So no child was moved out of a behaviour plan without them voluntarily choosing to do so.

0910

Families were given that option—again, entirely at their choosing—to end their plans and receive interim one-time funding instead. Many families chose to do this for a number of reasons, including what the minister has raised, which is that there was a broader access of services available through interim one-time funding and childhood budgets than there was from the legacy behaviour plans. Families could access speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, as well as technology, respite and other family supports and equipment through childhood budgets and interim one-time funding, but they could only access behavioural therapy through a legacy behaviour plan. So some families chose to exit their behaviour plans and receive interim one-time funding or a childhood budget instead.

In 2021, in addition to the roughly 4,800 children who were in active behaviour plans, we also issued an additional almost 13,000 invitations for childhood budgets or interim one-time funding.

And to answer your question, MPP Armstrong, as of April 30, 2021, we had 3,889 children who had an active OAP—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Ms. Jennifer Morris:—behaviour plan, 11,073 childhood budget invitations have been issued, and a total of 31,886 interim one-time funding invitations have been issued. There are a total of 46,891 children registered on the wait-list. All of them have either received an invitation for funding or are in a behaviour plan.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Chair, how much time do we have left?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): A minute and a half.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I'm going to turn it over to Lisa Gretzky to start the next round. I know it will bump over to the government, but I'll let her finish the minute and a half.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Gretzky.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I have a question around developmental services and the Passport Program, specifically. I'd like to know how many families are currently on the wait-list for Passport funding.

Hon. Todd Smith: We can get into greater detail throughout the day. We have, I believe, eight hours, and I can get you that exact number. I know my assistant deputy minister Rupert Gordon will join us. I know that we did double the number of individuals who are receiving Passport funding in the province of Ontario. I don't want to give you a number without making it an accurate one, but I know that we did double the number who are receiving the minimum of \$5,000. That's the minimum. Everybody is receiving at least \$5,000.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Many of the families were unable to use their Passport funding due to COVID-19, so I'm wondering, how much money did the government retain?

Hon. Todd Smith: We've extended the ability for families to spend that Passport funding. As I'm sure you're aware, we also increased or lengthened the list of eligible expenses for families with Passport because—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): And with that, I'm sorry to say, you're out of time for this rotation.

We'll go back to the government. MPP Roberts, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Good morning, Ministers. Thank you for appearing before the committee today, on this beautiful Friday.

I want to start with a question that's going to be directed to Minister Dunlop, to pull you into the conversation. I know a ton of really exciting initiatives that are happening on your side of the ministry, as well, on children and women's issues.

One of the areas that I want to talk a little bit about is the child welfare redesign. This is an area that I've been fortunate to play a small role in, in my role as parliamentary assistant at this ministry. I recall, early on, when you took over the portfolio, you and I had the chance to visit the children's aid society in Peel together and launch some consultations that have eventually led to us re-designing and reforming the child welfare system.

I think we can all agree that Ontario's child welfare system was not working particularly well. Minister, I have heard you speak many times about this in the House and in communities right across the province. There is really a clear need for change so that the children, youth and families who are impacted can have a much more positive experience. The metrics of success should be the same for any child or youth in Ontario regardless of whether they have been part of the child welfare system or not. Instead, unfortunately, we see worse outcomes in many areas for those who are in the system.

As part of these consultations, we have had extensive engagement with First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners, Indigenous organizations, the child welfare sector, other sectors such as mental health, the law profession, front-line workers, and youth and their families. That all culminated in the government announcing, in July 2020, that it would be redesigning the child welfare system in Ontario.

I am wondering, Minister, if you could spend some time talking about how the government is redesigning this system and some of the progress to date.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: It was a pleasure to join you in Peel, as well as when I was in Ottawa and we had a chance to meet with your children's aid society. Thank you for the great work you do in that area.

And thank you to all the committee members for being here on this Friday. We have a full day.

We know that our current child welfare system has faced challenges for some time, and that includes overrepresentation of Black, Indigenous, and 2SLGBTQ+ children, youth and families engaged with the child welfare system. Children and youth in care experience disparities in outcomes such as education, homelessness, human trafficking. Children and young persons in licensed residential settings do not always receive high-quality care that meets their needs. Families do not always feel adequately supported to seek help, stay together, or to reunify. Inconsistent and often time-limited access to prevention-focused community services; lack of coordination across the many sectors, service providers who serve children, youth and families—and the child welfare system is not financially sustainable or efficient.

The COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted and in some cases exacerbated these challenges.

Addressing the overrepresentation of First Nation, Inuit and Métis children and youth in the child welfare system is also a key element of the murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls inquiry's calls for justice.

The redesign is focused on three main goals: strengthening families and communities in partnership with cross-sector providers through enhanced community-based prevention and early intervention; addressing systemic racism and the disproportionalities in outcomes, disparities for Indigenous, Black, 2SLGBTQ+ and other equity-deserving populations in child welfare; and continuing to improve the service experience and outcomes for children and youth who need protection services, including more family-based placements.

I would like to talk about how we are redesigning the child welfare system. We can all agree that every child and youth in Ontario deserves a safe, loving and stable home and every child deserves to be supported as they grow and transition into adulthood. Continuing to improve the service experience outcomes for children and youth—they need protection services, including more family-based placements. That's why our government is redesigning Ontario's child welfare system to focus on services that are high-quality, culturally appropriate and truly responsive to the needs of children, youth and their families. Our plan is focused on strengthening families and communities through prevention initiatives that better serve those in need. We are seeking more permanent homes for children and youth in care when they cannot stay in their own homes or communities.

Working in partnership with Indigenous and Black communities and service providers as well as leaders in other sectors, we're changing the culture from apprehension to prevention. This means giving more moms and dads, children and youth the help that they need early, giving them a voice and putting them at the centre of decision-making.

Recognizing the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth in the child welfare system, the ongoing impacts of intergenerational trauma on Indigenous people in Ontario and their unique cultural needs, a distinct Indigenous approach is being applied across all parts of redesign, guided by the Ontario Indigenous Children and Youth Strategy.

Some of the key highlights I would like to report on: We have made significant progress since the redesign was first announced last July, including advancing more than 10 bilateral and trilateral processes with representatives of First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples. This includes supporting the coming into force of the Wabaseemoong First Nations customary care code and providing \$2 million to support Indigenous systems planning.

0920

We've issued policy directives to cease the practice of birth alerts in Ontario, as well as policy directives to allow for the use of Helping Establish Able Resource-Homes Together, or HEART, and Strong Parent Indigenous Relationships Information Training, or SPIRIT, as culturally appropriate alternatives to Structured Analysis Family Evaluation, or SAFE, and Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education, or PRIDE.

We publicly released Ontario's Quality Standards Framework, which provides an overview of what high-quality residential care looks like across all sectors and settings, and the children and young persons' rights resource.

We're also investing in targeted initiatives that support the goals of redesign, such as: \$11.5 million in COVID-19 response funding for children, youth and families; \$5.4 million to enhancements to the Family Well-Being Program through the Roadmap to Wellness; \$5 million ongoing to enhance access to funding for prevention-focused customary care; we issued an extended moratorium on youth aging out of care during the COVID-19 pandemic

and invested \$8.7 million to better support youth aging out of care; over \$3 million to enhance mental health and addictions supports in the child welfare system, including \$0.84 million for short-term COVID-19 response mental health services for children and youth in care and their residential service providers; \$1.5 million in ongoing investment to modernize Ontario's adoption system and provide more supports for families who choose to adopt; \$1.5 million in ongoing investment to expand community-based prevention and well-being interventions for Black children, youth and families; \$1.5-million expansion of the Education Liaison Program to improve educational outcomes for children and youth in care; investment in community-led prototypes to implement and evaluate innovative ideas that contribute to the redesign's goals; \$250,000 from the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development to improve access to and success in the labour market for youth leaving care; and continued investment in One Vision, One Voice to address anti-Black racism in the child welfare system.

Over the next year of redesign, we will continue to build on the progress achieved to date, including moving forward on important initiatives that will set the foundation for the future state we are working towards, including developing a multi-pronged engagement approach with diverse stakeholders and partners. This includes focused engagement with Indigenous leadership, service providers, youth and families; Black communities, service providers, youth and families; as well as youth with lived experience in the child welfare system, implementing an approach to enhanced collaboration across multi-ministries and sectors where improved connections between systems and service providers will close gaps in service and share responsibility for improving child, youth and family well-being beyond the child welfare system alone.

Recognizing that we can't have a one-size-fits-all approach to child, youth and family services for every community in Ontario, our approach to engagement reflects our intention to bring together cross-sector stakeholders, community partners and children, youth, and families in communities across the province. This will ensure their voices are central to the implementation of child welfare redesign and discussions around transforming child and family services in their communities.

In line with the redesign's shift to community-based prevention, we are working to identify high-impact opportunities to shift financial investments over time from within the child welfare system to community-based initiatives that better serve children, youth and families within their communities.

I'll now pass it over to Deputy Menard and ADM Remington, who can speak more to the need for redesign and all the work that we have been doing.

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you very much, Minister Dunlop.

I'm Janet Menard, deputy minister, children, community and social services.

As Minister Dunlop pointed out, the child welfare redesign is a transformation of child, youth and family

services that includes all sectors, organizations and individuals that impact the well-being of children, youth and families.

Of course, our work is guided by a future state vision, but I thought I would just take a minute to look backwards a little bit, because it's also informed by the history of the system. The child welfare system has pretty deep roots and goes back to the 1800s. In fact, the first children's aid society was established in Toronto in 1891, and Ontario passed the first child protection act in 1893. As is the case today, the operation of the early societies was focused solely on protection, and protection by and large meant removal of children from a situation that was deemed to be avoided—so really, no involvement in prevention or support for families. That mindset and culture has prevailed throughout the course of the evolution of the system. Today, we have 38 societies, including 13 Indigenous-led child well-being organizations. To varying degrees, they have actually moved into the space of prevention and early intervention, but there still is an overriding prevalence of protection.

The other thing that I find is important to note is the introduction in 2017, under the Child, Youth and Family Services Act, of an obligation for everyone, including members of the public and professionals working with children and families of children, to—it was required by law that they report suspected cases of abuse or neglect. All suspicions had to be reported to a children's aid society. We call this "duty to report." This has heavily influenced the activities of societies, and in fact resulted in thousands of referrals every year that can come from teachers, neighbours, family members—the general public can report suspicions of abuse or neglect.

In fact, in the last year, the projected numbers coming from societies—because they provide us with the information; they report in to us—was almost 108,000 referrals came in to societies, which resulted in 62,000 investigations. They sort them to ensure that an investigation is necessary. That took us to about 11,000, almost 12,000, kids in care currently. The lion's share of work in getting children into the system involves investigations, and investigations are traumatic, often involve the court system, and can be very damaging to families, especially when the allegations don't bear out in further discussion and investigation. So that is where we come from when we talk about the child welfare system.

What I'd like to do now is, because we do have a vision, I'll go back to the vision, which is, as I said, informed by the history, which is important for us to remember. Today, our future state vision is guided by a belief that all human services in communities need to work effectively together and with families to build on their strengths and enhanced resilience; that government ministries and cross-sector partners have a shared responsibility and are accountable for improving child, youth and family well-being across the life course and eliminating outcome disparities for equity-deserving groups.

0930

It also envisions that Indigenous children and youth are healthy, happy, resilient, grounded in their cultures and

languages, thriving as individuals and as members of their families and First Nations communities; and that local perspectives of the child, youth and family voices drive the design and delivery of human services available in every community in Ontario; and that in the long term, there are measurable improvements in child, youth and family well-being in all communities, so that we're not just measuring numbers of referrals and investigations and children in care and youth in care, but we're actually talking about the difference that is being made through their involvement in the system.

In essence, we're transforming or redesigning a long-standing system to ensure that families stay together and children and youth in care have the supports they need to feel safe, be safe and succeed and thrive as they transition from care to adulthood.

I will turn it over to my colleague Assistant Deputy Minister David Remington, and he will talk to you about the five pillars.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Deputy.

Good morning. I'm David Remington, assistant deputy minister for child welfare and protection division.

As the deputy has said and as the minister has said, we are fundamentally rethinking and redesigning the child welfare system. We built it across several pillars. I just want to spend a few minutes to talk about the pillars.

The first pillar is really supporting child, youth and family community well-being. It's probably one of our central pillars in the significant change that we're about to undertake with partners and that we've been working on for the last year. It's really about community organizations working together to think about the needs of families early on. It includes all sectors; it's not just child welfare. We're talking about schools, early years programs, parenting programs, health and mental health services. It's a significant part of the modernization to really include other sector partners. Child welfare is everyone's business. It's not just the CAS down the corner; it's everyone working together.

We have a mandate to develop several proposals to work forward that fundamentally change the landscape of child, youth and family services for Indigenous partners, working to include the potential to significantly reduce the overrepresentation of children in care. It's working with Indigenous partners, it's working with governments of Canada and really putting forward approaches in customary care so that children, youth and families can stay connected to community, connected to culture and connected to their family.

We really have a pillar that works on quality of care—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say, with that, we're out of time on this rotation.

We'll go back to the official opposition. MPP Gretzky, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I'm just going to go back to finish my previous questions around developmental services. I asked how many families are currently on the wait-list for Passport funding, and the minister said they will get back

to me on that. Hopefully, by this afternoon, when we continue, we'll have those numbers.

I had also asked for the adults, who were numerous, who could not use Passport funding during COVID-19—how much money did the government retain of that money? How much was saved from those individuals not being able to spend that money? Also, I'd like to know: Were the families provided with the funding to be used at a later date? So the funding they didn't use from their allotment this year during COVID-19—is that money then carried forward to their budget for the following year?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, MPP Gretzky, for the questions.

I will pass it over to my assistant deputy minister Rupert Gordon in a moment just to touch on some of your questions.

I do want to reiterate the fact that we have, since 2018, doubled the number of people with developmental disabilities in the Passport Program. The number is 54,000 now, and those individuals are receiving a minimum of \$5,000. They are able to spend that money how they see fit—taking part in community classes or various recreational programs, developing work or volunteer or daily life skills and hiring a support worker if they need one, creating their own life plans, getting temporary respite for their caregivers. Once full developmental services assessment processes are completed, those adults are approved for Passport, and they could receive the minimum \$5,000, but they could receive up to \$40,250; the average is about \$11,500.

As I was mentioning earlier, before we ran out of time, our government did increase the ability of individuals who didn't have those day programs to go to because of COVID-19—the ability to purchase technology if they wished, or expanded the list of eligible expenses there. We are making it easier for those who work within the Passport world, increasing the availability of faster reimbursements, and—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I'm sorry to interrupt, Minister. I appreciate all that, but the question was, for the families who weren't able to spend the money because of COVID-19—because that has happened—how much of that money was retained, and will that carry forward into their budgets for next year? I know that you expanded what they could spend, but it was still difficult in some cases. So how much of that money was retained and will be returned to those families carried forward in their next allotment?

Hon. Todd Smith: I'm just trying to drive home the fact that we tried to make it as easy as possible for families to continue to get services, because you're right; not everybody could. Not every service provider was able to keep that programming going during COVID-19. It has been a difficult time.

I'll bring in Assistant Deputy Minister Rupert Gordon to pick up on your question, MPP Gretzky.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thank you, Minister.

My name is Rupert Gordon. I am assistant deputy minister of the community services division at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

MPP Gretzky, to your question, the interim actuals currently report approximately \$64 million in underspending out of the Passport Program. As the minister said, the program this year has reflected the expansion of the ability to spend on a series of items in order to assist families to do more participation and activities in the home, to be able to be connected remotely to community activities through the use of technology, sensory items, supplies to support in-home physical fitness, personal protective equipment, essential service delivery fees, and supports for behavioural support plans and related interventions. I think it's important to note that those interventions delivered more than \$36 million of support to families through those temporary measures. At the start of this fiscal year, there was an approach to provide some advancement of resources and some other flexibility in order to allow them to take advantage of those benefits.

With regard to your question about the underspending for this year and whether and how that might be carried forward, there is no current provision or plan to provide for that. But what there is—and a very important component of the current additional enhancement that's available—is support for families who are paying for caregivers to access support above and beyond their Passport allocation for the \$3 wage enhancement that is available. That's a significant investment, and it's an investment that government has made not only in respect of the Passport Program but in respect of other direct funding initiatives that the government supports for families on the children's side—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I'm sorry to interrupt. I appreciate that, and I think my answer was in there: It's not going to carry forward. I have a lot of questions and very limited time. I do appreciate that you did answer the question about it not carrying forward, that there was \$64 million and that does not carry forward into the next Passport allotment.

0940

If I could switch gears—again, I apologize, but we do have very limited time—I would like to talk about social assistance. After the passage of Bill 276, the ministry will be leading a complex process of aligning provincial social assistance intake systems with wholly municipally operated stabilization systems, and integrating both with as yet unnamed providers of employment programs. Yet the administrative capacity of the ministry is scheduled to shrink by \$5 million from last year and \$20 million from the year before. So my question is, how are you planning to support such a complex process with fewer staff and declining resources?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for the question.

As you know, we've announced our transformation of social assistance, the recovery and renewal program. That's going to enhance the delivery of social services and social assistance to individuals who need it by better allocating who is responsible for what. The provincial

government is going to be responsible for intake, for registration. It's going to be the municipal partners that will be providing those life stabilization supports on the ground, in communities.

We've done a lot of work with individuals who are working in this sector, and I know that ADM Nelson Loureiro will be wanting to speak to this. He has been involved, along with our team, in reaching out specifically to our caseworkers and those who are on the ground in communities working directly with individuals to ensure a smooth transition over a period of time. What this is going to do is streamline the entire process so that individuals are getting more face time with their caseworkers and are able to access the supports they need.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: But if I could just interject there, that's my question: How are you planning to provide that support for that complex system with fewer staff and declining resources? How is that better going to support the social assistance recipients?

Hon. Todd Smith: By better defining who is responsible for what and streamlining the process. We're spending \$10 billion on social assistance right now, and the one thing that I'm sure you would agree with is that we're not seeing the types of outcomes that we should be seeing when it comes to the delivery of social assistance and moving individuals, particularly out of Ontario Works, back into employment. Minister McNaughton and I were both out yesterday speaking about employment services transformation and what's happening in that sector. Only 1% of individuals are moving into a job out of social assistance, Ontario Works in particular.

Maybe I will bring in ADM Nelson at this time and he can pick up on where I left off.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Maybe ADM Nelson could also then respond to the fact that it was said that you were going to co-design with recipients and stakeholders as part of this modernization. I'd like to know what funds are actually allocated to stakeholder engagement and what does that—are you engaging the community service providers that are going to be having to pick up the majority of the work here? Are you talking to individuals who are receiving social assistance?

We certainly can agree, Minister, that the system, the way it currently is, is not effectively supporting individuals, but I will point out that a lot of people on social assistance, especially those on ODSP, are unable to work. So, yes, I have concerns about this modernization, as they do.

Maybe the ADM could answer that: What funds are allocated to stakeholder engagement?

Hon. Todd Smith: Just before Nelson comes on, I'd just touch on the collaboration piece. This has been a very, very collaborative effort with our partners in the municipal sector, particularly AMO and the various working tables with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, but in particular, those who work in this sector and are involved in this sector.

If Nelson is there, he can introduce himself.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister Smith, and thank you, MPP Gretzky, for your question.

I'm Nelson Loureiro, assistant deputy minister of social assistance policy, planning and innovation division at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

The current plan under the social assistance recovery and renewal does not currently contemplate reduction in resourcing. It is about realigning roles and responsibilities on who does what, and as mentioned by the minister, it is about looking at who is better positioned to do what—so the municipalities taking on more of that community support, that life stabilization role, and the province taking on more of that back office administration function, like eligibility, financials etc., and improving our digital presence and our digital solutions, and allowing the municipalities and freeing up the space for caseworkers to focus on activities that will support clients towards greater independence and employment, where possible and where feasible.

Specifically on the employment services side, as was announced yesterday, we are working with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development in better supporting people into employment services through service system managers. Again, that will have an impact on who does what and what roles and responsibilities—for instance, what the municipality takes on versus the service system manager, but it is a partnership between the two.

Specifically, to your question, MPP Gretzky, around how much funding is allocated to engagement to collaboration, I don't have a specific number, but what I can say is, it is a specific component of our plan around engagement and co-design. It's a pillar principle within our plan to co-design with people with lived experience. It's a big pillar to co-design with our clients as well as our staff, as well as our municipal partners.

The co-design process is going very well. The response we are receiving, for instance, from our municipal partners is very positive in our approach. We've set out a vision in collaboration and in partnership with our municipal partners, and we are working towards that vision in our co-design process. We have—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: If I could just use that as a segue—again, I apologize; I don't like interrupting, but my time is very limited. That's a really good segue. Maybe as you're responding, we could work this in.

When you talk about the partners and the modernization—the municipalities will be on the hook for providing comprehensive life stabilization programs that low-income Ontarians have to engage in as a condition of the benefit, but there seems to be no significant anticipated increase in investment from the province in programs like housing and social supports. So I'm wondering if you can tell me how the added demand for those mandatory programs is going to be funded. Are the municipalities going to have to raise property taxes in order to pay for that?

Also, because you talked about doing a lot of moving towards digital and that kind of thing, and these recipients or applicants will have to do a lot digitally, can you show where in the estimates budget there is money for devices and Internet access, where those plans are—funding is for 31% of low-income Ontarians who don't have adequate Internet services at home?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for all of those questions. I know Nelson will want to chime in on a number of these things.

To the concerns regarding municipal funding: Because we are working so collaboratively with our partners at AMO and in the municipal sector on this, as well as our partners who are currently working in the social services sector—this is not about an increase for municipalities; this is about better aligning with municipalities who's responsible for what. So are services going to be provided on the ground by our partners in the municipal sector? Yes. They're best suited to do that. The province is best suited from the intake perspective and the funding perspective, as far as individuals' monthly rates that they're receiving.

What I would say, though, is—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Minister, my question is, if there is going to be a shift in that, who delivers what—and I understand that. But there will be an increased need or demand on the municipalities for programs like housing and social supports, so where in the estimates does that show how they are to meet that? Is there funding to support the municipalities to be able to provide those added services that they're going to have to be providing? How do they come up with that money? Is that going to have to be a property tax increase?

0950

Hon. Todd Smith: No, no.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Is the province going to be forwarding more money to the municipalities to be able to deliver those services?

Hon. Todd Smith: We're making investments across the government. This has been a pan-government approach, as was outlined in our Poverty Reduction Strategy.

When it comes to mental health supports, you've seen the record investments that have been made by our Associate Minister of Mental Health, Michael Tibollo: \$31 million just last week, but \$3.8 billion that our government is committed to investing in mental health supports on the ground.

The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Steve Clark, on the housing side, is making record investments when it comes to new housing. We saw some of those in the recent budget and the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit partnership with the federal government.

You look at child care spaces and the investments that are being made in that sector as well. Minister Lecce and the federal government, as a matter of fact, are making investments in that sector as well.

Nelson, I know there were a number of questions previous to that question that MPP Gretzky had posed, if you want to touch on some of those for her.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Perhaps the ADM, because the minister had raised the Poverty Reduction Strategy—in the estimates it shows no allotment, so based on a previous allotment in the previous year, the entire budget for the Poverty Reduction Strategy has been cut—100% cut. I'm wondering, based on seeing that in black and white in the estimates, if that means that the Poverty Reduction Strategy office is being closed. I'm not sure if I missed

something, if maybe the Premier and the minister think that they've ended poverty. But there is no allotment in the estimates for the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I would also like to point out, because the minister raised the federal programs—and I'll be happy to go back to this next round—that the lion's share of the funding that has been forwarded during the pandemic for pandemic recovery and through social transfers—that only 6% of that money came from the province; 94% of the money has come from the federal government. I have concerns about the fact that the Poverty Reduction Strategy office—there is no funding allotment for that, and the government seems to think they've ended poverty when clearly that's not the case.

In my next round, I'll have an opportunity to talk about the fact that the federal government has picked up a lot of the bill through this pandemic. I would like to know why that money was not reinvested, since the government, again, only provided 6% of the money so far—why that money wasn't reinvested in actually raising the rates for individuals on social assistance, and what the government thinks they're going to accomplish by driving poor social assistance recipients further into poverty and debt.

With that, Chair, I think I'm probably within seconds of my time being up.

Hon. Todd Smith: There are billions of dollars in investments—and I'll be happy to talk about them in the next round of questioning—that our government is making to support people who are currently living in poverty, including housing, mental health supports, child care spaces and many other—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Minister, unfortunately you're now out of time.

With that rotation, we go back to the government side. MPP Barrett, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Toby Barrett: A big thank you to the ministers on this call, and of course the staff. This is a great opportunity to get these very detailed answers and descriptions over the 20-minute period. It's so important, certainly, for the people we represent. This time of year, many of us are part of children's aid annual meetings and things like that.

My question would be to garner some information with respect to the social assistance transformation initiative. Certainly, many, many challenges in this field before the crisis of the past year or more—and I say that as a former critic for this ministry, back in the days of the Frances Lankin report. I've published a paper myself with respect to what kind of changes can be made in consultation with key stakeholders.

Like many on this call, I've been thinking about people in my riding. I think of my buddies, many of whom are on ODSP, that as an MPP when you kick around town by town—these guys are great. They have a work ethic. They're very enthusiastic. Many are really heavily involved in volunteering and helping out with the various festivals. Their enthusiasm is second to none. They want to help out; they want to work. They're in a situation

through no fault of their own where they maybe don't have the ability to hold down a full-time job. I worry about them, given what has happened over the past year. I've lost touch with so many of these mainly young guys who are out and about in the various towns. Maybe they're washing windows, working in the fast food industry or volunteering with the festivals, as I had mentioned.

I know the minister worries about this. For these people, the world has changed and their world has changed. Is our social assistance transformation plan able and is the flexibility built in to help these people to continue to be involved—and, of course, those who are on Ontario Works? We've always known, even though it has been referred to as Ontario Works for over 20 years now, the work part makes up, I understand—and I'd like to get the details in my question—a very small percentage of what the program is about. I would like to get an update—I am out of touch—on how many people are on Ontario Works and how many people are on the ODSP program. I say that because many have lost their jobs. They never did get that planned job over the past year because so many of these workplaces don't exist anymore.

Again, I know everybody on this call worries about things like this, and I would ask the question to get more specific. Can we get a fulsome description of this, what's referred to as a social assistance recovery and renewal plan? And secondly, the consultation that is so important in any of these kinds of major initiatives—perhaps there was consultation before the virus hit, and I'd like to get an idea to what extent the feedback from the consultation is being incorporated in this plan.

Hon. Todd Smith: Good morning. It's good to see you. They are all good questions.

Of course, we're all concerned about these individuals in our ridings and in our communities. I run into them on the street on my way to the bank and sometimes hanging outside my constituency office—just looking for me to answer their questions as well and assist them in any way we can.

Our constituency office staff—I know yours and all of our constituency staff, no matter what side of the aisle we're on in the House—do the best they can to support these individuals and get them the help they need and answer any questions, and also, when it comes to Ontario Works in particular, making sure that the supports are there to get them into work, to get them back up on their feet and living independently again. So we can talk about some of those numbers and some of the questions that you've raised.

1000

I'm really happy to have the opportunity here to outline our work on social assistance transformation. It's so important because, as I mentioned earlier in questions with MPP Gretzky, we're not getting the results that we need to get in this sector in getting people back to work.

As you know, programs like Ontario Works and ODSP are critical to helping those who have lost their jobs or who are unable to get work. That's why last September our government unveiled our plans to build a more responsive,

efficient, person-centred social assistance system that's going to get people back to work and help the economy recover as we emerge out of the COVID-19 crisis.

As part of the first phase of the social assistance recovery and renewal plan, we've been rolling out various measures that build on the enhancements already under way to improve and build a more sustainable and modern system—things like focusing on improved access to employment and training services, as well as developing new digital tools, modern service options and ways to process financial assistance faster. I will be bringing in my assistant deputy minister, Nelson, again to expand on some of those measures in more detail in a moment or two.

This February we took a step further, announcing our government's vision for how we'll work with our delivery partners to improve social assistance and make it easier to navigate. I want to note that this vision represents the first significant change to modernize the social assistance system in decades. The recent launch of the co-design process is going to play a key part in enabling a new provincial-municipal model for social assistance. Over the next 12 to 18 months, we're working through a detailed process to develop our new operating and funding model with municipalities.

I can tell you that all municipal partners are engaged in the co-design process. They realize that this is long overdue as well, and I'm really encouraged to see the initial feedback on this process. It has been very, very supportive, and the transformation is well received by our partners in this sector, especially the piece about designing this collaboratively together and designing it along with them.

Another way that we're working to achieve our new vision is through legislative amendments. Just last week, we passed Bill 276, the Supporting Recovery and Competitiveness Act, which included amendments to the Ontario Works Act as well. That act hadn't substantially changed in over 20 years. The proposed amendments align with the new vision, and they're going to support our enhanced focus on life stabilization to enable people in receipt of social assistance to achieve greater independence and financial resilience and financial independence as well. They'll build in flexibility to work through testing and transition to the new provincial-municipal social assistance delivery model that takes a person-centred approach to human services.

My ministry has also been working to address the recommendations of the Auditor General that she made in her recent audits for Ontario Works and ODSP, respectively. We know that we've got a lot of work cut out for us on this file, with concerns that were noted on things like—and I mentioned this earlier—only 1% of people on Ontario Works move into employment each month. That's what Minister McNaughton and I were talking about yesterday. When it comes to the employment services transformation, it's essential to increase those numbers.

As you know, MPP Barrett—and I'm sure you have travelled around with the Premier or visited with different businesses in your riding—one of the things that we heard prior to the pandemic, loud and clear, was that we needed

more people to fill jobs. They were trying to scrounge and find individuals to work. We need to make sure those individuals have the supports to allow them to get to work. Maybe it's a new pair of workboots, maybe it's some tools, maybe it's a ride to work, maybe it's child care—all of these services can be delivered by our municipal partners, and we'll be responsible at the province, at the upper level. That 1% number really does underscore the need to change to make the system more integrated and help more people move towards independence and employment.

We know the average length of time that people receive Ontario Works has been increasing at far too dramatic a rate. In 2010, the average was 18 to 21 months. This has increased: An individual now stays on Ontario Works for 43 months, in 2020. It was never meant to be that; it was meant to be a safety net to allow you to get back into employment quicker. The length of time on assistance and then that 1% number moving to employment are very, very disappointing figures for all of us, and we're working to change that.

Earlier, I mentioned access to employment and training services as part of our recovery and renewal work. In fact, we were out yesterday with our good friend PA Jane McKenna and Minister McNaughton from the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, just talking about how important this work is. Ontario Works and ODSP clients will benefit from this new system. It's easier to use. It's more tailored to local needs, and it's able to provide better outcomes for people.

The current model for employment services is far too complex. It's too complex for job seekers. It's burdensome. There are too many administrative tasks, as well, and trying to navigate through this fragmented system takes them away from the most important task at hand, and that's getting connected with a good, sustainable job. So we're going to continue to work closely with MLTSD to overcome those barriers and move them towards employment and independence by connecting them to the right integrated supports in their community.

We also want to—and we touched on this earlier, and Nelson touched on it—allow our front-line staff to focus on results for people, rather than paperwork, and assist people to return to work and contribute to building a thriving Ontario economy. One of the things that I always say when talking about this is that those individuals got into this work to be caseworkers, to help people, not to be data entry clerks. They spend far too much of their time inputting data and inputting documents. So a lot of the work that we've done in this sector—and I know ADM Loureiro will want to speak to this—is digitizing and allowing the caseworkers to be able to actually assist individuals, through social assistance, to get back into a job and have a positive impact on our economic recovery.

I'll ask Nelson to pick up the context for this transformation and even expand on the specific actions and progress that we've made to date.

Nelson?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister Smith.

As Minister Smith said, I'm very excited to tell you about the social assistance recovery and renewal plan and

the transformation within social assistance that we're planning.

As you noted, Minister Smith, we know we need to change the system, and we know we can do better. We need to better support our almost 600,000 cases on our programs: 200,000 cases on Ontario Works and 377,000 cases on Ontario Disability Support Program.

The case for change is very clear. We know that the current system leaves caseworkers focusing on paperwork and administration at the expense of casework that leads to employment, and we know that employment outcomes are poor, as just mentioned. Often, relationships are built around policing and fear instead of trust and support. Our programs are siloed and hard to navigate, many people don't get the broader supports they need, and the one-size-fits-all rules and gaps in verification due to manual processes have caused our program integrity to suffer.

Evidence shows that early responsive interventions, one-on-one support and trust-based relationships yield the best results, yet previous attempts at reform haven't followed the evidence and have failed to grapple with the built-in structural barriers to effective and efficient case management. So this is what we're doing about it—and I'll highlight some of the progress to date.

Since the fall, we have been implementing new measures as part of the social assistance recovery and renewal plan. As Minister Smith just noted, we have been collaborating with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development to improve access to employment and training services. We are also improving service delivery by embracing technology to better support staff and clients with digital tools and modern service options.

In October 2020, we launched a new, easy-to-use online application for social assistance and streamlined the process to apply. The social assistance digital application is available 24 hours per day and offers e-signature and electronic identification to reduce the need for citizens to travel into our office. This is making it faster and easier for applicants to receive the critical financial support they need.

This past November, the MyBenefits digital platform, a service channel that allows clients to access and update information on their case, was expanded, with testing of a new feature to improve access by offering two-way digital messaging between clients and caseworkers. We anticipate that two-way messaging will be available to all MyBenefits users by the end of this month.

We are currently prototyping a centralized intake process with 20 Ontario Works municipal providers that processes applications more quickly and reduces paperwork, again giving caseworkers more valuable time to support clients and help them get back to work. It is anticipated the centralized intake process will expand to all municipalities by November of this year. We are also moving to risk-based eligibility reviews with automated, smarter eligibility verification, using data available to us through provincial, federal and third-party data sources. This makes financial assistance processing faster and easier to access, while strengthening program integrity.

As noted earlier, we are collaborating with our municipal partners in co-designing a new social assistance operating model, and there is lots of excitement around that. While Minister Smith highlighted the collaborative work this entails with our municipal partners, I also want to note some of the key activities under way with co-design processes.

In March and April, the foundational work was laid with things like establishing milestones and the proposal of legislative amendments that were just passed to the Ontario Works Act, also noted earlier by Minister Smith. A more detailed plan for the co-design work, including a service delivery blueprint and a refining of the provincial and municipal roles and responsibilities, just wrapped up in May. In the summer, we will see co-designers tackle the design of priority elements, such as a new operating model and who does what, as well as a detailed transition plan.

I also want to highlight that this co-design process is focusing on putting the client and their needs at the centre. Client involvement and feedback is part of the process. It is being factored in by directly engaging them in the co-design process—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you—and seeking feedback from prototypes for testing of the new model. We are planning to leverage existing client advisory groups that are formed in many municipalities with local and provincial offices. We are also working closely with organizations who advocate for specific client groups, including urban Indigenous populations and persons with disabilities, to ensure that specific needs and experiences are understood and addressed.

This will be an evolution where we realign the roles of the province to take on more of the back office functions, overseeing social assistance applications and payments, and making it quick and easy for people to access the system while safeguarding program integrity. The municipalities will shift to deliver life stabilization for Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program clients. They will use their expertise to deliver person-centred paperwork and knowledge of local supports to help people get back to work and access supports to stabilize their lives, such as housing and health care. This is a human services model with more person-centred municipal supports.

In closing, although we have some ways to go, the work on social assistance reform is already under way. We have been making great progress on things like communicating our vision for a greater effective and streamlined social services system that focuses on people and moving to more digital options, which reduces data entry and administrative burden and allows staff to focus on key activities such as supporting employment and life stabilization. I believe we're well on our way, and we can achieve our transformed system that will allow front-line staff to focus on results for people rather than paperwork and that will better support our most vulnerable Ontarians.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, we come to the end of that rotation.

I want to note that I have indication that MPP Parsa has joined us, and I would like to have an identity confirmation.

MPP Parsa, good morning. Please confirm your identity and that you are in Ontario.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Good morning. It's Michael Parsa, and I am in the province of Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you very much, sir.

Members of the committee, I'm going to call a 10-minute recess. We'll be back within 10 minutes.

The committee recessed from 1014 to 1024.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): The committee is back in session. We are now going to the official opposition. They have a 20-minute rotation.

MPP Gretzky, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: MPP Barrett talked about caseloads, so that's the direction that I'm going to ask questions on as well.

The first question is, is the minister expecting a massive increase in caseloads, and if so, how would that happen?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for the question.

When federal supports run out later this year, we are anticipating that there could be a lot of those individuals who will be looking for social assistance at that time here in Ontario.

We do know that the federal government has given us a date as to when things like the CRB and the enhanced employment insurance will be running out, and we are bracing for an influx of people, which is why it's essential for us to ensure that our employment services offices are working as effectively as we would like to see and that we are getting individuals the supports they need so they can re-enter the workforce. I know Nelson is still on the line here, and perhaps he can speak a little bit to projections that we are anticipating. But again, you really don't know exact numbers. Hopefully, a lot of those individuals will be returning to work.

As I was mentioning to MPP Barrett when he was asking the question, we do know that, given the track record that our government had leading up to the election in creating hundreds of thousands of jobs in Ontario, we still had 250,000 jobs that were unfilled. That means we have to do a better job at ensuring that we're getting those individuals the life supports they need on the ground—I mentioned it a couple of times: things like workboots and transportation and child care and all of those supports they may need to ensure that they're successful in getting to work.

Nelson, do you have any more insight into what the predictions are, I guess, when the federal benefits run out?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister Smith, and thank you, MPP Gretzky, for your question.

We use the unemployment rate to forecast cases, so the pace of economic recovery, the sectors hardest impacted—that's the kind of analysis that's being done by the team here at the ministry in terms of what our caseload forecasting numbers could look like toward the later part of this year, into the fall and winter time period. As the

minister noted, one of the critical factors is the end of the federal recovery benefits, as the ending of those will have a considerable impact on our social assistance caseloads.

We're taking a multi-faceted approach when we are looking at this. One is that we're looking at what diversion strategies we can look at in order to not have people come on to the social assistance caseload, and working with, for instance, the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, working with the current service system manager in Employment Ontario and looking at how we can support people who are transitioning from the recovery benefits into employment.

If recovery benefits conclude—a decision is still pending; I think the federal government has the opportunity to make one more extension—right now, as it looks, its September time frame would be the time we're looking at, so going into October would be when we would start to see an increase. We're projecting, or forecasting, right now that the increase can be approximately 7%, so a 7% increase in caseload. That would bring us, for instance, into approximately 250,000, 260,000 cases on Ontario Works.

Subsequently, we would be looking at the applications for ODSP to come back to what we were looking at previously in terms of applications, which were approximately 6,000 a month. Those who are eligible would depend on the adjudication.

MPP Gretzky, that's the forecasting we're looking at. Again, it is dependent on the pace of economic recovery and what the unemployment rate looks like, and that's something we're constantly monitoring with our Ministry of Finance, and doing projections and working with the Ministry of Finance along those projection lines.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Recognizing that the federal benefits are ending in September, those people are still represented in the caseloads through negative entitlements. They've received a cheque for about \$2.50 so that they were able to maintain the drug coverage and stay on the caseload. So even though they were getting less of the income from social assistance, and that was transferred to the federal funding, they still maintained their drug coverage.

As you said, Mr. Loureiro, and you had said it at the OMSSA presentation as well, that represents about 250,000 people. If you look at the numbers, that's approximately the same number of cases pre-pandemic. And when we compare the year-over-year social assistance rates—again, that's not a big, sudden influx of people on social assistance. That was about the same as what was already there. If we compare the year-over-year social assistance stats for April 2020 to April 2021, OW caseloads have declined by over 102,000 beneficiaries, so that's about a 24% decline in people receiving Ontario Works benefits; ODSP caseloads have declined by about 12,000 beneficiaries, or about 2%.

1030

According to the province's 2021 budget, on page 170, a 1% caseload change in OW equals about \$28 million; for ODSP, it's about \$58 million. So, based on those numbers

from the government, from April 2020 to April 2021 the ministry actually saved \$672 million from Ontario Works and \$116 million from ODSP, which equals \$788 million. What is the ministry doing with that savings?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks very much for that question.

As ADM Loureiro mentioned, case numbers do fluctuate all the time. This is social assistance spending, and caseloads change regularly, as the program is entirely application-based.

What we've experienced during the pandemic is that a lot of individuals are receiving the federal benefits, but at the same time, as you rightly pointed out, we wanted to ensure that those individuals were able to stay in our social assistance program because they are dependent on the drug benefit that they received for them and their families.

ADM Loureiro is there and can speak a little bit more to the actual financial ups and downs.

As you mentioned earlier, MPP Gretzky, we don't know what might be coming down the pipe here in the next couple of months, when those federal benefits run out.

Any money that has been saved we're continuing to reinvest in the program as well.

Nelson, do you want to pick up from there?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: That was my question. What is the ministry doing with the savings they've already realized? How is that money being reinvested?

Hon. Todd Smith: I think the other really, really important point here is that you'll recall back in March of last year—it was actually the day that the provincial emergency was declared by the Premier—Minister Clark and I were both out that day talking about a \$200-million investment in the social services relief fund as well. So when I talk about the fact that that money has been reinvested—that was the first instalment, the \$200 million that went out to service managers and communities right across the province. But there have been three instalments of that SSRF funding that has been announced by Minister Clark and I. It's up over \$750 million now.

So there has been additional money invested in individuals who need it during this time to support them on the ground in various ways. We thought it was best to be distributed by our service managers in those 47 different regions across the province because they know best where that money was needed. I'm not exactly sure how it was distributed in your part of the world, down in the Windsor region. But I do know in Hastings county, for instance, where I'm from, that that money went to those who provide services like food banks and other not-for-profits, transitional housing and residential services for places like Minister Dunlop is responsible for, those anti-human trafficking shelters and women's shelters and those types of places.

I'll let Nelson pick up on exactly the ebb and flow of what happens with funding within his division.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister Smith, and thank you, MPP Gretzky, for your question.

MPP Gretzky, I'm going to pick up on two parts of your question: the first part, on what the surge really means for us, and then the second part, the reinvestment part of the question.

What the surge really means for us is two things. Where people have continued to be on the caseload, that's reflected in the 200,000 number. So that's already reflected in where we've come from, at 250,000 cases, to 200,000. So those \$2.50 cases are reflected in the decrease.

We do anticipate seeing a surge, and we need to prepare the system to be able to address the new applications and potentially the new persona of individuals or cases that come into our system as a result of the pandemic and some of the sector impacts when it comes to the pandemic. What that means is not only having the applications being taken in streamlined, having it easier to access, and the things we talked about earlier around why we've created the digital channels; it's also about the supports we're providing to these individuals really early on in order not to keep them on our caseloads for a longer period of time.

We understand based on data that the longer they stay on social assistance caseloads or Ontario Works, the more likely they will be on Ontario Works for a longer period of time. We want to ensure that we are supporting them in transitioning and providing the life stabilization supports that they need to achieve greater independence.

In October, we need to prepare our system and our municipal partners to have us address the administrative components of the application—that back office. Whether it's the taking of the applications, the digital—we've centralized an intake unit within the province to be able to administer and take applications and better respond to those applications in a more timely way, allowing the municipalities to focus on the individuals, provide those person-centred supports to focus on the people who we are anticipating coming on to our caseloads.

That's the first part.

The second part of the question, on reinvestment: As Minister Smith noted, this wasn't a savings exercise. The dollars that the estimates book highlights as the difference between last year's expenditures and this year's were reinvested in programs like the minister mentioned, the social services relief fund, but within social assistance specifically, the emergency benefit—\$111 million there—expanding the emergency assistance program and discretionary benefits that are provided to social assistance.

You mentioned, MPP Gretzky, keeping people on the program to provide drug benefits. That was a decision that was made in order to continue to provide drug benefits and the \$2.50 you mentioned earlier.

In addition to that, a lot of investment has gone into the digital tools to increase access to services. I talked a little bit about MyBenefits. I've talked about two-way messaging. We've introduced electronic document management, where there are no more file rooms, so people can actually submit their documents digitally—e-ID and e-signatures and things of that nature. Those are areas of investment that the ministry and the government have made to improve services, improve outcomes for people and increase access.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: If I could just interrupt you there, that's a lot of administrative services that that money went into—some of the money, anyway.

Since 2017, Ontario Works rates have increased by only \$12 and ODSP rates by only \$18. The province received \$182 million through the Canada Social Transfer. And further, of the COVID-19 pandemic recovery money, only 6% came from the province, with the rest coming from the federal government.

Following up on what you said, where some of the money that has been saved has gone largely to administrative services—why is none of that money that has been saved reinvested into the actual individuals on social assistance? Why has it not gone to raising the rates? For the people who are watching this—because I know there are a lot of people watching this—Ontario Works, for a single individual, the maximum is \$730 a month, and for those on the Ontario Disability Support Program it's \$1,169 a month for an individual. Why has none of that money that was saved been put into raising the rates and lifting these individuals above the poverty line? Why has the bulk of that money gone into administrative—

Hon. Todd Smith: It simply hasn't; it actually has gone back into benefits for individuals, either in the form of the—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: [*Inaudible*] have not seen an increase in their social assistance rates. The rates are \$733 a month for Ontario Works for a single individual, and ODSP is \$1,169. That is the same as it was before these benefits started flowing from the federal government through the province, and before the province spent any money, so I will respectfully disagree with you, and so will the recipients of these benefits.

1040

On top of that, when Ontario decided to subject the CERB and the CRB payments to clawbacks, Minister Smith, you assured individuals that any money clawed back would be reinvested to support low-income Ontarians. But rates are frozen; case counts are down, as I pointed out; and even the emergency payments are restricted to those who are able to get in touch with their caseworker. I touched on this yesterday—the number of individuals who weren't able to get the benefit. It's based on them being able to get in touch with their caseworker during the pandemic, and those caseworkers had to use their discretion to distribute the benefits. Lots of individuals were told that they did not qualify for the benefit.

Based on all of those things, can you show how the average person on Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program has actually personally benefited from that investment? Where is it that they have seen an increase in their monthly benefit amount?

Hon. Todd Smith: I'll respectfully disagree with your statement that the money saved has gone into administration; it simply hasn't. It has gone back into supports for individuals, either through the social services relief fund, as I mentioned—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Hon. Todd Smith: —\$56 million that has been invested there. Our government introduced the emergency benefit in March of last year. More than 250,000 individuals and families were able to access that funding.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: That is—

Hon. Todd Smith: And there were also discretionary benefits that were available—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: —[*inaudible*] people on Ontario Works and ODSP were able to—

Hon. Todd Smith: I'm just going to reiterate—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Minister; MPP Gretzky, I'm going to have one person at a time.

MPP Gretzky, if you need to speak, please raise your hand, and I will give you the floor. You have the floor, and then we'll go.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I just want to point out to the minister that just under 43% of people on Ontario Works and ODSP were able to access that emergency benefit, because there was no information sent to them that it was even available. You ended it after only three months. Many weren't able to get hold of their caseworkers to be able to access that benefit, and many individuals were told that they did not qualify for that.

So while I appreciate you bringing up the emergency benefit—which was \$100 or \$200, respectfully—it is not an ongoing program. It was only for three months. Again, I go back to how only 42.5% of individuals and families receiving OW or ODSP were able to access that benefit.

Hon. Todd Smith: That's 250,000 people.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: My question is, why did you end that benefit? Why did the ministry end the \$100 emergency ODSP benefit after only three months when we are still in a pandemic and those individuals still, with their regular benefits, were well below the poverty line?

Hon. Todd Smith: So, 250,000 individuals and families across the province were able to access the emergency benefit. We also brought in emergency—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say we are now out of time on this rotation.

We go to the government. MPP Pettapiece, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thank you, Chair. Good morning to all those who are participating in these hearings today.

Ministers, I have a two-part question. One is on the youth leaving care, and the other will be on ending birth alerts.

COVID-19 has impacted every Ontarian in some way, but it has had a great impact on children and youth in care. They're often already in a stressful situation, and to know that they may be leaving the child welfare system during a pandemic can only add more anxiety to the situation. I'm glad the government put in place a moratorium on youth leaving care. It is a huge relief to the youth expected to leave care during the pandemic. I'm also very pleased that the minister has extended the moratorium beyond the March 30, 2021, expiry date.

My question, though, is about the moratorium itself and the work being done in this space. Considering the government is redesigning the child welfare system, what is currently under way to support youth leaving care once the moratorium expires? And can you expand on exactly what the moratorium means?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you so much for the question, MPP Pettapiece.

We know that COVID-19 has put immense pressure on Ontarians, and that includes youth in the care of the children's aid societies of Ontario. But also, we know that there has been a lot of pressure on youth in care prior to COVID-19. Outcomes for the youth leaving and from the child welfare system are typically poor compared to the general Canadian youth population. Without a stable home environment and strong relationships with peers, mentors or adults, youth in and from care are more likely to experience a range of negative outcomes, such as homelessness, mental health concerns, unemployment, lack of educational engagement and achievement, and involvement in the youth justice system.

Challenges during transition have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic where non-essential services and schools have been shut down. A closure of supportive services combined with social distancing increases risks to an already vulnerable youth population and raises significant concerns about forcing a transition to independence during such an uncertain and unpredictable time.

To address the current pandemic, a regulatory amendment and a new policy directive were issued in March, June and November 2020 and March 2021 to ensure that no youth in care or former youth in care in Ontario would age out of the supports and service they were receiving through a society. This moratorium is in place until September 30, 2022. The moratorium provides an opportunity to develop a policy framework that is responsive to the needs of young people as they transition out of the care of societies and into the community. Our vision is for an Ontario where children, youth and families receiving child welfare services have the supports that they need to succeed and to thrive.

In addition, for young people who had already transitioned out of the child welfare system, the ministry also provided funding to support their immediate needs during the COVID-19 outbreak. Working in partnership with Indigenous and Black communities and service providers as well as leaders in other sectors, we're changing the culture from apprehension to prevention.

We provided \$1.5 million in funding to the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada for the COVID-19 youth support fund. This fund provides up to \$1,000 for eligible youth to navigate challenges related to the COVID-19 outbreak and help them meet their immediate needs, including housing costs; food and household supplies; remote mental health supports; and technology support for e-learning. Youth aged 18 to 29 who were formerly in the care of a society in Ontario or a child welfare agency elsewhere in Canada were eligible to receive supports through the fund.

In addition, as part of our government's efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19 this past year, we invested \$40 million to support organizations that provide residential services, including residential settings for children and youth. As part of the 2020 budget, the government is

investing an additional \$30 million over two years to help both non-residential and residential service providers in the social services sector continue infection prevention and control measures.

I'd also like to thank the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, who have been a critical partner during the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies has delivered over 31 million pieces of PPE to over 1,000 organizations across the province who provide vital services to children, youth and families.

As the situation with COVID-19 evolves, we continue to work in this sector to keep children, youth and families safe.

We know that the child welfare system redesign won't happen overnight, which is why we have already begun working with service providers to better support children, youth and families.

To help begin to build a prevention-focused system, our government announced \$5 million in annualized funding to enhance access to prevention-focused customary care for Indigenous children and youth. This investment will help more children to thrive closer to home, their families and their communities.

Our government also directed children's aid societies to end the practice of using birth alerts, which we have heard disproportionately affects racialized mothers and families.

1050

We also released two resources for children and youth, as well as those who serve them. The first is a comprehensive quality standards framework for licensed residential settings. We've also released the children and young persons' rights resource to further support children and youth in care. We have conducted unannounced licensing inspections in residential settings. We've hired 20 new staff to help specifically with oversight and inspections and provided free trauma-informed care training for front-line workers in residential settings.

We have also invested an additional \$1.5 million annually in the Education Liaison Program to help children and youth in care across the province get the support they need to focus on their studies. This will ensure that every children's aid society has at least one education liaison to help students succeed.

We recently passed legislation that further protects our children and youth from sexual exploitation, particularly human trafficking, and provides them with resources and support to exit that horrific life.

I'll now pass it over to my officials and assistant deputy minister to speak to the progress to date and the expansion planned for child welfare redesign, and he can expand on the importance of the legislative changes.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Minister.

As the minister said, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we passed a regulation that was to amend that children in extended care and continued care and supports not be moved out of care during the pandemic. It extended the eligibility for youth in the interim children's aid society and temporary care, requiring children's aid societies to

maintain these supports for youth beyond their 21st birthday.

The regulation subsequently was amended in June, November and March to extend the supports, and it requires that youth are supported through this policy directive and maintain all of their current supports. So youth, as the minister said, will be supported till September 30, 2022. The moratorium ensured that youth leaving care were actually supported and not having to move out during a pandemic. It means youth leaving care have the stability of the current housing arrangements, foster care, group care and independent living and will not be forced to look for new living arrangements during this global crisis. Youth will also continue to receive financial supports where applicable to support their housing, their well-being and needs such as rent, groceries, personal care items.

The extension of the moratorium also provides an opportunity for the ministry to work together to provide a new framework for youth as they transition out of care. The first significant piece of creating a responsive policy framework for youth transitions is the development of readiness indicators to support children's aid societies in preparing youth to transition from care.

In order for the ministry to provide meaningful policy changes to support youth as they age out of the system, we need to engage youth. We need to hear from first voice advocates: What are those policy opportunities and meaningful changes we can put in place to truly support youth as they age out of the system successfully?

The ministry knows that youth voice needs to be at the heart of the work we do. We're working with first voice advocates to explore options and redesign a youth transition framework. The ministry will be co-leading with the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, the Ontario Children's Advancement Coalition and Youth in Care Canada to undertake youth engagements to seek advice on readiness indicators. This will help the ministry establish a new framework to determine when young people are ready to leave the care of the children's aid society and transition to adulthood. The engagements have begun and will continue throughout the summer as we co-design readiness indicators for youth transitioning out of care. As part of the process, the engagements with youth with lived experience, service providers, advocates, partners and stakeholders will hear from young people preparing to transition out of care and what they need to be best supported.

Work is under way to redesign the child welfare system, as the minister noted. Part of the strategy is a person-centred, evidence-informed human services system that's connected. It shifts the focus on child welfare policies, programs and existing resources over time to a more integrated continuum of supports and services for children, youth and families. The strategy undertaken will provide a framework that allows us to work together to better shift from reactionary services to proactive prevention-based services and continue to improve the experience of youth.

All human services have to be integrated and properly supported, and it's an all-of-government approach. We're

going to strengthen youth voice, we're going to strengthen families and work together to have a strong, supported system.

As the minister said, when we talk about birth alerts—we undertook immediate consultation, on the passage of the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls report, to include stakeholders and have an engagement session with them on the experience of birth alerts. We heard that they can be traumatic for Indigenous mothers, and birth alerts can increase Indigenous women's mistrust and fear of the child welfare and health care systems, reducing the likelihood that they'll actually seek medical care or voluntary supports before or during childbirth.

The ministry also heard that birth alerts can disproportionately impact other marginalized mothers and families, parents experiencing poverty, young parents, and racialized parents. They can perpetuate systemic inequities.

The ministry heard about the development of alternative approaches to birth alerts, like birth planning and conferences, working with hospitals and prenatal and postnatal supports and health care practitioners, before ceasing and ending the practice of birth alerts. For this reason, we issued a policy directive in July, and the ministry provided children's aid societies with three months to allow time to prepare for this practice to cease. Folks worked together to support young moms. Societies were invited to work with local hospitals, prenatal and postnatal services providers and health care providers to develop collaborative, alternative, parent-involved approaches to birth alerts. These alternatives are focused on prenatal services, early referrals to community resources, and working with expectant parents and voluntary secure supports before the birth of a baby, to reduce the harm to infants.

Moving forward, children's aid societies are expected to work together with agencies and expectant mothers to create parent-involved plans in collaboration with the mother and properly supporting the family. Examples provided include supports such as counselling, birth planning, links to community agencies and providing assistance to expectant parents.

As mentioned, we have heard that birth alerts disproportionately impact First Nation, Inuit and Métis partners and communities. We want to be responsive to what Indigenous partners have been telling us. We want to work together to support them so that interactions are respectful and the needs of Indigenous families are provided and culturally safe. While we cannot go back in time, we are looking forward to moving together in a positive way with First Nation, Inuit and Métis partners.

The ministry is committed to addressing the overrepresentation of Indigenous, First Nations, Inuit and Métis people to ensure access to community-based prevention supports. Consistent with the child welfare redesign and changes to the government, we're working together to provide those prevention services, to provide high-quality, culturally appropriate and truly responsive services to children, youth and families.

Eliminating birth alerts will be a first step in a child welfare system that responds to children, youth and families in a prevention-focused way.

Through the child welfare Indigenous community prevention supports fund, the ministry supports over \$95 million to Indigenous partners to ensure access to culturally appropriate supports that are in place to support families. The Family Well-Being Program is a great example of this prevention program. It works with community partners, it's led by community partners and designed by Indigenous folks for their communities. They're leading the way.

The three pillars of the Family Well-Being Program were to end violence against Indigenous women, reduce the number of Indigenous children and youth in care, and improve the overall health and well-being of Indigenous communities. Family well-being programs and services provide the supports of traditional land-based teaching and ceremonies, trauma-informed counselling, addiction supports, safe places and coordinated services. These services and programs support children, youth and families to heal and to recover from the effects of intergenerational violence and trauma, to reduce violence, and to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system.

The Family Well-Being Program provides \$35 million annually to 34 partners, with 220 positions that are community-based front-line workers in 250 delivery sites across the province, supporting Indigenous communities and working together to redesign the system that best suits and supports Indigenous communities.

1100

From a third-party evaluation feedback from partners on the Family Well-Being Program, they said, "More holistic community coordinated child and family services," and that it substantially improved the family well-being, reduced violence, and the creation of safe spaces where children and women can gather and feel supported and heal together. It preserved family units and provided a reduction of child welfare involvement, and children in care are reunited with birth families.

In addition to the provincial evaluation, Indigenous partners also submitted local evaluations, demonstrating the impact and the success of the program. The Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres submitted an impact analysis estimating that the Family Well-Being Program—potentially over \$42 million in annual savings related to long-term mental health supports, suicide prevention, policing and family social services.

In 2018 and 2019, the Ontario Native Women's Association reported that their Family Well-Being Program had effectively supported 173 families, including 251 children, in order to prevent CAS apprehensions, and 87 families and 156 children were reunited.

In 2020, the government announced an increase of \$5.4 million in the Family Well-Being Program through the Roadmap to Wellness strategy. By leveraging flexible, existing programs, the ministry was able to support Indigenous communities to efficiently scale up their programs and resources while reducing administrative burden.

A new \$5-million investment in prevention-focused customary care is also shifting resources from protection to prevention. This funding will support Indigenous communities to care for children in a way that's consistent with their culture, their customs, and allow First Nation, Inuit and Métis children to remain close to home, supported by their families, their communities and their cultures.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you for the opportunity to be able to share some of the good work we're doing with our Indigenous partners in the prevention support space and to help youth transition successfully into adulthood. We're looking forward to the continued partnerships with youth leaving care so that we can co-design and co-develop a system that's supported, integrated, and that truly puts youth voices at the heart of what we do.

Working together in a collaborative spirit is the whole point of the child welfare redesign. We know we cannot do this work alone. We must work with community partners to fully engage, to fully listen and to take their advice as we transform the service system. We know we've got a ways to go. We know there's lots of work to do in the child welfare space. We've heard from partners. We've listened to partners. We're engaging partners.

Doing this work together, we feel that we can truly reach a fully integrated human services approach to dealing with folks and working together to provide services as early as possible in their journey. Together, we can reach out. Together, we can support. And together, we can provide more positive outcomes to children, youth and families.

We're looking forward to the next steps and working with our youth voices and hearing from them across the province as we engage to truly do this work together. And as always, we listen to the lead of our Indigenous partners. We listen to their lead, we follow their lead, and we work together with them.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide some comments today. I appreciate it.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Minister, do you have any further comments?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: The ending of the use of birth alerts was very important. It's something that we heard from communities across Ontario, but it also—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say that you're now out of time.

We'll go back to the official opposition for their rotation. MPP Gretzky, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I just want to go back to ADM Loureiro. You had mentioned diversion strategies so that people don't go back onto benefits after the federal recovery benefits end. Can you explain what you mean by "diversion strategy"? How does that work? What does that look like?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: To answer your question around diversion strategies: Employment Ontario does not, for instance, only support persons on social assistance—so providing supports through Employment Ontario;

working with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development around reskilling and retooling specific sectors that have been hardest hit by the pandemic; working with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development on establishing data; working with our colleagues at the federal government, at the officials level, around data-gathering; and understanding the persona of these individuals and how we can support these individuals back into employment. And if they are coming onto social assistance, that they're coming on for short-term supports, and that we are supporting them and putting in targeted efforts in terms of supporting these individuals that have been closest to the labour market and unfortunately the pandemic has hit them—so programs like Second Career, looking at micro-credentials with our Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, looking at programming and funding from our federal colleagues to better support individuals or sectors that have been hardest hit by the pandemic.

As the minister mentioned, taking an all-of-government approach and working across ministries to ensure that we are supporting people in the best way we can through, again, life stabilization and greater independence, where we can, and where they are not needing to come on social assistance—that's the outcome, in terms of getting people back on their feet and getting people back into where they potentially were pre-pandemic, and looking at data and looking at programming and how we can best support people, MPP Gretzky.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Minister Smith, you are on record multiple times claiming that discretionary benefits are still available. The Ontario Disability Support Program COVID-19 key information web page states, "If you have other exceptional COVID-19-related costs, ask your caseworker about discretionary benefits," and yet I'm hearing from many individuals who reached out to their worker to ask, and the worker had no clue what they were talking about and referred them to the manager.

How much of the total funds, if any, were provided to municipalities, to the OW offices and ODSP offices, for discretionary pandemic benefits?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for that question.

It all goes back to reinvesting any savings that we've experienced throughout the pandemic into the system. But I should point out, and I'm sure Nelson will want to pick up on this as well, that discretionary benefits are available to individuals at all times. We gave caseworkers the direction, when individuals can show that they're experiencing extra costs associated with the pandemic, that they should receive discretionary benefits. He could probably give you a little bit more exact amounts that have been distributed across the province through caseworkers to individuals when it comes to discretionary benefits. But that was just one of the programs that we put in place to help individuals—the biggest, of course, being the social services relief fund, the \$756 million, almost three quarters of a billion dollars, that has been reinvested into the program.

I don't know if, Nelson, you want to pick up on that?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Sure. Thank you, Minister Smith. Thank you, MPP Gretzky, for your question. Again, maybe I'll take it in two parts.

The first part is around what we did do to communicate the emergency benefit. We did communicate the emergency benefit through social media and news releases. We put it on our Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services website, and the ministry made announcements and news releases as part of the release of the benefit.

What we were unable to do, because of the lead time it takes to do this, was communicate directly with clients, like a mass mail-out through a cheque insert. The lead time that would have taken us to do that—it was speed that we needed, in terms of responding because of the pandemic, that prevented us from doing that specifically.

1110

The emergency benefit was created to provide quick access to the discretionary benefit pool in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic to support both the Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program recipients. The benefit was intended to assist with immediate exceptional COVID-19-related expenses that occurred in the beginning stages of the pandemic. At the beginning stages, there were unprecedented limits on access to items such as PPE, and the federal benefits and supports were in the process of being launched—CERB, as it's known, and expansions of the HST and CCB. Initially, it was launched as a one-time benefit, available in March, then it was extended as a monthly benefit for three months, in July.

In terms of individuals who were trying to access it, MPP Gretzky, you mentioned previously that people were unable potentially to get a hold of their case worker. Where it could be verified through voice mail or email that the client attempted to request within the period that the benefit was available, and was unable to contact, we have issued directions and had issued directions to caseworkers that they are able to issue that benefit in arrears, and they are doing so.

Beyond July, and getting to the—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I'm just curious: How much money was provided to the municipalities, to the OW offices and the ODSP offices, for discretionary benefits? How much was actually provided?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: The discretionary benefit is based on a per-case cap. The team has done an analysis of whether that cap is at its threshold. Our analysis on the municipal level is that there's still room in the cap and that the discretionary benefit continues to be available to people who need it, and the municipalities continue to issue it for both the Ontario Works recipients and the ODSP recipients. We are not being asked at the ministry to increase the cap, because there is still room and availability within that cap to continue to issue the benefit to people who need it. It is at the request of the municipal—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Can you tell me what the cap is and how much money has been given to the municipalities?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: I don't have that information in front of me, MPP Gretzky. I can send it to you through the Clerk.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I appreciate that. Thank you.

I'd like to move on. The government talks a lot about social assistance fraud. Alongside modernization, there's an increased use of monitoring, after the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services hired 17 program integrity analysts to monitor recipients for fraud allegations. On November 4, 2020, Deputy Minister Menard—I believe it was during the Auditor General's report that I had asked a question about that—stated the majority of those allegations were ruled out as being unsubstantiated. I'm curious as to why the province is choosing to spend—and I asked it then, I believe—between \$1.1 million and \$1.4 million on these 17 positions to investigate potential fraud, when Deputy Minister Menard said that the allegations are ruled to be unsubstantiated.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for that question, MPP Gretzky.

The hiring of these program integrity workers is one of several changes that are going to transform our system to provide better support for our most vulnerable individuals. We know that Ontario's caseworkers want to focus on results for people rather than on doing their paperwork, and by relieving them of clerical responsibilities such as eligibility reviews, we're enabling those front-line staff to better assist people to return to work and participate in their community. The hiring of these program integrity workers is one of several changes, as I say, that are going to help us transform the system.

I don't know, Nelson, if you want to pick up on that.

These are important new individuals who are going to assist us in delivering a better service to people across the province.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: These individuals are hired specifically to try to root out anyone on ODSP or OW committing fraud, and they said it at that committee meeting.

I will say it here again: I don't think that anybody who could be making above-poverty income would choose to defraud the system and collect social assistance just for the sake of living in deep, abject poverty.

So I'm not clear, when the deputy minister on November 4, 2020, had stated that the majority of the allegations are unfounded or unsubstantiated, why the province would spend that amount of money, \$1.1 million to \$1.4 million, on these positions when they could indeed put it back into raising the rates for the individuals who rely on social assistance.

Maybe Mr. Loureiro can clarify, then: What are the current amounts of fraud that the ministry has calculated, on social assistance? How much has been spent on the investigation of fraud and the collection of overpayments versus the money—

Hon. Todd Smith: I just want to clarify, first of all, before Nelson responds to that direct question.

Keep in mind, we've worked so closely with those in the sector, and consulted with individuals as well, that we've determined, again, that we want the system to work better for the caseworkers and for individuals.

The hiring of these program integrity workers is more about taking that load off of caseworkers. Caseworkers

shouldn't be having to worry about this. Caseworkers should be worried about helping the individuals they're serving.

If Nelson wants to pick up on that or your other question—go ahead, Nelson.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister Smith.

Thank you, MPP Gretzky, for your question. Again, I'll pick it up in two parts.

The first part is, we are centralizing aspects of the fraud allegation and review process, where program integrity analysts will focus, again, on the investigations and support the development of expertise in this analyst role. The intent of this is that they will conduct this other time-consuming work that otherwise would be, as the minister mentioned, left to the caseworkers, such as the assessment of clients who may not have reported changes that affect their eligibility, or fraud.

Other responsibilities of these analysts include conducting quality assurance reviews on business processes and providing technical advice to staff, as well as making recommendations on process improvements. Having these dedicated resources will increase the time available for the front-line caseworkers to work with clients and help them in supporting them through life stabilization and achieving greater independence. So in that, it does tie into our plans of a more responsive, efficient and person-centred social assistance system and improving our system to produce better outcomes for people.

The second part of the question was around what numbers we have seen and what the data is telling us. Last year, we saw approximately 17,000 cases where, as a result of fraud, either eligibility was reduced in some form or a termination of the case was required as a result of an allegation or a fraud investigation—from all different sources, I would say, in terms of how we come to these 17,000 cases.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Do you have a number, then, on how much was spent for those investigations of fraud and the collection on overpayments, as opposed to money that was actually recovered through those investigations?

Hon. Todd Smith: Just before Nelson responds to that, I think it's important to point out that caseworkers were doing this work. Caseworkers were investigating these types of claims, and that was taking their time away from helping individuals. I just want it to be clear that that's why these individuals have been hired and will be working within the system.

Nelson?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: To clarify, before ADM Loureiro responds: Between \$1.1 million and \$1.4 million was being spent on the 17 program integrity analysts. So I'm asking, of those investigations, how much fraud and the collection of overpayments was recovered, as opposed to the money spent to recover these funds?

1120

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, MPP Gretzky, for your question.

I don't have the exact figures in front of me. I can get back to you through the Clerk.

What I will say is, we received approximately 26,000 allegations last year. These are allegations that would have to have gone to a caseworker who would have taken their time to review and assess. These are allegations that went to the centralized unit, and out of those allegations—the 17,000 is the number I quoted earlier.

I will get back to you, through the Clerk, on the expense of the hiring of the fraud investigative analysts and the recovery and what that return looks like.

Hon. Todd Smith: I would just add that the return on investment here is going to be measured in the success of those caseworkers getting more individuals the supports they need so that they can get a job, so that they can go to work, so that they can lead a more stable life. You may want to focus on the cost of those program integrity workers, but this is a very good investment. We're very hopeful, and we expect to see far better results than 1% of the people on social assistance leaving to get employment every month. That's what this is all about—ensuring those caseworkers can be caseworkers and not investigating fraud allegations. Deputy Minister Menard mentioned in her previous presentation that those are very, very time-consuming efforts that take them away from providing the life stabilization that's necessary for these individuals.

We want the best outcomes possible for those individuals in the system. We want them to get the supports they need. We want them to leave the system, and I think many of them want to leave the system as well.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Hon. Todd Smith: Far too many of them are staying too long in the system, and I believe I outlined that earlier in our estimates committee meeting. The average now is about 48 months. That's far too long, particularly for Ontario Works, for individuals to remain in the system.

The caseworkers themselves have told us that they spend 50% of their time on paperwork and administration. That's not—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Chair, if I could just reclaim some of my time.

Hon. Todd Smith: That's not time in helping individuals.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I would like to say, with the limited time left, when you're talking about outcomes for individuals on social assistance, first of all, you quote getting people back to work. I've heard you say it, and the previous minister said it: "The best social program is a job." For people with disabilities, that's incredibly insulting and insensitive.

I want to point out that when we're talking about outcomes for individuals on social assistance, it's not just about having access to their caseworkers—as I noted earlier on, there is grave concern about the fact that we are going to be looking at fewer caseworkers; that's not helping outcomes—but it's also looking at the rates, their monthly income.

Going through the estimates and the questions I've asked so far, when you're talking about incomes for individuals on ODSP or OW, there is nothing in here that has

increased direct support to them, financial support, as far as them being lifted out of deep, abject poverty.

In the next round of questioning, I'll get further into the rates, specifically, and I'll have some questions on that.

I'm sure I'm just about out of time, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You are just about out of time—20 seconds.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Yes. Again, in the next round of questioning, I will be speaking more to the actual rates and how, when we're talking about outcomes for these individuals, raising the rates would certainly create better outcomes for these individuals.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): And with that, you are out of time.

The rotation goes to the government. MPP Oosterhoff, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: My thanks to the ministers for appearing before the committee today. I very much appreciate all of the attention that you've given to providing information to the committee and all your work in your respective ministries. I know it has been a time of ongoing challenges and pressures with COVID-19—but also the substantial shift that was obviously needed when we came to office to ensure that systems were running in a more supportive way, in a more integrated way, in a more accessible way. I think it's important to see some of the steps that have been taken in this regard as well.

My question is for Minister Smith.

One of the pieces that I hear about a great deal, especially in the midst of COVID-19, is the importance of being able to access digital services, being able to access services from home, being able to access services and solutions in a way that allows people to do many of these things from home. And so, as we live in a digital-first world—and the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated to us just how critical it is to be able to access resources, information, services and supports online—I think seeing the digital-first solutions that your ministries are putting forward for government services and, really, across government is exciting, because they offer the opportunity to improve not just efficiency but the client experience itself. I think that's a key component of the changes that are being made. It's about making sure that Ontarians have a better experience in their interactions with the government of Ontario, whether that's through social assistance changes or any other agency.

I'm wondering, Minister, if you could build on some of the digital tools that you've already mentioned which are becoming available with regard to the Ontario social assistance system, and I'm wondering if you could elaborate further and tell us how recipients and caseworkers are going to be benefiting from these digital tools.

Hon. Todd Smith: It's good to see you this morning, MPP Oosterhoff. Thanks for that question. I really do appreciate the opportunity to expand on how we're embracing new technologies, not just in this ministry but right across the government.

We are improving the social assistance system here at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

It's especially important considering what we've heard from members of the opposition who clearly haven't grasped the benefits of new digital tools. MPP Gretzky has mentioned this a couple of different times.

It's really important to provide these digital tools to individuals. It allows us and allows them to get support to them quicker. Based on a time study, we know our caseworkers spend, again, approximately half of their time filing and organizing paperwork, which takes them away from helping the individuals they want to help, and ODSP offices process approximately 35,000 pieces of paper a day. We see a clear need for improvement and, in fact, have already made significant progress on this front, but we do still have a long way to go.

As well, the pandemic has highlighted for us the benefits of changing how we operate to make things faster and safer for all of our staff and clients. The move to digital options enhances the client experience, as well as improves efficiency. It enables staff to focus on key activities, such as supporting their clients with employment and life stabilization, as we've talked about here for the last couple of hours. It's really important that those caseworkers are able to do that and have the time to do that and are not distracted by other things.

Over the past couple of years, we've been making steady progress in modernizing service delivery options at every step of the client journey.

I'd like to highlight some of our accomplishments in embracing this digital-first approach to service.

I know Deputy Minister Menard and Nelson, whom we've seen a lot, our ADM on the social services side, are going to provide more detail on actions and progress in just a moment.

Last fall, we introduced a new easy-to-use online application, and we streamlined the process to apply for social assistance. This includes a digital identity verification option to reduce the need for people to travel into our offices, which is really important given the pandemic.

We rolled out MyBenefits. It's a digital tool for clients to report any changes in their circumstances and apply for new benefits, or they can check on the status of their own applications at this site, MyBenefits. Over 120,000 Ontarians are registered and are users of this new tool, and the number of users is growing by 1,000 a week. It's quite remarkable. We've seen a 285% increase since the start of the pandemic. So if there is a silver lining in this pandemic, this is one of them here in our ministry of social services.

We've also made significant progress in eliminating the paper cheque and using reloadable payment cards, as well, and direct bank deposits, which has been really important for individuals. This makes payments quicker, more accessible, and more importantly avoids the need for cheque-cashing fees as well, which some clients were facing.

1130

Finally, we're also working on several fronts to help ensure the provision of Internet access and affordable plans to social assistance clients, recognizing the need now more than ever for them to be connected. By embracing the move to digital options, we have achieved reductions

in the amount of time spent on administrative work. This has freed up valuable staff time to work with clients to get the right supports that will get them on the path to greater independence and ready for jobs.

Digital solutions also serve to underpin the foundation that we're building for a transformed social assistance system, one that's going to evolve to embrace a human services delivery model with more person-centred supports. Those supports are so important to getting them to a place where they can then move into employment. Whether they're on Ontario Works or maybe—contrary to what MPP Gretzky has said, there are many people who are on the ODSP program who want to go to work, and they need supports to go to work. It's quite insulting, actually, that she would even mention the fact that people on ODSP can't go to work or don't want to go to work. There are many people I've talked to over the last two years in this portfolio who are anxious to work and to go to work more often.

I'll pass it over to Nelson right now, and he can expand on the comments and the successes that we've seen on this front.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister Smith.

As noted, we have an opportunity to embrace technology to enable our staff to save valuable time, focus on clients and make interactions with the system easier, thus supporting better outcomes for the people we serve.

Clients come to us in crisis, often when they have nowhere else to turn. The last thing they need is a system that doesn't really reflect their reality; that requires them, for instance, to fill out lengthy and hard-to-navigate forms, to wait for phone calls to be returned, or to physically come into the office when they may be dealing with transportation issues or child care responsibilities. The minister noted that our caseworkers spent approximately half of their day on general administration. This is far from ideal, so we are transforming the way we work and offer services.

We have been making progress with this transformation by testing and scaling service modernization options. The following are some specific ways we have employed technology to better support staff and clients:

On the digital applications front, as mentioned, in October 2020 we launched the social assistance digital application, a new, easy-to-use online application and streamlined process to apply for social assistance. The digital application is available 24 hours per day and offers e-signature and electronic identification to reduce the need for applicants to travel into our offices. Over 84% of applications received since February 2021 have included e-signatures, making it faster and easier for applicants to receive the critical financial supports they need when they need it.

I also want to highlight that at the start of COVID-19 we launched a new digital emergency assistance application. This has streamlined the application for citizens looking for emergency assistance only, allowing them access to supports faster, without having to go through the entire social assistance application process. This facilitated

access to much-needed support at the start of the pandemic, before federal benefits were announced.

I want to speak specifically to MyBenefits. MyBenefits was launched in 2018. This provides a fast, easy and secure way for people to access case information and to report changes. It is accessible; available 24 hours a day, seven days a week; and saves time by providing a self-service channel for clients to manage their case. The tool follows the Ontario Digital Service Standard and is available to all Ontario Disability Support Program and Ontario Works clients. This self-service tool allows clients to access and update information on their case, including messaging and document upload.

MyBenefits has over 120,000 users and is averaging approximately 1,000 new users each week. As of April 2021, clients have completed more than 42,000 income reports through the platform—this is 42,000 less pieces of paper being processed by our caseworkers—and 92% of users have gone paperless in receiving communications from us, things like client letters and statements of assistance. This reduces the amount of printing and mailing that is required.

In November 2020, we began to prototype an expansion of MyBenefits to provide two-way messaging for clients to communicate with their caseworkers. This provides a secure way for clients to communicate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and enables them to provide important documentation to staff to request benefits, inform of changes in their circumstance and communicate more generally about their case. Although this feature is being prototyped with six municipal partners and five Ontario Disability Support Program offices, this new digital communications channel is showing great success. It has been used to send over 8,500 messages in these 11 offices, and more than 4,000 documents have been received digitally through this messaging service. This reduces office walk-ins, phone calls, mail and faxes coming into our offices. It is anticipated that two-way messaging will be available to all MyBenefits users by the end of this month.

I also want to note that the feedback from staff on this tool has been positive, with one caseworker noting, “All my clients are very happy and love using messaging. They picked it up right away with no issues. It is a really easy way to book appointments and advise of required documents.”

I want to talk a bit about electronic document management. Our ministry has also implemented electronic document management, or EDM for short, for both the Ontario Disability Support Program and the Ontario Works delivery partners, which fully digitizes a client’s file. EDM reduces the amount of data entry and paper-handling time and enables staff to access files without needing to search through a file room or internal mailing systems. EDM also includes a component called “digital day one.” What that is is a tool which allows staff to scan documents that have been dropped off by clients so that they are immediately digitized and connected to a client’s file, improving response times to client inquiries, access to benefits and overall service quality.

EDM has been very well received by our staff as a digital tool that frees up their time to support clients. As noted, our ODSP staff processes approximately 35,000 pieces of paper per day. That means that prior to EDM, staffers were spending approximately 30% of their time in document management alone; I am proud to say that introducing EDM has reduced this by 75%. Ontario Works municipal partners have also moved to EDM, with 21 offices representing over 78% of the total caseload onboard with EDM. Another 12 Ontario Works municipal sites are on track for implementing this fiscal year.

As mentioned earlier, we also introduced a centralized intake. We have started to prototype this centralized intake model that will process applications more quickly and reduce time-consuming paperwork for caseworkers. Currently, 20 Ontario Works providers are participating in the new centralized intake model, with the anticipated expansion to all municipalities by the end of this year.

I want to shift to a program that we launched called a reloadable payment card. The ministry continues to promote the use of reloadable payment cards for clients who are unable to open or maintain a bank account. The reloadable payment card has been available since 2016 for ODSP and 2019 for participating Ontario Works partners. The card protects against theft of cash or cheques, eliminates cheque-cashing fees, and enables clients to make purchases online, which has only become more important during the pandemic. The card also reduces stigma, as it appears like any other bank card. The uptake on e-payments, including direct bank deposit and the reloadable payment cards, is at 96% for both programs. Prior to the launch of the reloadable payment card, we were at 86% for ODSP and 91% for Ontario Works, so introducing this card has not only increased convenience but also reduced costs for clients.

I want to note that our digital services are being designed to complement existing in-person and telephone channels, not replace them. These services now ensure citizens have access to their case information and the choice of how they wish to engage with the ministry.

1140

Generally, those who are choosing to use digital channels are happy with the options made available to them and have given us positive feedback. For example, we heard from one client, “The online benefits function is user friendly and offers the tools I need to comfortably manage the benefits I’m receiving whenever I want to. It is also clear regarding who and how to contact for help.”

We continue to test our digital services with users and improve them based on their input. This is, again, a co-designed approach. On the connectivity front, we recognize that digital services are not the only support that social assistance clients require. Access to affordable Internet not only ensures that our social assistance digital strategies are successful and available to all who choose them, but it also increases social inclusion, access to digital health care resources, and expands access to jobs, training and educational opportunities.

COVID-19 has only amplified the need for more effective Internet connectivity as people are dealing with social

isolation, physical distancing, labour market impacts and communicating with social assistance offices virtually. We recognize this issue and that it is larger than social assistance. We are collaborating with other ministry partners, including the Ministry of Infrastructure, on Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan, to consider ways that can help our clients in the immediate short term and longer term.

The ministry has also had discussions with telecom providers to support the expansion of affordable Internet plans to social assistance clients, many of whom have not been eligible for affordable Internet programs from other levels of government. The ministry has equipped 45 of its 47 ODSP offices with free public access WiFi. The remaining two are awaiting infrastructure upgrades and will be completed by the end of this summer.

In closing, as a result of digital services in place through the ministry, we were quickly able to pivot, provide service without interruption, and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, while ensuring staff and client safety by reducing the need for in-office visits and submissions by mail and in-person appointments.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you. Overall, our transformation to implement digital options and automation has already shown significant progress and has made things easier for both our staff and clients. By achieving reductions in the amount of data entry and paper-handling time, and by making it easier for clients to interact with us and their life, we have enabled both staff and clients to focus on things like connecting to employment and life stabilization activities, the things that matter most.

Maybe I can turn it over to Deputy Minister Menard in the last minute or so.

Hon. Todd Smith: Actually, I can take it, Nelson.

I just wanted to reiterate the comments that you were making and some of the comments that you have received on the good work that's happening on the digital front in our ministry.

We're hearing directly from clients, including one client who says, "Thank you for the MyBenefits web page and developing new ways to break barriers in accessing disability supports. Please continue developing and fighting for supports for disabled persons during COVID-19." That came to us just a couple of months ago, in April of this year.

And this one is great: "As a newcomer to Canada, and especially in Ottawa, I must admit that the quality of the service that has been provided to me since the start of the contact is five stars. The new online service of my services was very well explained, point by point, and is largely clear. Different languages are available, in French and English, which is really important and it's a big plus." That was a client who responded to us last summer, actually, in July, who signed up.

I think it's just an awesome testament to the importance of this digital program that a thousand of our clients are signing up to MyBenefits every week. They really see how

this is making their life easier in accessing the information that they need. And the two-way texting that has been happening has been well received as well.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): This rotation is up. We have roughly 15 minutes before our noon break.

This rotation goes to the official opposition. MPP Gretzky, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I appreciate the time to ask some more questions before we go to break.

And I just want to be clear, because the minister is misrepresenting what I said: I never said that individuals with disabilities don't want to work. What I've been very clear about in the five or six years that I've had this critic portfolio is that there are many individuals with disabilities who can't work and that saying the best social program is a job and trying to pushing them into jobs that are not suitable for them, that they cannot physically do, is insulting to them. That's their words. That's not coming from me.

I would like to read off a comment from ODSP Action Coalition on that very topic. It says, "Minister Smith, you say many people with disabilities on ODSP over the past two years told you they want to work. That's great. But how many people have told you they can't work and are struggling to survive on measly monthly benefits?"

I'm going to go back to the digitizing, because the minister, again, took a personal dig about myself and my colleagues, or specifically myself not being able to grasp digitizing because I asked this question—I want people to understand that this is the question I asked that provoked a personal attack: "Can you show where in the estimates the budget is for the devices and Internet access plans for the 31% of low-income Ontarians who don't have adequate Internet access for services at home?" That question was asked because, while I understand that we are moving to digitizing things, obviously, because we're on Zoom today—I've never said that's not a good thing. What I have said is, there are many people, 31%, who will not be able to access those services. The government needs to take that into consideration and ensure that they can access it. One of the ways that they can ensure that is by raising the income rates for these individuals.

In that vein, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Ottawa, for example, is \$1,244, and in Toronto, it's \$1,417; the cost in Sudbury is \$921, and in Peterborough it's \$990. That's according to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. in 2021.

The report from the city of Toronto indicates that annual spending for a shelter bed in the city increased to \$80,000 per year, while the cost of running a supportive housing unit was \$24,000 per year. We know there is a supportive housing wait-list of well over two decades long. We know that, in 2021, the shelter amount for an individual—one person, a single person—on OW is \$390. If you include their basic needs, their total maximum income would be \$733, so that's well below housing costs. Their shelter and their basic needs combined still do not meet the needs for housing.

For a single individual on ODSP, an individual with a disability, the maximum amount is \$497 for shelter and

\$672 for basic needs, for a total maximum of \$1,169 a month—again, in many cases, not even reaching the cost of housing. And if they do have enough for housing, there's very little left over for food and other necessities.

Food price increases are expected to be between 3% to 5%, with the highest increase up to 6.5% for meat and vegetables. The most healthy foods for people are going up over 6.5%, and yet your government, Minister, cut a planned increase of 3% for social assistance rates in half. These individuals are not even getting cost-of-living increases to be able to go to the grocery store and get healthy food.

I'm wondering if the minister could then explain why the government is not investing in raising the rates, knowing that the cost of housing and shelter are so high; why they choose to spend more money on shelter beds rather than stable permanent housing for individuals; and why rates have not been increased so that individuals on social assistance can afford to go to a grocery store, instead of relying on a food bank.

Hon. Todd Smith: There's a lot to unpack there and a lot of questions.

Certainly, individuals who are watching today will know that, after 15 years, they were no further ahead under the previous Liberal government than they were 15 years ago. There was little investment in this sector. There was very, very little investment in supportive housing from the previous government.

1150

Under the guidance of the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing and working collaboratively with our department here at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, we're making many, many investments in supportive housing. As a matter of fact, this year alone, we're investing \$2.2 billion in supportive housing. We've committed to increasing the combined funding for Home for Good and the Indigenous Supportive Housing Program by \$31.7 million, from \$63 million in 2019-20 to \$94.7 million in 2021-22. We're also increasing funding for the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative, known as CHPI, by \$15 million, from \$323.7 million in 2019-20 to \$338.7 million in 2020-21. There's a lot of work to do, there's a lot of catching up to do in this area; there's no question about it.

Our government has also announced a range of measures to help Ontarians get through these unprecedented times. As I mentioned a number of times throughout the morning, we've invested \$765 million in the social services relief fund, which goes directly back to our partners at the 47 municipal agencies and DSSABs in the north to ensure that individuals in those communities are getting the support that they need; specifically, on housing and homelessness.

The Community Housing Renewal Strategy focuses on affordable housing for low-income households and supports the sustainability of the non-profit co-operative and municipal housing sectors. The strategy is going to help sustain, repair and grow the community housing system, making it work better for the people that it serves. As part

of the Community Housing Renewal Strategy, the government is investing nearly \$1 billion in 2020-21. That's going to help sustain, it's going to help repair and grow community housing and help end homelessness in Ontario.

As I mentioned earlier when we were talking about the Poverty Reduction Strategy, we are taking a cross-government approach, so some of the things that we're talking about here would fall under the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and Minister Clark—things like the Canada-Ontario Community Housing Initiative, providing funding to those service managers in our municipalities to replace the federal social housing agreement funding that expires each year. Those service managers can use this funding to repair and regenerate and expand community housing, protect affordability, support for tenants, support community housing providers whose original program and arrangements are expiring. There's the Ontario Priorities Housing Initiative, which provides funding as well to those 47 service managers; the Indigenous Supportive Housing Program, working with urban and Indigenous organizations and service providers. There's the Multi-Ministry Supportive Housing Initiative, undertaking a review of supportive housing programs to improve services for people and increase system efficiency there. There's CHPI that I already mentioned, which is a significant investment.

As you can see, just on the housing front alone, we are making major investments in all kinds of different programs.

When it comes to food security, the Emergency Food Box Program has been provided an additional \$8 million; the social services relief fund, as I mentioned—\$765 million; the Surplus Food Redistribution Infrastructure Program, providing over \$5 million in funding to help food rescue organizations, First Nation communities, Indigenous organizations purchase refrigeration trucks and freezers and storage space and kitchen equipment so they can safely collect and preserve and distribute food in the various communities that they serve.

So we are taking a cross-government approach in the Poverty Reduction Strategy. That, of course, doesn't include all of the investments that we're making when it comes to mental health. There are four pillars that are involved in this program: the employment and training supports—

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister; I'm sorry. I have a request from MPP Gretzky for the floor. MPP Gretzky?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I'm just going to ask the minister—he gave a list of areas they're investing in. He talked about housing. He talked about investing in shelter beds, investing in the increased need for those shelter beds and food banks.

My question to the minister is, why would you not invest in raising the social assistance rates for individuals to lift them out of poverty so that the need for shelter beds

would decrease, so that the need for food bank usage would decrease?

When you're talking about eliminating homelessness, a good direction to go would be to increase social assistance rates. And while you are rightfully critical of the previous Liberal government, I will point out that they, near the end of their term, right before an election, announced a 3% increase—not nearly enough, but it was a start—to social assistance. Yet the first thing that your government did was cut that increase in half.

When you look at where you could invest on the front end to save money on the back end, why, Minister, are you and your government so opposed to raising social assistance rates to ensure that individuals who rely on social assistance—more specifically, those with disabilities do not have adequate income to be able to secure housing, to have food security so they don't have to go to food banks? Why are you so averse to the idea of raising those rates when many, many organizations, many of these support agencies have shown that when you invest on the front end there is a savings on the back end? Whether that is in the health care system, in the education system, the justice system—when you make those investments on the front end, it decreases the need for food banks, and it decreases the need for shelter beds. I'm just wondering why the government is so averse to making those very impactful investments that would go directly to individuals on social assistance, by raising the rates?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for acknowledging, again, the fact that the previous government did very little except for, really, what we both know was an empty promise prior to an election campaign. This was a government that we both know was circling the bowl and was not going to be re-elected, so they could promise anything that they wanted. You can't put a whole lot of stock in the fact that the previous government was advertising a 3% increase in rates.

What I will tell you is that we increased rates by 1.5% when we became the government. We've also, as indicated, provided additional supports in so many other areas, in our Poverty Reduction Strategy, which provides investments for individuals, while at the same time ensuring that we're streamlining all of these systems so that we're getting better results.

What we're focused on, particularly in the employment services transformation, is ensuring that we can get people back to work—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Chair, can I—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister. MPP Gretzky, you had a point?

I'll note to all, you have about two minutes before we take our break.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Thank you. It's clear that not only are the minister and the government averse to the idea of increasing social assistance rates, but they are not interested in actually answering that question either.

I just want to point out, about the Poverty Reduction Strategy, because the minister has mentioned that several times—again, I will go back to the estimates. In the current

estimates before us, that entire line is gone. It's zero—zero dollars in that—and it was supposed to be a five-year strategy. So there is concern, and I did ask a question about it and didn't really receive an answer as to why that entire line has been cut. I think that you could understand why there are individuals who are concerned about the fact that that particular line has been completely eliminated.

I will have an opportunity this afternoon, along with my colleague from Ottawa Centre, to ask some more questions. But the first question we're talking about, on the employment services transformation—and I'm hoping it could be really a tight answer: What is the difference between the common assessment tool that has been introduced and the previous tools that were used in the past?

Hon. Todd Smith: Sorry, I just want to touch on the Poverty Reduction Strategy comment and the fact that that was zeroed out—that \$14 million. Our Black youth action plan investment alone—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say, Minister, we are now out of time.

We will recess until 1 p.m. See you all at 1 p.m.

The committee recessed from 1200 to 1300.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good afternoon, everyone. We're going to resume consideration of vote 701 of the estimates of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. There's now a total of 10 hours and 35 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates.

When the committee adjourned this morning, the official opposition had five minutes remaining.

Before we go to the official opposition, I have a number of new participants in today's hearing. I'd like the MPPs to confirm their identity and the fact that they're in Ontario.

I have MPP Skelly.

Ms. Donna Skelly: I am MPP Skelly, and I'm in Hamilton.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you for chairing yesterday afternoon. I gather it went very well.

MPP McKenna.

Ms. Jane McKenna: It's Jane McKenna, and I am in Burlington.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you so much. MPP Harden.

Mr. Joel Harden: MPP Harden here. I'm on unceded Algonquin territory in Ottawa. It's nice to see you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you very much. With that, MPP Gretzky, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I'm going pick up where I left off this morning with just this one question to start, and then I'll move on to another area. I wanted to ask the minister—as I pointed out, a single individual receiving Ontario Works receives a maximum of \$733, and a single individual on the Ontario Disability Support Program receives a maximum of \$1,169. I'm just wondering if the minister himself thinks that, even in his area specifically but in other areas across the province, he would be able to secure stable housing, and based on the 6.5% increase to healthy food costs, like meat and vegetables, if he believes that he

would be able to sufficiently survive on that amount of money.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for the question, MPP Gretzky.

That's why we increased funding by 1.5% when we first became the government of Ontario. That works out to about an \$80-million investment year over year. And that's why we're making the changes that we're making to the employment support services that are available—so that, particularly in Ontario Works, we'll get those individuals who are making, as you mentioned, the \$700-plus a month off social assistance by getting them the life stabilization supports that they need; the job training that they need; the equipment; potentially, mental health or child care or other supports that they need. That's why we're making investments in all of these other areas—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Chair, if I could reclaim my time, please.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Gretzky, you had a question?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Yes. I'd like to reclaim my time.

Just to be clear, since 2017, Ontario Works rates have increased by only \$12, and ODSP has only gone up in 2018. So that's between 2017 and the three years, Minister, that you have been in government.

My question was very specific: With the current rates of Ontario Works for a single individual being a maximum of \$733 and ODSP for a single individual being a maximum of \$1,169, do you believe that you would be able to secure stable housing and be able to put food on the table without having to rely on a food bank?

Hon. Todd Smith: As I was saying, MPP Gretzky, that's why we're providing all of the supports in other areas to assist these individuals in getting housing—supportive housing, in many cases—and we've made a lot of investment there, along with my colleague Minister Clark at municipal affairs and housing. That's why we're ensuring that we're getting individuals the 1.5% increase, which, again, works out to—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Hon. Todd Smith: —an \$80-million-a-year investment. That's why during the pandemic we were quick to come out with the social services relief fund. And that's why we've brought in the Poverty Reduction Strategy, which is a pan-government approach to ensuring that—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Chair, if I could reclaim what's left of my time.

Hon. Todd Smith: —we're assisting not just those—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister; sorry.

MPP Gretzky, you have a point you want to make?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Yes. I just want to point out, again, that according to estimates, the Poverty Reduction Strategy has been allotted zero dollars in this current budget.

I'm going to move on, because the minister is not directly answering my question—and by extension, then, is answering my question.

We finished last time with me asking, what is the difference between the common assessment tool that has been introduced under the transformation—what is it like, compared to the previous tools that were used in the past?

Hon. Todd Smith: Unfortunately, in the limited amount of time that we have left, I'm not sure that ADM Nelson Loureiro will have enough time to explain that, but he is prepared to use whatever time we have left to address that question.

Nelson?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you for your question, MPP Gretzky.

I'm going to point to three things, and I'm going to speak fast because I know the time is limited. The tools that are available at the municipalities are district tools. They're not integrated and connected across the province. They're not integrated and connected with the case management tools that are used to support clients on social assistance. The tool that we have introduced as part of the employment services transformation has taken lessons learned from the tools that exist. We've done co-designing with the municipalities around the tools that exist. It does integrate with the case management systems. It allows for planning—with the client, the services, the manager or the employment service provider and the social assistance caseworker—a person-centred plan within the tool.

The last thing I'll say—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say that that rotation has ended.

Before we go to the government—Mr. Cuzzetto, just before I go to you, sir—Mr. Coe has joined us.

Just to bring you into the swim of things—if you would identify yourself as, indeed, MPP Coe and that you're in Ontario.

Mr. Lorne Coe: I'm situated in Whitby, in my constituency office.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Okay.

MPP Cuzzetto, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: First of all, I'd like to thank the minister, the associate minister, the parliamentary assistant and the staff for all your work that you've been doing at the ministry, as well as for doubling the funding for autism from \$300 million to \$600 million—very well needed.

Minister, I've been hearing from families and parents with family members with developmental disabilities in my riding. What has been clear to me is that they've had challenges accessing funding for them, and this has been going on for the last 10 to 15 years.

Beyond accessing the development service system, it is also known that unfortunately these people who do have developmental disabilities still deal with stigma.

I know that you recently released a plan to implement real change in this sector and to improve outcomes for people and their families. Can you tell us more about the plan and the steps that have been taken to date on this implementation?

Hon. Todd Smith: It's good to see you this afternoon, on a glorious Friday. Thanks for the question. It's a really important question.

I can tell you that the ministry has heard for years from people with developmental disabilities and their families about the challenges they face with the developmental services system here in Ontario. The previous government had years to make changes, address those challenges and develop a more individualized and responsive model for developmental services that responded to what the ministry has heard. Very clearly, they failed to make any meaningful progress on this front over the 15 years that they were the government of Ontario.

We're addressing the challenges that individuals and families are facing head-on, with a focus on ensuring people with developmental disabilities can fully participate in their communities. Over the fall and winter, we held consultations and we heard directly from hundreds of people across Ontario. We also had an advisory group comprised of key stakeholders, and I've also continued to engage regularly with a table of sector leaders on developmental services.

We heard clearly through the engagement that Ontario needs a developmental service system that is person-centred, responsive and sustainable, to better address the needs of people now and in the future. It was evident that the system has issues that cannot be solved by tinkering around the edges; significant foundational changes are needed. That's what we're embarking on with the reform in this sector, working collaboratively with our partners, as I mentioned.

I was really pleased to release the government's reform plan. It's called Journey to Belonging: Choice and Inclusion. We did this last month, back on May 18. Our plan outlines a common vision that we share with people with developmental disabilities, their families and our sector, as well as Indigenous partners. It's a vision where people with developmental disabilities are supported to fully belong in their communities.

The journey to reform developmental services has been a long one, from a place in time when people with developmental disabilities were living in institutions—and you'll remember those institutions—separated from the community in which they live, to one where we're in reach of community inclusion and true belonging.

1310

That's why we've released our plan. It's going to help lead to a more person-centred and responsive system that better addresses people's needs and goals and that supports people to belong and participate in their communities.

Yesterday, I had a great meeting with Chris Beesley from Community Living Ontario. Michelle Brooks from our reference group also joined us on that meeting. It was a really interesting perspective from siblings of individuals with developmental disabilities. Siblings with a cause—that's the name of the group. It's a great bunch of young people who have family members with developmental disabilities. They want to be advocates for their brothers and sisters. They know them as well as anybody else does, and they want to ensure that they reach the goals they've set out.

Our plan focuses on three key areas: creating a more person-centred system, as I've mentioned a couple of times; improving service experience by modernizing how services and supports are delivered; and delivering high-quality services with a strong focus on achieving positive outcomes for people.

We know that change isn't going to happen with the snap of a finger. It's not going to happen overnight. This is something that's going to take a while to achieve. But we also know that people want to see improvements now to the services that they receive, and we've made those changes. The plan commits to real action over the next year to make immediate changes to improve how people access services. It streamlines the process and also helps reduce barriers for people.

As we work toward achieving our long-term vision, some of the immediate actions we'll be taking over the next year include:

- improving user experience and reducing the amount of time people spend on the assessment process;
- making changes to the Passport Program to better address people's needs;
- reducing administrative burdens and freeing up service provider capacity to focus on providing services for people;
- implementing initiatives to support people through key life transitions, such as moving from the children's to the adult system and finding youth employment opportunities; and
- improving the availability of skilled staff to provide people with the supports they need at the right times.

We continue to make investments in the developmental services sector to support people currently in service and those who are at high risk. This commitment actually goes back to last year's investment. It was \$361 million in the 2020 budget. When we were elected, we inherited a budget—this is really important—from the previous Liberal government that lacked any real long-term plans or any investment to continue to cover the costs of supporting people who had previously come into the adult developmental services system, including some who had transitioned from the children's system to the adult system. Those investments simply weren't made. The government wasn't ready for those people coming into the adult programs. That's why we invested \$361 million in stabilization funding.

Among other measures, budget 2020's \$361-million investment allows us to fully commit to continue to providing funding and supports for people in those developmental services who came into service in the prior fiscal years and the budget never allowed for them to receive those services. It means that individuals will continue to receive the high-quality services they need.

As part of budget 2021—this year's budget—we're investing \$13 million over the next three years. That's going to assist more people with developmental disabilities to access community housing.

We're also expanding the Adult Protective Service Worker program to better support people with

developmental disabilities to live more independently, which is one of the goals of our long-term vision as well.

We're committed to planning for the future and better serving those who depend on developmental services. As we move into designing and implementing changes to make our shared vision a reality, we're committed to working with our partners to get it right.

I love the meetings that we do have with our partners in the sector. They're a really great, committed, dedicated, passionate group of individuals. We have great conversations about where the sector needs to go, and we'll continue to do that as we continue to roll out the vision for the developmental services sector together.

I'm now going to turn it over to our deputy minister at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, Janet Menard. She's going to provide more details on the engagement process that informed this long-term reform plan that we're embarking on in this sector.

Janet?

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you very much, Minister.

As the minister outlined in his remarks, we have consulted extensively with stakeholders and sector partners as part of the development of the reform plan. Last fall, the ministry held eight virtual engagement sessions with people, family, service providers, academics and a range of stakeholders right across the province. Almost 200 attendees participated in these sessions that were held over November and December, and we heard additionally from a wide range of stakeholders directly, including individuals with lived experience and francophone stakeholders.

In addition to the virtual engagement sessions, there was an opportunity for people to provide online feedback based on a discussion guide on reform that was posted on the ministry website. Happily, we received a strong response to the online guide, with almost 900 responses. The feedback we received through our engagements was very much in line with what we expected and have heard from people, families and sector partners over the years.

Some of the themes that emerged from the engagement included the need to make supports more person-centred, responsive to people's needs and offer them meaningful choice; building on people's strengths instead of their deficits; supporting families and caregivers to allow them to continue providing care; shifting to more proactive supports and moving away from a model where people may need to be in crisis before they can actually obtain supports; addressing barriers and external factors, such as affordable housing, poverty, education and employment opportunities; and finally, providing culturally appropriate services for Indigenous people, francophones and newcomers to Canada, as well as regional supports in northern, rural and remote communities.

The ministry has also been engaging on an ongoing basis since late last summer with the Developmental Services Reform Reference Group, which is an advisory table comprised of stakeholders, including individuals with lived experience, family members, service providers and academics and other key experts.

Finally, as the minister noted, he has also personally been engaging regularly with the minister's table, which is

comprised of key sector leaders representing developmental services agencies of varying sizes and from across Ontario, as well as sector umbrella organizations.

I would like to now turn it over to Rupert Gordon. He is the assistant deputy minister of the community services division. He will provide more details on the long-term commitments and immediate actions outlined in the reform plan, as well as the government's recent investments in developmental services.

Over to you, Rupert.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thank you, Deputy.

The developmental services reform plan is a strategic framework that outlines the government's key long-term commitments to improve the developmental services system in Ontario. The plan recognizes the journey for people, families in the sector and the great work that has already been done. It acknowledges there are challenges right now. It summarizes what we heard from people through our DS reform engagements. It outlines immediate actions to improve client supports and services over the next year, and it describes the long-term foundational changes that are needed to be designed and implemented over the coming years to enable successful reform of the system.

The vision for reform is one where people with developmental disabilities are included and belong, through supports that are person-centred, person-directed, flexible and sustainable, and where everyone has a supporting role to play—government, families and support networks and the wider community.

There are a number of foundational changes that are critical for reform that we'll be developing over the next years and then testing and rolling out across the province.

As the minister noted in his remarks, the reform plan focuses on three key commitments: on creating a more person-centred system where supports are based on a person's needs, offer greater choice and flexibility and help people achieved desired goals; improving the service experience by modernizing how services and supports are delivered; delivering high-quality services with a strong focus on achieving positive outcomes for people.

1320

To develop a more person-centred system, key actions will include:

—better support with planning and coordination for people;

—earlier proactive supports to address emerging needs and supports for families, caregivers and networks to deliver better planning and early intervention;

—developing a person-centred funding model that links a person's funding to their assessed needs, in addition to achieving greater equity in the level of funding and improving financial sustainability. An individual funding model is a key enabler of person-directed services;

—addressing barriers for people accessing services in their communities, like housing, education, employment and health, and barriers to the opportunities that are available to all citizens;

—more culturally relevant supports for Indigenous people as well as francophones and racialized and marginalized communities.

To improve how people experience getting services and supports, actions will focus on improving the application process:

- by making it simpler and easier to access and providing better information to help people plan for the future;
- by improving the intake and assessment;
- by reviewing different approaches that are more responsive to people’s circumstances, support needs and the types of support that they are looking for;
- by making it easier to share and adopt best practices in person-centred service delivery; and
- by expanding the use of technology and improving digital options.

It’s important to note, however, that digital first does not mean digital only. As we know, that doesn’t work for everyone.

Finally, reform will focus on the quality of services and supports and better outcomes for people. This will involve introducing a performance measurement approach to support continuous improvement; sharing information to help people and families identify and choose high-quality supports; and a workforce strategy in collaboration with the DS sector to support a skilled, diverse and professional workforce to help people participate meaningfully in their communities and lead good lives.

We know there are things we can do right away to improve the current system while we work on the foundational aspects of reform. The immediate actions focus on two broad categories, which are improving access to services for people and reducing barriers.

The first is related to improving how people apply for services and supports. As part of this, the ministry is working on providing clear information about the application, intake and assessment processes and outcomes early on to families so that they can support transition planning and transition to adulthood; and providing more training and supports to Developmental Services Ontario offices to help reduce wait times for assessments.

The second area is related to Passport, where the ministry will focus on evaluating flexibility introduced during COVID-19 to determine what to make permanent, with a focus on enabling the purchase of technology supports, supporting people to make it easier to submit expense claims for quicker online reimbursement, and providing clearer guidelines to help better plan how people spend their funding.

The third area focuses on reducing administrative burden for service providers through work on more efficient and streamlined contracting and reporting processes so they can focus on supporting the people rather than the paperwork.

The fourth area is about enabling smoother life transitions. As a part of this work, the ministry will be helping people access affordable housing and community-based housing solutions, starting with the investment as part of budget 2021. We’ll be promoting youth employment initiatives in partnership with the Ontario Disability

Employment Network. We’ll be improving transitions for youth moving from the child welfare system and children’s special needs systems into adult developmental services.

The fifth area of immediate action is related to the sector workforce. In partnership with sector partners, this involves improving staffing capacity through recruitment and retention efforts, shifting to a more person-centred way of delivering services by supporting the sector through the ministry’s knowledge translation and transfer hub.

The final area of work, importantly, is related to increasing awareness, and this will be done through outreach and an education campaign across sectors to reduce stigma and discrimination.

The reform plan has set out an eight- to 10-year time frame to implement key components of the reform agenda in a gradual and thoughtful way, with a focus on minimizing disruption for people and families. A high-level breakdown of the timeline is as follows:

Over the next year, the ministry will be implementing the immediate actions that I just described. In terms of the core, foundational elements to enable long-term reform, we’ll spend the next three years on the design of key elements in collaboration with partners. Some of the early areas of focus will be on the workforce strategy and on understanding the cost of service delivery across the province to develop the funding model. In the later years of reform, the focus will be on helping people and service providers transition through the change. This may involve testing and evaluating reforms on a smaller scale or phasing in reform activities. In the final years of the strategy, we will involve implementing reform across—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have a minute and a half left.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: —and the province.

I want to build on the minister’s comments related to the \$361 million. Important investments include annualized investment for sector stabilization. This amounts to \$50 million that was previously committed through the 2018 budget but only previously provided on a fiscal basis—residential funding for people taken into service in 2018-19 and earlier. This year’s budget packages will reflect those historical funding commitments, and this investment also allows the ministry to continue investing in new residential services for the highest-risk people and to continue offering the Passport basic amount as new people become eligible.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: How much time is left, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Twenty-five seconds.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I just want to thank the ministry again for all your hard work. I commend you for everything you are doing to improve the system for future generations. Thank you very much for your time today.

I’ll pass it back to the Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We now go to rotation for the official opposition. MPP Gretzky, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Under the proposed new delivery model for social assistance, it states: “The province will

focus on overseeing social assistance applications and payments....

“Municipal partners will use their expertise to deliver person-centred casework and knowledge of local supports to help people get back to work and access supports to stabilize their lives such as housing and health care.”

My question is, how many caseworkers under this new model are expected to lose their employment after the restructuring of social assistance? Do you have an estimate on that?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks very much for the question, MPP Gretzky. Nelson has been working very closely on this.

We’ve been stressing, along with our partners in the municipal sector, that this is about providing a better service to individuals. This is ensuring that the province is taking the responsibility of applications and administration. The province will be up here; the municipalities will be delivering the services on the ground. There won’t be any involuntary job losses as a result of this transformation that’s taking place. We’re committed to working collaboratively with our municipal partners on the development and the co-design of the program, but also ensuring that there is no additional cost associated with this for municipalities.

I can tell you, there has been tremendous enthusiasm from our municipal partners we’ve been working with on this transformation. At the AMO tables we’re involved with, both with our colleagues who are municipal politicians but also at the staff table, where they’ve been working away at this employment service transformation—which everybody understands is really important.

I don’t know if we need to go to Nelson, but I’m sure he would probably like to fill in a few additional points, to build on what—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: If I could just go specifically to the question: Whether voluntary or involuntary, how many caseworkers, how many employees, how many jobs do you think will be lost? Whether that’s through someone voluntarily leaving—and frankly, what are the incentives for someone to leave their employment? And those who may be affected involuntarily, how many of those caseworkers are expected to—what’s the number of caseworkers that’s going to decrease?

Hon. Todd Smith: I’ll stress again: This isn’t about job losses; this is about providing a better service to the individuals who are receiving services from the province and the municipality and making sure that it works better and is seamless.

We’re working together with our municipal partners on the co-design. Obviously, the municipal partners are responsible for the employees on the municipal side, and we’re responsible for those who are working on the provincial piece of this.

Nelson, do you want to add anything?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I’ll just jump in and say that I categorically disagree with the minister on what he just said. To the caseworkers who will be out of a job, it matters, and that is exactly why I asked the question.

When you’re talking about being able to provide services to the individuals who receive social assistance, the number of caseworkers who are available to assist those individuals with whatever it is that those caseworkers are going to be charged with doing—that matters. You cannot say that it is increasing services to individuals receiving social assistance when they don’t have access to caseworkers or their caseworker loads continue to be 400-plus cases and over. Again, I will go back to the individuals who are going to lose their jobs, whether voluntarily or involuntarily—it really does matter.

1330

I want to ask again about the common assessment tool that has been introduced. I’d like to know how marginalized populations such as Indigenous, LGBTQ+, BIPOC and women will be taken into account with this tool. Is it a one-size-fits-all, or are there differences based on those particular marginalized populations?

Hon. Todd Smith: I just want to go back to your previous comments, MPP Gretzky.

This is not about losing jobs. This is about getting people jobs. This is about getting people off social assistance so that they can be independent and living on their own. It’s about ensuring those caseworkers who are working in the sector have reduced responsibilities, as we talked about throughout the morning, and they can be solely focused on providing those social supports to individuals and assisting them in getting into employment.

I will pass it over, on your new question, to Nelson, and he can talk a little bit more about the tool and how it works.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I’m just going to go back to that again, to the caseworkers who are going to be out of a job: It is about jobs. It’s about losing their jobs. It’s not just about pushing people, regardless of their abilities, into a job that’s not suited to them or they may not be able to maintain; it is also to prop up numbers, to be able to say, for the government’s own purpose, that we’ve created so many jobs. If they’re not jobs that are appropriate to individuals, then those really are not good jobs. And, again, the individuals who are going to lose their jobs, the caseworkers—it is about that.

The next question is—because I’m sure we could go back and forth all day on that one, so we’ll just agree to disagree—I’d like to know how it’s beneficial to use corporations that have problematic pasts to run our employment programs rather than rely on our Ontario public service workers. Why are we using taxpayer dollars for private corporations?

Before you answer that, I want to share a quote from the Niagara Falls Review, specifically on Fedcap—the other company also has a problematic past: “Christine Hastedt, public policy director for Maine Equal Justice Partners, said her organization has continued to hear ‘very disturbing problems’ from people who have been referred to Fedcap since 2017, when the non-profit corporation was given a \$62-million five-year contract to run the programs.

“But in some cases, people referred to Fedcap were given work assignments, despite having mental or physical disabilities, or a child with a significant disability.

“They basically can’t do what they’re being asked to do,” she said. “They aren’t appropriately accommodated for those conditions.”

So I go back to: How is it beneficial to use these corporations that have problematic pasts? Why would we not be investing into our public service workers? And how will the ministry ensure that individuals who cannot work due to a disability or having a child with a disability will not be forced into inappropriate work situations?

Hon. Todd Smith: I hope you’ll let me answer this question. You seem—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I would be glad to have you answer it, if you would actually answer it.

Hon. Todd Smith: You’re actually more interested in asking questions and not getting the answers.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: If you give me answers, I would be interested in listening.

Hon. Todd Smith: I would like to answer the question if you give me the opportunity to answer this question.

As the member knows, there are three prototypes that we launched. One of them is in Peel. It’s one of the prototype areas. In Muskoka-Kawartha, Fleming College is operating the employment services transformation there, and as you mentioned, Hamilton-Niagara is Fedcap. We wanted to ensure, in the three prototypes, that we had a private sector, a non-profit and a public sector partner. The early reviews that we’re getting from all three areas are very positive.

I would point out that in BC, John Horgan’s NDP government also moved to this outcome-based model, and they’re awarding contracts to a mix of non-profit and private providers, including the very same organization that we selected as the service manager in Peel region, WCG. The NDP Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction out there, Shane Simpson, said the system is going to “make it easier for more people to find good, stable jobs so they can provide for themselves and their families.” That’s the goal in this entire process.

I know Nelson would love to talk about this. Nelson could also talk about the jobs that are going to be created when it comes to our employment transformation. You seem obsessed with the fact that jobs will be lost. Jobs are going to be created as a result of this program, not just for those who are working in the sector—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Chair, if I could reclaim my time, please—

Hon. Todd Smith: —but for those on social assistance who are working to get a job.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Gretzky and Minister—MPP Gretzky, you’ve raised your hand. You have the floor.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I’ll just point out that in BC they’ve also raised the rates over 54%, while your government cut it down to 1.5% and people still live in poverty.

I’m going to back to Ontario; you’re responsible for Ontario.

I am asking why a company like Fedcap is being awarded these contracts.

And I am obsessed with people losing work because these caseworkers are very concerned that they are going

to lose their jobs. I don’t think that is something you should try to shame me over. These are very real concerns over job losses. They’re very concerned about job outcomes for individuals who rely on social assistance, and individuals living on social assistance, especially those with disabilities, are very concerned, based on the past performance of the company that you have chosen, that they are going to be pushed into jobs that do not suit them, that they have disabilities that would normally preclude them from being able to work and that the government is moving towards a model where they will be pushed into jobs even if they are not able to do them. I just want to put that on the record.

My colleague from Ottawa Centre is on the call and has numerous questions as well. So I will cede my time to the member for Ottawa Centre, who I know also has questions regarding this.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Harden, the floor is yours.

Mr. Joel Harden: How much time do we have left?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have nine and a half minutes.

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you. Before I get started, I hope people will indulge me. I’ve been going to a number of community events here, and I’ve been asked by community leaders to mention something specifically for the record—because I know folks are tuning in to watch this. I just want to acknowledge that our province and our country are in a state of grieving right now with the revelations that have happened on the west coast of the country, at the Kamloops residential school. I’m coming to you from unceded Algonquin territory here in what we call Ottawa, what we love as Ottawa.

I also want to acknowledge that our community, in particular our Muslim community, is grieving this week, given the heinous events that happened on June 6 in London, Ontario. I was pleased to see parliamentarians from all parties there to comfort the families and pledge that we are going to do more than just talk about mobilizing against hate, that we’re going to do concrete action.

I just want to begin on that front and acknowledge that there’s great work being done here in Ottawa; I know in your communities as well. I think it’s important for the record, given that we’re talking about human dignity, human development, employment, all these important things, that that be mentioned off the top.

Thank you for indulging me.

I come to our discussion at the estimates committee of MCCSS’s proposals here from the perspective of being the party’s disabilities critic. Obviously, my work overlaps a significant amount with MPP Gretzky and other MPPs in our caucus, and I know the work that all of the members of the Legislature do.

I’d like to begin, if you like, from a higher level, because having read the Recovery and Renewal document that has been published, having read what we’re discussing today, I want to make sure that I am reflecting in good faith what the minister and the team are putting forward. So I’ll just clip a segment from the Recovery and Renewal document, Chair.

Minister Smith, in that document, writes that the goal is “To create an efficient, effective and streamlined social services system that focuses on people, providing them with a range of services and supports to respond to their unique needs and address barriers to success so they can move towards employment and independence.”

When I read over the whole document and I reflected on the key capstone passages from the document, that was one of the ones that stood out for me; indeed, it was highlighted by the document creators.

Just from the standpoint of beginning our discussion this afternoon, I would like to ask a couple of basic entry questions.

Do we think at this point, in looking at the estimates you’ve submitted to this committee, that everyone currently drawing upon an ODSP income is capable and able to engage in a significant capacity in paid employment? I’m just wondering, Minister, if I can get an answer from you on that.

1340

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes. This is why we’re undertaking the major changes that we are, specifically on the employment services—and good afternoon, MPP Harden. I appreciate the comments that you made off the top as well. We all should be standing in solidarity with locked arms on these two horrific occasions that you mentioned. So we’re with you on that, and express our sympathies to all those who are affected by that.

When it comes to employment services transformation, we’re continuing to modernize the system and ensure that individuals, particularly individuals with disabilities, have an opportunity to participate in the workforce, because many of them want to. When we were talking yesterday at our press conference with Minister McNaughton, the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development, Minister McNaughton highlighted just one of the individuals—and if we do have the opportunity, go to Nelson; he could tell you. The number so far in the three prototypes that we’ve launched, I believe, is—44% of the individuals who have been assisted so far are individuals who have disabilities.

Minister McNaughton mentioned yesterday a gentleman by the name of Dave from Peel region who was out of work. He has a disability. He was on Ontario Works, but he needed assistance in getting the tools that he needed, the workboots that he needed. He needed to get a forklift license or permit so he could drive a forklift. And there were a few other issues that he was facing when it came to his own life circumstances. That’s why the transformation that we’re making on the recovery and the renewal piece is so important and so wide-ranging that that individual—whether it’s Dave or any other individual across the province—is able to access the life stabilization supports that they need to assist them to get back into the workforce if they’re able and wanting to do so.

We understand that not everybody on ODSP is able to work, but there are many who are. And of course, everybody on Ontario Works is only supposed to be there for a short time if the system is working for them, but right now

we know that it’s not. We had the discussion earlier about how only 1% of the individuals on Ontario Works are actually gaining employment each month, and many of those people end up coming back into the system because they’re not getting those life stabilization supports that they need. Maybe it’s mental health supports—and we know that Minister Tibollo has made tremendous investments in mental health, and Minister Elliott in other health care services that people are requiring.

We know that our government and the federal government have made commitments to child care. It’s our municipal partners that are getting those individuals child care supports when they need them.

There are others who need training. That’s why we’re working so closely with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, and the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, for that matter, with accelerated programs like the PSW accelerated program—because we need far more PSWs in the province, too, to meet the demands that we already have, plus all of the investments that we’ve made in long-term care. So we need training.

There are so many life stabilization pieces around this employment service transformation and the social services recovery and renewal that are going to assist individuals who can work and want to work, be able to work and live independently on their own.

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you for that answer.

I think what I’m going to attach myself to, Minister, is when you mentioned “if they’re able.” I think this is really important. When I’ve had the occasion to talk to a number of ODSP recipients, a number of ODSP workers, they’ve made it very clear to me that everybody wants to contribute; there’s no doubt about that.

You used to be in radio. I’m very familiar with some of the great events we do here in Ottawa, and I can tell you, there is no way, once we get back to those live music events, any of those events are going to function without ODSP recipients acting as volunteers, for Bluesfest, for CityFolk—people are contributing as ODSP recipients all the time. To be honest, I often worry that sometimes we don’t talk about that piece enough.

What I’m interested in, then—because I’m also going to take a stab, in the remaining time I have on this round, at what I think is another point of consensus.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. Joel Harden: First of all, I think there is consensus among all of us that everybody wants to contribute to our society and they want to be supported in their way of contributing to our society, whether it be through paid employment or through some voluntary activity or through looking in on your neighbours. I think we’re all in agreement on that.

I think also—if I could take a stab, Chair, because I was listening in on some of the discussion, earlier this morning and obviously just now—that the income levels we have for ODSP and OW are completely inadequate. I heard the minister talk about the last 15 years and the lack of investments in people’s incomes. I think we can collectively

agree as parliamentarians that they're so low and certainly have been exposed during this pandemic to be so low that they actually incur significant harms upon the individuals in these programs and other health services, education services, criminal justice services and other public services. I'm going to take a stab, and maybe in this round, Minister, if you want to have a quick reaction to that—about this income adequacy consensus and whether I'm right on that front.

Hon. Todd Smith: What we're doing and what this is all about right now is ensuring that those wraparound services are there for individuals. On top of what they're receiving, there are other services that are available to individuals.

Obviously, we're trying to drive as many people who can work, to get them the supports they need so that they can be gainfully employed, and for those who are on ODSP, as you mentioned, give them the opportunity, not to work full-time, in some cases, but to open the door to adding some additional income so that life does become easier for those individuals—but certainly, for those on Ontario Works, getting them off Ontario Works in a very, very timely manner.

This morning, we talked about the fact that we could have an avalanche coming towards us this fall when the federal programs run out. We want to make sure that we are able, and we'll have to be able, to embrace those individuals—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you. I'm sorry to say, Minister, with that, this rotation has come to an end.

The next rotation now goes to the government. MPP Parsa, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Minister, like my colleagues, I want to thank you—both yourself and Minister Dunlop—very much for being here, and to your officials, the deputy minister. Thanks very much for the great work that you've all done during some very difficult times.

Minister, my question is going to be about something that is near and dear to many of us, many families here, and that's the adoption modernization in our province. Many times, I've heard complaints from families of just how difficult their journey has been to adopt a child and to be able to grow their family. You and I both know, what should be an exciting time for both future parents and their child is often a long, drawn-out experience that really dissuades prospective parents from undertaking the process. It also means that many individuals from diverse backgrounds who may be looking at adoption as an option choose not to, limiting the choices for children and youth to those of similar backgrounds. Again, I've heard it from many families who have described the system, Minister, as disjointed, confusing, and, of course, it takes a long time.

I know adoption is one of the pillars of your redesign strategy. What exactly does it mean? Would you be able to elaborate on what your plans are to improve the adoption experience—an experience that affects children,

youth and families, and, again, something that is near and dear to the hearts of many Ontario families?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you so much, MPP Parsa, for this question. It's always an exciting opportunity, to talk about adoption.

I'd also like to thank MPP Roberts, who mentioned earlier our announcement at Peel CAS in 2019.

Adoption can be an incredibly beneficial and rewarding experience for both the child being adopted and the family opening their hearts and home. There are many children in care of children's aid societies who are eligible for adoption, and every child is unique and will thrive with the right family in the right environment. The research is clear: Children who are placed in a permanent home have significantly better outcomes compared to those who remain in care. They are more likely to graduate from secondary school, be employed and have higher incomes. They are less likely to rely on social assistance, be homeless, involved with the justice system or have substance abuse issues. There is nothing more critical, nothing more fundamental, to a child's well-being and success than knowing they have a permanent place to call home. Every child deserves the best opportunity to succeed and reach their potential, and every child deserves a loving, permanent, safe family and home.

Parliamentary Assistant Jeremy Roberts held round tables last year with adoptive parents, prospective adoptive parents, Indigenous partners, front-line workers and leaders in the adoption sector. We wanted to hear from them about their experiences and ideas on how to improve the adoption system. This is what he heard: There's a lack of consistency in approaches to adoption planning and responsiveness from children's aid societies, leaving families feeling a lack of engagement and support; also, a lack of collaboration between societies and across public and private adoption streams; also, a need for greater access to post-adoption services, including financial and non-financial supports, to support adoption stability and prevent adoption breakdowns and disruptions.

1350

Children and youth desire greater participation in the adoption process and openness with their families, post-adoption. There is also a need for equity to be included in all phases of adoption service delivery, while recognizing that adoption is not an appropriate permanency option for all children and youth, and that options for permanency arrangements also include legal custody and, for First Nation, Inuit and Métis children and youth, customary care.

A key priority for our recently announced plan to transform and modernize the child welfare system is to develop lifelong connections and supports for children and youth through permanency, increased stability and the success of family-based placements, such as adoption, kinship arrangements or customary care. We intend to increase adoption stability and success and offer a more consistent, responsive experience for children, youth and prospective adoptive parents.

Our government is taking action to improve the adoption system by investing an additional \$1.5 million annually in programs and services to improve the adoption process for children, youth and families. The funding will help bring more prospective parents, adoptive parents, children and youth together permanently through the development of a centralized intake system and expansion of online matching. It will also provide additional supports and training for families, post-adoption. These investments address feedback received from the consultations with the child welfare sector in the fall of 2019.

As part of the \$1.5 million, we are investing \$900,000 to work in partnership with the Adoption Council of Ontario to develop a centralized adoption intake service and significantly expand centralized adoption matching. Currently, prospective adoptive parents go to individual children's aid societies, with varying responses, times and experiences. Centralized adoption intake will provide a single access point for parents interested in adopting through the public adoption system. We will mandate centralized online matching by requiring societies to profile children and youth who are eligible for adoption, where it is in the child's best interest, on the AdoptOntario web-based adoption-matching platform.

Centralized matching will make it easier for families and children and youth to find and be matched with each other across the province. This is anticipated to lead to an increase in the number of adoptions of children in care.

As part of the \$1.5 million, we are also providing an additional annual investment of \$600,000 to the Adoption Council of Ontario and Adopt4Life. We will be expanding Pathways to Permanence 2, which is a training program to support adoptive parents who are parenting children who have experienced trauma and loss as part of their history, and the Parent2Parent program, which is a peer support program that provides support to adoptive parents by facilitating support groups and pairing them with a local adoptive parent to get help. This is responsive to what the ministry has heard from adoptive parents, who have expressed a lack of help post-adoption and that more supports were needed to keep adoptive families together.

The ministry has heard from the Adoption Council of Ontario: "Now more Ontario adoptive families will have the benefit of the specialized training that Pathways offers. More Ontario children and youth on adoption and permanency journeys can experience stronger relationships with their families. This will help them heal from their trauma and loss, reducing the risk of family breakdowns and ensuring the stable, permanent home they need to thrive and flourish."

We will also establish service standards to improve adoption services provided by children's aid societies to prospective adoptive parents, adoptive parents, and children and youth, and to support greater consistency across the province.

We have also heard from sector partners the importance of matching kids, where appropriate, with prospective adoptive parents of similar religion, race or cultural backgrounds. To better match diverse youth, we will undertake

a public education campaign to recruit new and diverse adoptive parents. The service delivery standards will consider equity and culturally appropriate service delivery, including matching of prospective adoptive parents with children in extended society care.

My ministry also funds supports for adoptive youth to support them in education and health care benefits. The Living and Learning Grant provides financial support to youth adopted from extended society care who are between the ages of 18 and 24 and who are enrolled in a full-time post-secondary program. The Aftercare Benefits Initiative allows youth adopted from care who are between the ages of 18 and 24 to access benefits such as health, dental care and counselling at no cost if they don't have access through another plan.

I want to thank the thousands of families across Ontario who have opened their hearts and homes to children in need of a family.

Our government is committed to bringing more prospective parents, children and youth together through an improved adoption system. We know that our investments and efforts are making and will make a real difference for children, youth and adoptive parents. We also know that we must continue working diligently with our partners in the adoption community to continue strengthening Ontario's adoption system.

I'd now like to pass it over to ADM Remington to speak about the details of our adoption modernization.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, MPP Parsa, for the question.

As the minister has noted, we have heard from significant partnerships about the challenges with the adoption system, as MPP Parsa initiated at first—lots of challenges in the system, and a huge opportunity to work towards creating a much more responsive adoption system.

I thought I'd start by giving some frame of adoption and what adoption is. It really is the legal means for another family to permanently take care and responsibility for raising a child. We know that some birth parents are unable to care for their children and other times, through a variety of reasons, parents seek a new family to care for their child; they're just not able to do it. Adoptive parents become permanently responsible for caring for their child. Adoption is legislated in Ontario under the Child, Youth and Family Services Act and the Intercountry Adoption Act, 1998.

The goal of adoption is to match families with children so that they can support their needs. It's really about getting that match right, about supporting the family so you can have successful, long-term placements for children and youth. Sometimes children can't live at home with their parents, and they may be looking for alternative caregivers. A lot of times kin and other family members will look after children. And in Indigenous communities, customary care is very popular; it allows children to remain in the community, connected to their community, connected to culture and connected to family. Children become available for adoption because their birth parents either decided to have an adoption plan for the child, or an

Ontario court has decided that a child should be permanently removed for protection concerns.

There are four types of adoption in Ontario. I thought I'd go over them for you. There's public adoption through the children's aid societies, international adoption, private domestic, and adoption of a stepchild or a relative.

Public adoptions are by far the most common. They're through children's aid societies, and children that we know to be children in extended society care—so the society is now the parent. Most children in extended society care are not infants. They're often older children. Many have complex special needs. Many have siblings who are also looking to be adopted. In certain situations, it's in the best interest of the child—and adoption is always to maintain a connection with birth parents wherever that's possible. We call this open adoption. It allows the family to still stay connected. Right now in Ontario, there are around 3,720 children and youth in extended care under the children's aid societies, and a lot of these kids are looking for a forever home. In the public adoption system, there are no fees attached to that, so parents who are wanting to go through public adoption can just work with the children's aid society and explore that.

International adoption allows for orphaned or abandoned children from outside Canada who don't have a chance of being adopted in their own country to find a permanent home with adoptive parents. Children from international adoptions can be infants, toddlers, school age and siblings, and most of these children have spent time in an orphanage. The ministry licenses individuals and non-profit agencies to facilitate intercountry adoptions, and they are overseen by the Intercountry Adoption Act.

Private domestic adoption is facilitated by either a licensed private adoption agency or a licensed individual. Relatively few children are available for private adoption compared to the number of families seeking to adopt, and the process for adopting a relative who resides outside of Ontario, such as a niece, a nephew or a grandchild, differs from other adoptions. Relative adoptions can be done directly through the court, and they don't require an adoption licensee person to work with them, so it just makes it an easier process for families.

1400

As the minister said, adoption is not always an appropriate permanency option. Customary care is care provided by a First Nation, Inuit or Métis community in the custom of the community. Right now, we have about 1,600 customary care agreements in place in Ontario—so youth who are supported by Indigenous communities. Additionally, societies may provide some funding to support these placements. Up to \$5,000 a year is available for customary care arrangements. This assists families with some of the accommodations to have a child in their homes—so furniture, mattress and other modifications, if you think about windows, doors, safety locks, things like that. It just allows them to have that access to the fund and that one-time financial assistance to make this customary care work.

We also have legal custody orders that—right now, there are about 460 legal custody orders in Ontario. These are agreements between family members such as an aunt, an uncle or a grandparent who has legal custody of the child.

Last year, we received advice from adoption round tables led by the government, which we talked about, to truly understand the challenges that families were facing and look at improvements for the adoption system. We established an adoption working group. We invited the Adoption Council of Ontario, Adopt4Life, children's aid societies. We had the Office of the Children's Lawyer. We had ministry staff participating on this working group. It has been lots of engagement with folks to really think about how we plan out the system, including the Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario, engagement with youth with lived experience, adoptive parents and other parents—to really think about, what should this adoption system look like? As the minister said, it's a chance to redesign the adoption system, looking at lifelong connections and supporting those changes. We are partnering with the Adoption Council of Ontario, Adopt4Life and the Dave Thomas Foundation.

The Adoption Council of Ontario is a not-for-profit organization. We've been working with them since 2006. We want to expand some of their programming. They're going to take on centralized matching for us to help make it easier for families to navigate the adoption system, which is so complex. They'll be working through AdoptOntario's secure website to make this possible. The Adoption Council of Ontario will centrally manage this adoption intake and application process, so it makes it easier for parents to have one point of contact. And the Adoption Council of Ontario started the design of the centralized matching process, launching in March 2022. So lots of work is under way in this good space.

The other thing we're doing is working with the Adoption Council of Ontario and Adopt4Life to enhance post-adoption training and supports for individuals and parents. We're expanding the Pathways to Permanence 2, as the minister said. It's really a specialized series of training for adoptive parents. It provides them lots of sessions on things that they want to work on and need help with. The Parent2Parent program is kind of an ongoing buddy mentoring program. It pairs folks and parents together to navigate supports and services.

I also want to talk about our partnership with the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption-Canada. It's a non-profit agency, and they have a program called Wendy's Wonderful Kids, where they hire private adoption agencies to hire professionals to work together to recruit and find homes and placements for children. Often, Wendy's Wonderful Kids deals with children who have significant medical needs and other challenges and really are harder to place. They've done a really good job in getting into that space.

We also support youth from extended care for other eligible financial supports. So youth in extended care, 18 to 24, if they want to pursue secondary education, can

receive a grant through our Living and Learning Grant. That provides \$2,000 a semester, up to \$6,000 for an academic year.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Chair.

Youth formerly in extended care or adopted on or after June 2016 can actually receive benefits in what we call an aftercare benefits program. The aftercare benefits program provides things like prescription drug coverage, dental benefits, extended health services and employee-assistance-type benefits. It's available for youth 18 to 24, and the plan provides those life skills up till their 29th birthday. Lots of youth are accessing that program.

The other thing we're doing in the child welfare broader strategy is strengthening supports for children, youth and families so that they have a strong voice in the decisions made about them, expanding access to education programs and employment services, working with youth on post-secondary and apprenticeship programs. It's also about supporting lifelong connections in communities so that youth have permanent connections and stability throughout their lives. It's really about creating those pathways, and it's all part of redesigning the child welfare system to think about a more integrated human services approach to the supports that we provide.

I really appreciated the opportunity to be able to share with you today.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Chair, do I have at least a minute left for a quick question, or no?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have 40 seconds, Mr. Parsa.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Thank you very much, Mr. Remington.

Minister, thank you, and thanks for pointing out the great work the parliamentary assistant, Jeremy Roberts, did in this process, as well. It's very much appreciated.

Just a quick answer, Mr. Remington, on the international adoption: When you're redesigning the adoption, will that have any effect on international adoption as well?

Mr. David Remington: Thanks for the question.

We are looking at international adoption as well, because it's part of this—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, I'm sorry to say, you're out of time.

The rotation goes back to the official opposition. MPP Harden, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Joel Harden: I'd like to resume where we left off, if that's all right, Minister Smith. I'm going to just summarize from our last round of consensus I saw emerging, which I found really helpful.

First, an acknowledgement that everyone in our society wants to contribute, and that includes people with disabilities, people on ODSP, many of whom, in order to qualify for ODSP—having a sustained relationship with paid employment would be very difficult, in fact, impossible without significant supports. I heard you talking about wanting to amplify and renew those supports. Fair enough. But

we're agreed that everyone in our society wants to contribute, and paid employment is simply not an option for a lot of folks on ODSP.

The next thing I think we have some consensus on is that the income levels, currently, for ODSP and OW, given years of neglect, are absolutely insufficient. I know my colleague MPP Gretzky mentioned the current maximums for OW of \$722 a month and for the Ontario Disability Support Program of \$1,169 a month. To be candid, I think in Ontario we legislate poverty at those rates. It's not the fault of any one government; it's a cumulation of indifference, where people have fallen further and further behind.

Minister, if I'm correctly summarizing those points of agreement, that everyone wants to contribute, that a significant amount of ODSP folks are not able to contribute in a paid employment context on an ongoing basis and that's why they qualify for ODSP and those important income security supports—I feel like Canada has just gone through a basic income pilot during this pandemic, called the CERB, the Canada economic recovery benefit, where it was deemed at the federal level that a minimum livable income was \$2,000 a month. I'm asking you, if that's what we think is a minimum livable income for folks so that they can survive during a pandemic and feed themselves and their families and do what they need to do, why do we have a different standard for folks on social assistance?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, MPP Harden, for the question.

Yes, this has been an interesting time, for sure, during the pandemic. The federal government came out with its CERB—the Canada employment relief benefit, I believe, is the way that one went; I could be wrong on that. Everybody knows it as the CERB. That was intended to replace employment earnings that were lost during the pandemic for individuals who were working at that time.

I'm not exactly sure, to answer your question, how the federal government came about that \$2,000 number—

Mr. Joel Harden: I can let you in on the reason, because we keep a very close relationship with our colleagues at the federal caucus here, and I'm sure you do with your Conservative colleagues. The original proposal the federal government had brought forward was an \$800-a-month benefit administered through the employment insurance program, which as you can imagine was not very popular. Because we actually have a minority government situation, the government is open to being pushed federally, and our team, with Jagmeet Singh at the lead, was able to push this government into a \$2,000-a-month minimum benefit.

1410

I do want to mention, Minister, that for ODSP recipients, who, because of their circumstances, live with daily pain, daily trauma and daily needs—a permanent relationship with paid employment is simply not an option for them, and I think we agree on that. For those who want to pursue extended relationships with paid employment, absolutely we should be supporting them—I take your point—but a significant amount of people on ODSP can't.

During this pandemic, it was shocking for me to see that for the small amount of people who qualified for the CERB who were ODSP recipients, the government here in Ontario was clawing back CERB income from ODSP earnings—and I use that word specifically, from a disability rights standpoint, Minister, because I consider ODSP recipients to be earning that employment security income. That's our social investment to make sure we have an enabling society.

I'm wondering, from your perspective—I don't know if this was a question you engaged with MPP Gretzky on—why did the government take that decision? It wasn't something that every province in the country did. Why did you take the decision to claw back CERB for the small amount of folks who qualified for it? What was the thought process there, given we're legislating poverty already? We've got people on such low benefits already, who can't avail themselves of employment—many of them can't. Why were we in a position of wanting to take CERB back specifically from them as opposed to other Canadians?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for the question, MPP Harden.

Most provinces actually clawed back 100% on the CERB in their social assistance programs; I believe BC was probably the only one that didn't.

When CERB was announced, we did have conversations at that time with my colleagues who were responsible for social services in provinces right across the country as well as with Carla Qualtrough, the federal minister who was responsible, on this issue.

The one thing I think that may have been lost on the advice that came from the federal government at the time—and we spoke about this with Minister Qualtrough—was that if we didn't provide that clawback, then individuals would have been punted out of our provincial ODSP program or our social assistance program because of the increased earnings that they would have had each month. So there was a middle ground that was taken, the 50%, which allowed the individuals to remain in the program, which more importantly allowed them to continue to receive the medical—

Mr. Joel Harden: Medications, yes.

Hon. Todd Smith: —and drug benefits that they need.

Mr. Joel Harden: I take your point. But surely, given what the BC government did in allowing the stacked benefit, you can imagine that for the first time in generations, someone with a disability who couldn't engage in a significant amount of paid employment had a livable income. What the research shows from BC is that it had a tremendous impact on people's quality of life. Many food banks were shuttered, many of the essential food supplies, essential living supports that people with disabilities live with, because we ask them to live in poverty, were closed, so the costs of living—and I think we can agree on this, too—went massively up.

I'm struggling with the notion that in Ontario we couldn't follow the lead set by the NDP government in BC, which is to say, "This is an extraordinary time.

People's costs of living have increased. We're going to allow people to have this income so they can actually live secure and safe lives."

Couldn't you have kept them on the program, on the ODSP, without having to do the clawback?

Hon. Todd Smith: Again, we worked with our colleagues across the province, or at least discussed this issue with our colleagues, my colleagues, both on the department side and in the ministers' offices in provinces across the country. We provided the direction to our ODSP and OW staff to ensure that those individuals on social assistance kept more of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit than they would have under the current rules. By going with the 50-50 clawback, they were able to seriously, in most cases, increase the amount of funding that they would have received for that particular month or those particular months that they were receiving CERB and, at the same time, not trigger losing their medical benefits.

We designed that as a program to replace employment income, and our social assistance program is treated that way. It was not a lot of individuals.

Nelson is our ADM on this file. Maybe he could—

Mr. Joel Harden: I'm familiar with the ADM's work on this, Minister.

You're right; it was about 7% or 8% of ODSP recipients who were in this situation.

Again, I am struggling with this notion that—I take your point. We didn't want to pull people off their essential medications by disqualifying them from ODSP. It's a good point you're making. But I certainly have seen, and I'm sure all of us have seen in our communities, the harm that's caused when people are asked to live through this pandemic on a legislated poverty income, while people elsewhere in the country—because of, frankly, a better decision, I would say—were availed of more income. Given our consensus that everyone wants to contribute, that not all ODSP recipients are in a position to engage in significant amounts of paid employment, and given that we are legislating poverty—we have shockingly low levels—I'm struggling to understand the rationale for the clawback in the first place.

John Stapleton, an income security researcher, whose work I'm sure you're familiar with, has sketched a bit of a history into income security in Ontario. It gives us a couple of clues as to why we feel the need for folks on income security—to make sure that we regulate a very meagre existence.

Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Joel Harden: Okay. Maybe you've already read these, Minister, but I'm wondering if I can get some reaction from you, because here's my fear: I fear there is a different kind of virus we have inherited from British public policy, and that is a need to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor. We run our income security programs with the supposition that fraud is a major problem, and because of that, we have to make sure that there isn't fraud. One way to prevent against fraud is to keep benefits shockingly low.

I'll just quote what Mitch Hepburn, who was Premier of this province from 1934 to 1942, said on this front. Premier Hepburn was a member of the Liberal Party. He said at the time, "There's a growing impression among the taxpayers of this province that they are being drained of their money to provide a living for idlers.... We will pay the municipalities a lump sum each month.... In other words, we will say to them: 'Here's the alimony, you raise the children.'"

Roughly 80 years later, Premier Mike Harris, who was Premier of this province from 1995 to 2002, made the following comment—and I can see it for myself, but I welcome hearing from you if there is a symmetry between these two comments: "There was rampant fraud and welfare abuse.... It was inconvenient for people to have to go down to offices to pick up cheques so we mailed them out and we found out that mail was being redirected to other provinces and even other countries.... We had to readjust rates and give incentives for those who were able-bodied to go out and get into what we called 'workfare' or 'educationfare' or 'get-off-your-duff-and-do-something fare.' So, 'workfare' ... and other policies in combination were a huge success." This was the Premier's remark at the time. I remember very well, because it was when I went to graduate school in Toronto, September 1996, when a 22% cut was made to what we now call Ontario Works. And it was done under this rationale, Minister.

What I'm struggling with, from the connection of these two Premiers, who are a part of our history—because I think we're inheriting this legacy of a lack of investment in this sector—is that there seems to be a belief in both of these leaders of our province that we need to keep benefits low, because otherwise, we will have rampant fraud in the system. Do you agree with that?

Hon. Todd Smith: What I do agree with is that too many individuals, MPP Harden, are spending far too long on Ontario Works. If we're specifically going to talk about Ontario Works, which is meant as a temporary support or safety net for individuals who have lost their jobs or find themselves unemployed for whatever reason—we want to encourage those individuals to get off that system as soon as they possibly can. And that's not happening right now.

I'm not sure if you were listening earlier, but we talked about the fact that the vast majority of individuals who are on OW now are staying there for more than 40 months. When you're talking about the rate that you're talking about, that's not something that you are expected to live on for a long period of time. This is there as a safety net. This is to get you on to the next stage of your life, hopefully to employment, if possible. That's why we're making the changes that we are around the employment services transformation and Employment Ontario offices, where there is a real focus on—not just shipping people off to work or getting off their duffs. This is more about getting them the support they need and career-matching individuals, giving our caseworkers the time they need to understand the clients they have, finding out what their interests

are and what their potential employment would be, something where they're going to stay and not come back—because the other statistic we talk about in this sector is, yes, 1% are leaving every month; most of those are coming back, and then they're staying on for too long. It's because they're being pushed into a job that's maybe not of interest to them or they don't have those other life-stabilizing supports around them.

1420

Mr. Joel Harden: And for ODSP, Minister—what's your thinking around both of those Premiers of our province, their comments on the need to keep benefits low? Would your thinking mirror for ODSP?

Hon. Todd Smith: Well, I think Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program are very, very different. As I mentioned, Ontario Works is supposed to be a short stay. You're not supposed to spend a long time on Ontario Works. Those who are on ODSP obviously have a disability. They're unable to work, or they're unable to work full-time, in some cases. In some cases, they are able to work full-time. They're two completely different programs.

The new Employment Ontario offices are going to allow our caseworkers in these offices to spend the time necessary with the individuals to understand what the best outcomes are for the individuals and try to help them achieve those outcomes.

When I was up in Sault Ste. Marie, it was my first summer—

Mr. Joel Harden: Minister, I'll ask for your Sault Ste. Marie story in a moment.

I just want to make sure I understand you correctly. I take your point around OW. You're in agreement with the historic view that if we keep those benefits low, we're going to have fewer people using those programs. But as you know, there's already a significant amount of folks who are marooned there.

And I think there's a conversation we can have about the quality of work in our economy and the kind of work that we're encouraging employers producing in our economy. There are many doing great work, engaging people with disabilities and people who are having a tough time in their lives. But there are a lot of folks taking advantage of people. They cycle through workers, and they cycle particularly through people with disabilities and people who have lived in poverty.

I just want to go back to the ODSP folks, so we understand this. At the moment, ODSP has a \$497-a-month housing allowance. How can anybody find housing on that kind of support? And ought it not to be a priority for our province to massively increase that? We said, through the CERB, that \$2,000 a month was an adequate income for nine million Canadians, but for 500,000 folks drawing upon ODSP, we seem to have a different standard.

I continue to struggle with the notion that we can't have a social security program that will give people dignity on the income level. What do you think?

Hon. Todd Smith: That's why we're making the investments we are in our Poverty Reduction Strategy. It was a cross-government approach, and I've talked about it a bit today as well. I'm in partnership with my colleague Minister Clark at the municipal affairs and housing ministry in the investments that have been made in previous budgets to increase housing and supportive housing to individuals.

I did just want to touch briefly, if you'll allow me, on my visit to Sault Ste. Marie, where I went to the ODSP offices. One of the things we're finding is that young people are entering the Ontario Disability Support Program at an alarming rate. That's why in a number of different ODSP offices, including in Sault Ste. Marie, they have put together a youth action team that is actually working with young people in the community, many of whom are dealing with mental health issues. That is what's keeping them out of employment. By getting to them early with the investments that Minister Tibollo is making at mental health and addictions, the \$3.8 billion, the Canada-Ontario investment in mental health supports for individuals, we're seeing huge results. Those youth advisers who are working in the ODSP office there are actually—I remember one story: There was a young lady who really had an affinity for horses.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thank you, Chair.

They were able to find her employment working at an equestrian facility and working with horses and getting her life on track, because they were able to get her the mental health supports she needed as well.

That's what it's really all about—ensuring those supports are there for individuals.

At the same time, to your question about housing, MPP Harden, we're making incredible investments when it comes to housing in our budgets, and in the Poverty Reduction Strategy as well. I outlined a number of those investments when talking with MPP Gretzky earlier, but there's the Multi-Ministry Supportive Housing Initiative, the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit, \$338 million in funding—

Mr. Joel Harden: Because that list is already in the record, Minister, I'll ask that we just end on a collective recognition that, at the moment, there's a \$497 housing allowance for ODSP recipients. For projects that may yet be built—that is not helping people get housed. In fact, as we're talking, on the hashtag #ODSPoverty, I'm getting noted by a number of folks who are saying they know of ODSP recipients couch-surfing, because that's all they could potentially afford with \$500.

Certainly, our province is a signatory to UN covenants on the rights of disabled peoples. I'm going to make the assumption into the next round that we're agreed that the benefits are too low. We have to find the money for the benefits, and that's what I look forward to talking about in my next round, because I have some ideas for you of where we can find the resources to give people the kinds of incomes they need.

Hon. Todd Smith: We have a long way to go. We've made a lot of investments, and we're going to continue to make those investments and support people when they need the support, whether it be for housing or whether it be through the mental health supports. Child care has been a big piece that our government has put forward for individuals as well, but also getting the skills training they need so that they can get a full-time job and then won't need to be living on Ontario Works or, potentially, on ODSP.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, this rotation is over.

We go to the government. MPP Skelly, the floor is yours.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Good afternoon, Ministers and colleagues.

Minister Smith, before I ask you my question, which will be on congregate care through COVID-19, I want to take this opportunity to simply address the fact that, as a former city councillor, the work you are doing and the changes you've brought to Ontario Works will have a profound impact on many of our most vulnerable people, who truly are looking to change their lives for the better. I do believe, wholeheartedly, that these changes are a much-needed improvement and, as I've said, will have a profound impact on their ability to get ahead and perhaps to find employment.

I also want to take a moment to acknowledge the work and the progress that you've made on the autism file and the help that you are now providing to children with autism in Ontario. This, of course, is a file that has been mishandled. It faced many challenges. In fact, I would describe the relationship with the previous government as chaotic. But you've brought some calm and some hope and certainly a lot more funding by doubling the funding. Again, I commend you and your associate minister, Minister Dunlop, and also all of your staff for being able to recognize the need to bring these significant changes to both of these programs and, of course, the funding that accompanies them.

My question is about congregate settings. Of course, we've all felt the stress—businesses, individuals, students—through COVID-19, but our most vulnerable in congregate settings also faced difficult and many new challenges because of COVID-19. Our government stepped up and through your ministry brought in some significant help.

Can you share with this committee how you have worked with people who run and who live in congregate settings to survive and to thrive, if you will, through the COVID-19 pandemic?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, MPP Skelly, for the comments, and the question as well.

I'm happy to speak a little bit about what we've done, when it comes to congregate care facilities, within the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. First off, I want to say that it has been a challenging time in this sector, and it has been a challenging time across the province and around the world, when it comes to

COVID-19. Protecting the safety and well-being of individuals living and working in the ministry's congregate care settings is our top priority at this ministry.

I'd really like to thank—I've thanked them many times throughout the pandemic, but I'm going to thank them again—the residents and the staff and all of their families for their understanding and their patience during this unprecedented time and for everything they have been doing, particularly in our group home settings, in stopping COVID-19 at the door. Every decision we've made has been made in the interest of keeping all of our clients and individuals in this sector safe.

1430

Our ministry took immediate action to protect our province's most vulnerable and the front-line staff who care for them by implementing our COVID-19 vulnerable populations action plan very early on in the pandemic. It included measures, as I said, to stop COVID-19 at the door and manage outbreaks when they do happen. Key to the ministry's response have been significant financial investments, which have helped ensure our sites can apply ministry guidance and infection prevention and control protocols to ensure that we're providing safe spaces for our residents and offering our front-line staff the protections they need to best support their residents.

In 2021-22, the ministry invested \$69.1 million to continue existing COVID-19 supports. That includes the COVID-19 Residential Relief Fund, the COVID-19 community supports fund, the infection prevention and control champions, personal protective equipment and transitional support funds as well. The residential relief fund covers costs such as additional staffing, residential respite for caregivers, PPE and supplies, costs to support physical distancing in transportation to minimize client exposure and additional cleaning costs. The ministry is assessing needs on an agency-by-agency basis, and we do have many partners in this sector to distribute this funding to support COVID-19-related expenses. These investments are in addition to the financial flexibility granted to agencies to shift funding within their organization and across program areas to focus on critical services and needs in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak.

To ensure the necessary public health measures were in place at residential settings across the province, the ministry provided guidance to sectors in infection prevention and control protocols through the vulnerable populations action plan, as I mentioned earlier. That helped keep infection rates in congregate settings low, preventing widespread transmission in sites once an outbreak had been detected there. The ministry has also been supporting employers through emergency orders that allow for staffing flexibility and redeployment and that limit staff work location to one employer only in the sector and at one site when an outbreak occurs.

The ministry has worked closely with the Ministry of Health as well—it has been a great relationship with Minister Elliott and her team there—to prioritize our residents, staff and essential caregivers in high-risk congregate care settings and people with an intellectual or developmental

disability at the start of phase 2 of Ontario's vaccination distribution plan. We're making great progress. Our ministry will continue to work with the Ministry of Health and public health units as vaccination efforts continue and second doses are administered.

While upholding public health measures and protecting residents and staff, ministry guidance also supports the emotional and social needs of clients by continuing to allow for essential visits and essential absences, including overnight absences, unless directed otherwise by public health as part of outbreak management. I want to stress this: Essential visits have and will continue to be available throughout the pandemic.

As a result of improvements in key public health indicators over the last number of weeks, including increased vaccination rates, our ministry has announced that, effective June 9—which was Wednesday this week—brief physical contact like hugs and recreational outings in the community would be permitted. To lower the risk of transmission of COVID-19, in accordance with public health guidance, visitor screening, physical distancing and use of personal protective equipment continues to be required. The ministry is going to continue to make every effort to protect residents and staff from COVID-19 transmission while supporting their emotional well-being and their mental health as well.

I should point out as well today that the government announced that we will be extending the temporary wage enhancement. I'm really pleased that, throughout the pandemic, workers in congregate care settings, particularly those in the developmental services sector, which I am responsible for, have been able to get the pandemic pay, but they've also been able to get the temporary wage enhancement. Just this morning, our government announced that we were extending that \$3 an hour for those who work in our congregate care settings, our developmental services workers. That additional \$3 per hour will be extended again, and that goes to 60,000 workers in the sector. This is a large sector. There are a lot of individuals working in this sector. So 60,000 of them will continue to receive that \$3-per-hour temporary wage enhancement. It's an \$841-million government-wide investment. I'm pleased to get that on the record here at estimates today too.

I'm going to turn it over to my deputy minister, Janet Menard. She can provide a little bit more information about the infection prevention and control measures we put in place when it comes to congregate care settings in Ontario's establishments.

Janet?

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you, Minister Smith.

As the minister said, when the government declared a pandemic emergency, among other things, our ministry was called on to be involved in identifying where priority, high-risk populations might be particularly vulnerable. As part of that work, we identified that, indeed, living in a congregate environment would put a large number of our clients across numerous programs at high risk. We were part of a group, co-chaired with Indigenous affairs, that

looked at how we could prevent infection and keep them safe. As the minister identified, our focus was on prevention, infection control and also stabilizing the workforce, because having people on the job and feeling safe is an important part of keeping people in congregate living safe.

We leveraged a relationship we had with the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies and coordinated with them around the distribution of PPE, including the procurement of it and distribution for our sector and the programs encompassed in our ministries. We felt there was a need to coordinate our approach across the sector and, as such, used an agreement, as I said, that we had with them to set up a logistics for supply chain system execution to deliver services to the whole sector. It was not an easy task given the number of organizations that had to be supported, but we dealt with each of those organizations individually and, in fact, put a really effective supply chain in place, just in time, to make sure that their needs were met.

I'm really proud to say that as of June 1, our ministry has shipped more than 31 million pieces of personal protective equipment to our agencies and service providers. In fact, the supply network has expanded distribution to include over 1,100 ministry transfer payment partners, including Indigenous service providers and communities.

As an additional screening measure for COVID-19, the ministry has been working closely with the Minister of Health to implement, more recently, a Provincial Antigen Screening Program in the ministry's congregate care settings. Service providers can use the antigen screening as a tool to enhance their existing infection prevention and control measures for individuals living, participating and working in congregate settings or, in fact, receiving in-person services. Rapid antigen screening can quickly identify asymptomatic cases of COVID-19 that would have otherwise gone undetected and can help stop the spread. As of May 21 this year, there have been eight asymptomatic cases of COVID-19 identified, preventing outbreaks and protecting the safety and well-being of clients and staff. Currently, there are approximately 200 locations using 9,000 tests per week, at scale, with more organizations continuing to sign up.

The ministry has also aligned its provincial infection prevention and control model to the Ministry of Health's hub strategy. This includes pooling infection prevention and control capacity across communities and sectors to support alignment to identified hubs, and identifying key champions that will represent the ministry's residential services and act as a conduit for infection prevention and control-related knowledge transfer and advice stemming from the local hub. The intent has always been to continue to leverage existing local mechanisms and relationships to adopt a proactive, supported, coordinated and integrated approach to key health-related partners, while also fostering new pathways and relationships.

1440

As I mentioned, we did recognize the dedication and commitment of support workers in all sectors throughout the pandemic, and as of March 31, the ministry has administered approximately \$102 million in total funding for

temporary pandemic pay. We've also provided funding to 510 transfer payment partners, who are supporting approximately 42,800 front-line workers.

To ensure that our most vulnerable continue to receive the care they need, the Ontario government is additionally investing \$141 million to extend the temporary wage increase for personal support workers and direct support workers in publicly funded home and community care, long-term care, public hospitals and social services sectors. As the minister said, this temporary wage increase of \$3 per hour worked, on top of existing hourly wages, will continue until August 23 of this year, and will help stabilize, attract and retain the workforce needed to provide a high level of care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The temporary wage enhancement supports workers, the majority of whom are women, who provide direct support services to children with special needs and adults with development disabilities through ministry-funded programs and services, including the programs where families and individuals receive funding directly to purchase services from their support workers. This investment will help ensure that we have a stable, growing workforce that can continue to provide vital support services to adults, children and youth in care throughout the pandemic.

The ministry continues to support the vaccine rollout for residents, staff and essential caregivers in high-risk congregate care settings, as well as people with an intellectual or developmental disability, and children in care and women experiencing violence.

We also continue to work closely with our health experts as the province starts to return to normal, to ensure that residents of congregate care facilities continue to be protected as much as possible from COVID-19 but can also take advantage of increased social interaction and recreational opportunities.

I will pass it over to Assistant Deputy Ministers Rupert Gordon and Karen Glass to provide additional details on the actions we have taken to address COVID-19 and its related challenges for the development and congregate care sectors.

Ms. Karen Glass: Thank you, Deputy.

I'm Karen Glass, and I am the assistant deputy minister of the strategic policy division at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

As the minister and the deputy have highlighted, the guidance that we've provided to the sectors and the infection prevention and control protocols that we implemented through our vulnerable populations action plan have actually proven to be effective in keeping infection rates in congregate care settings low and preventing widespread transmission in one site once an outbreak has been detected.

I think you know who our congregate care sectors are within the ministry: residential group homes for adults with disabilities and developmental disabilities, intervenor residential sites, Indigenous healing and wellness shelters,

violence against women and anti-human trafficking residential sites, as well as licensed and directly operated children's residential and youth justice residential facilities.

The financial investments that the minister spoke of have really enabled and allowed our sites to be able to apply the guidance and, in particular, the IPAC protocols, and provide safe spaces not only for our residents but also offer front-line staff the protections they need to successfully do their job. The guidance itself just outlined communication requirements for all of these things. Sites, of course, were expected to adhere to these protocols and also in alignment with their community spread rates. If one resident or staff case of COVID-19 is detected at their site and outbreak is declared, outbreak protocols must be applied regardless of the community spread.

The ministry issued enhanced precautions guidance via memos. We were in regular contact.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have one minute left.

Ms. Karen Glass: I will just simply say that we have four emergency orders that are in play that the minister referenced: one in adult developmental services for inter-venor services, anti-human trafficking, violence against women—these are tools that help protect the health and safety of residents—and the fourth order affected district social services administration boards.

Ms. Donna Skelly: I want to once again, Minister, thank you and, more importantly, thank our front-line staff. Clearly, the initiatives that you undertook and that they were able to provide to some of our most vulnerable in Ontario have helped us all survive this horrific past 15 months. We often talk about our front-line staff as heroes, and they truly have done incredible work. We're very proud of them, and we're very proud of the work that your ministry has done as well, so thank you.

And thank you, Minister Dunlop.

Hon. Todd Smith: Just for being you.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Just for being you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): That's it for that round.

We go to the official opposition. MPP Harden, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Joel Harden: I want to return, Minister Smith, to where we left off, because again, I'm always liking to summarize the steps of our conversation this afternoon.

We're agreed that everyone wants to contribute, that we want to create a social assistance system that allows for that to happen, that not all ODSP recipients are able to engage in significant amounts of paid employment. In light of that and the fact that we at the moment are legislating below-poverty-level benefits for folks on ODSP as well as OW, let's think about where we can find some money to enhance the numbers we're seeing now before the estimates committee.

I'm looking over some figures that have been shared with me from advocates in the sector, and they note that for social assistance statistics from April 2020 to April 2021, Ontario Works caseloads have actually declined in this moment by 102,000 beneficiaries, or 24%, and that

ODSP caseloads have declined by 12,000 beneficiaries, or 2%. Based upon that, what has been disclosed to the public and arithmetic that has been released by the ministry in the past, the conclusion is, at the moment, given those reductions in caseloads, the province is now in a positive financial position of \$788 million.

I am in receipt of a letter that you wrote to advocates from the Ontario disability support action alliance, or advocates in the sector, indicating that any savings that were going to be accrued to MCCSS in this moment as a result of the advance of federal programs are going to be re-invested back into enhanced benefits. I'm wondering if you can explain the degree to which you have done that, also keeping in mind, from what I understand—you can correct me if I'm wrong here—that the emergency benefit that the ministry brought into being for three months, from April to July, the \$100-a-month benefits, are now sunsetted. Can you elaborate on where that \$788 million has gone?

Hon. Todd Smith: We had a good discussion about this this morning. ADM Nelson Loureiro was a big part of that discussion as well, with MPP Gretzky.

With the various programs that were brought into place when the pandemic started, we have reinvested any savings that we saw from individuals going and getting the federal benefits—the CERB—back into social assistance programs.

In the form of the social services relief fund alone, \$756 million was reinvested into communities right across the province to assist people in dealing with the effects of COVID-19 in their communities. Our 47 municipal partners and our DSSABs in the north were ecstatic. I must say, the response that we received from them in the three instalments of SSRF funding—very, very well regarded and well received by our municipal partners, and then invested in our communities in all kinds of different forms.

As we talked about earlier, we all know that domestic abuse was on the rise as a result of the pandemic, so municipalities in many communities chose to invest in transitional housing or support for shelters in dealing with this problem that has arisen as the pandemic has rolled on here over the last 16 months.

1450

We also had the emergency benefits, which went out to 250,000 recipients and families. They were able to access that in the early stages of the pandemic, when we were in a complete, province-wide shutdown.

And then discretionary benefits continue to be available for individuals across the province.

I don't know if there's anything that Nelson would like to add to the conversation, but—

Mr. Joel Harden: Before he does, Minister, can you help me understand, from a disability rights standpoint from ODSP recipients, why did Ontario take the decision with the emergency benefit not to simply make it universal across the whole caseload, as the province of British Columbia did? Why did we say you can only qualify for this emergency benefit if you can contact your ODSP

worker and set up the paperwork? Why did we make that decision?

Hon. Todd Smith: I did answer that this morning. I'll let Nelson handle it this time with you, if that's okay, MPP Harden.

Nelson?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister Smith.

Thank you, MPP Harden, for your question.

Again, the caseload was not a savings exercise. The dollars, as the minister mentioned, were reinvested in the SSRF, \$765 million; the emergency benefit, \$111 million; the expansion of emergency assistance and discretionary benefits; as well as things like, in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing—we partnered with them on the High Priority Communities Strategy around supporting people who needed to self-isolate due to COVID-19 testing results or people who were COVID-19-positive within their homes. We supported those individuals with income supports and used some of the money for that, as well as, within our First Nations communities, providing additional funding for expenses related to COVID-19 through a transitional support fund—

Mr. Joel Harden: ADM Loureiro, pardon me for interrupting; I'm sorry. But I still don't understand, and the reason I'm asking is because I caught a glimpse of the debate this morning—I was managing some kids on virtual school and some constituency work, so I didn't catch all of it. I'm failing to understand why we couldn't do a both/and scenario in this situation here. I like the idea of the province having the flexibility to allocate monies in areas of need, but I fail to understand why we didn't pursue the elegance of a decision to simply make sure every ODSP recipient had that top-up across the whole caseload.

We were getting reports in our office of ODSP workers in an absolute state of frantic pace, many of whom, in the city of Ottawa—and as I understand it, elsewhere—have over 400 people they're working for. So it just really seemed, at a tumultuous time, during a pandemic, to be a very odd decision to put ODSP recipients in a position of having to contact their worker.

Again, as we've already confirmed in our conversation so far, these are poverty-level benefits that we're distributing—and I'm not blaming you, ADM Loureiro, and I'm not blaming the minister. This is an historic thing. This is an historic problem we have to fix here. We all know that every single ODSP recipient needed this money. Food banks were closed. So many important social supports that people living hand to mouth require were not available to them, so they needed this money. Why couldn't we have done a both/and solution of figuring out a way to get that emergency benefit out to every single ODSP recipient, while also benefiting, because there was a surplus on the provincial balance sheet from federal transfers and federal programs, those other programs? Why didn't we do a both/and?

Hon. Todd Smith: Nelson, do you want to take that one?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Sure. When we introduced the emergency benefit, we did it with speed in order to address, again, what I mentioned this morning, an unprecedented time where there were lockdowns, as well as the federal benefits coming into view and into alignment. So when we introduced the emergency benefit, it was in recognition of people who required it. Anyone who required it and requested it—we took an approach that all somebody needed to do was request the benefit—

Mr. Joel Harden: ADM Loureiro, this is where I'm failing to understand. We've already had agreement that there would be no one on ODSP who wouldn't request these funds. Why did we build that into the system for the rollout of the EB at one of the most difficult times for people with disabilities?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Anybody who requested the funds, MPP Harden, received the funds—

Mr. Joel Harden: I understand that. My question is different. ADM Loureiro or Minister Smith, please clarify it for me. It's a sincere question, because I've had it asked of me several times: Why were we putting people already living in poverty in a situation where they had to chase their ODSP worker to get access to funds at a critical time? Why did we make that—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): And before you answer—MPP Harden, please raise your hand when you want to have the floor. I will intervene. It's problematic when I have two people speaking at once. It's just hard for us to keep track.

Mr. Joel Harden: I apologize, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm just trying to keep things as orderly as I can. I'm not trying to stifle debate.

Mr. Joel Harden: Understood.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): So you've asked your question. I turn it back.

Hon. Todd Smith: You're doing a great job, Chair, and we appreciate your efforts.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Todd Smith: I would just like to point out, to ADM Loureiro's comments, that we introduced the emergency benefit in March. This was the same month when we declared the state of emergency. We put this program together very quickly, as well as the emergency assistance program for individuals who weren't on social assistance. They could access the emergency assistance program. This was before CERB was part of the common lexicon, as it has become over the last 16 months. We were quick out of the gates with this emergency assistance program so individuals could get some support, pay their rent at the end of the month, because they had just lost their income. The restaurant they worked at or the store that they worked at was closed.

This was all a big mystery and a bit of an unknown at that time. I remember listening to the local radio, leaving Toronto in mid-March, and the announcers on the radio were saying, "Well, this will only be two or three weeks, and we'll be right back. We'll be right back to business again."

Mr. Joel Harden: Dare to dream.

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes. So we didn't really know for sure how long these programs were going to be necessary for, as well. There were so many unknowns at that time, so—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you, Minister. I have MPP Harden with the floor.

Mr. Joel Harden: Okay, that helps me understand it. So the thinking at the time was, "This may not be for long."

I remember those apocalyptic times, Minister. I remember doing those drives myself and saying, "My goodness, I feel like I'm living in a Michael Crichton novel: Things are shutting down everywhere. Folks' lives are thrown into chaos."

So the thought process, if I'm understanding you and ADM Loureiro, was, "This may not last for a long time. Let's make it a voluntary benefit." That's still the part where I'm stuck, because people who are on ODSP or on OW are living in poverty because of decades of mismanagement and indifference from folks managing this particular file. You inherited this mess; I don't envy you. This is awful, that we ask somebody to find housing on a housing allowance of \$497 a month. I am still struggling to understand, despite the apocalyptic situation in which we found ourselves last March and April, why we didn't do what BC did and just grant it across the whole caseload. For anybody living in poverty, we have to make the assumption that they need this \$100 a month.

I remember very clearly, on another travel down to Toronto, finding out that the benefit was going to be withdrawn and seeing a speech from the Premier that I must have watched about 20 times just to understand the thought process. The Premier had mentioned that there was a fear, from the government's perspective, of "double-dipping," that if this emergency benefit was allowed to continue, some people would be, I think his words were, "further ahead."

I must admit, ADM Loureiro, Minister Smith, that anybody who has talked to folks who draw upon ODSP for their income, and whatever meagre income they can find beyond that, knows this is not the life of Riley. And the notion that the small amount of people who qualified for the CERB and ODSP at the same time being hit with a clawback, having this emergency benefit cancelled—sirs, I still struggle to understand why we made that choice.

We still have time in this Parliament—because this pandemic is absolutely not over. And despite a \$600 trial balloon per month thrown out by the federal government to people with disabilities that made some dent, there has not been a lot of action for people with disabilities at the federal level. Provincially, why don't we think about renewing this emergency benefit across the whole caseload, as our colleagues in BC have done, which has, I can tell you, manifestly helped people out of poverty? Kids have gotten square meals. People have been able to keep body and soul together. Their mental health has been better. Why don't we switch back to that? Why don't we

build that into what you're reporting to estimates committee today and say, "Let's universalize this benefit, ideally with some retroactivity, to make sure that we can lift people's incomes up?" We're starting to see a slow re-opening of the province. We'll see how that goes, knock on wood. But folks have been living hand to mouth in the one of the worst times in our province, and we made the decision to get people to chase their workers. I still don't understand why we did that.

1500

Hon. Todd Smith: There's a lot of optimism out there. I'll knock on wood as well that we are headed out of this pandemic. You'll recall that last summer there was a lot of thinking that maybe we were headed out of the pandemic as well, and certain regions were able to open last summer earlier than others. Those individuals, many of them, were able to return to work and get their benefits back.

At the same time as the actual emergency benefit did end, discretionary benefits have continued to be available to individuals throughout the province, throughout the pandemic, and continue to be available today. They contact their caseworkers.

Part of the larger picture that we're working on in our transformation and our recovery and renewal for Ontario Works and ODSP is to ensure that those caseworkers have even more time to be available to their individuals when they need them, so that if they do need to get that extra hundred bucks that's available to them they can do that, so that they can have access.

One of the things that ADM Loureiro was talking about earlier—and we were both speaking about it, actually—is the success of this two-way texting. I'm not sure if you've talked to any of your friends in the ODSP sector, MPP Harden—

Mr. Joel Harden: I have done, yes.

Hon. Todd Smith: —who have accessed this new service. It has really taken that relationship to a whole new level between caseworker and client.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister. Sorry, Minister. MPP Harden?

Mr. Joel Harden: We'll have time to talk about the electrification of records. I know you spoke to MPP Gretzky about that at length, Minister.

Again, I'm going to park this now, but maybe—
Interjection.

Mr. Joel Harden: I wanted to make sure I was observing the Chair there.

I'm going to park this now, but perhaps this is our first source of disagreement for the afternoon. That's fine; in politics, we have disagreement. It's part of our lives. But if I were in your shoes, sir, I would have made sure that this benefit went to every single person on ODSP in the province. I would have danced on the cabinet table to make sure it happened. My goodness, we've got people living in abject poverty. We have people couch-surfing. We have people who have been holed up in their homes for months, and they urgently need this benefit. Let's hope that the economy opens up and starts to help people with

disabilities, people living in poverty, but that's not what I'm seeing right now, unfortunately. I see a lot of suffering.

The folks from Feed Ontario—I'm sure you've read that report, Minister—came out with a report estimating that the cost of poverty is between \$27 billion to \$33 billion a year for Ontario. All the folks I know at our hospitals in the city here are telling me they are disproportionately working with folks who are lower down the rung on those social determinants of health—people living in poverty, people living with mental health issues, people living with trauma—so I really feel as if the way in which we've managed income benefits, particularly in this moment, is challenging.

I continue to invite your government to look at those income benefit improvements, and if you're distributing discretionary funds across the province, great.

Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have three minutes.

Mr. Joel Harden: Okay. Where I want to bridge to our next round is to think about where else we could find some money to improve those benefits for ODSP recipients, and OW recipients too. I think a great fact of life is that when you've had some stability in your life, you can actually find employment.

In the city of Stockholm, Minister, that I had the great privilege to visit about nine years ago—what happens in their city is that street outreach workers go around the city with keys in their hands and they have apartments they can take people living in crisis to, with their consent, to start rebuilding their lives. Wouldn't it be great to have a province that had that kind of housing-first approach, income adequacy and wraparound-supports approach?

But I want to direct our attention to a report that was published by the Financial Accountability Officer of Ontario recently. It was on a subject that I think would make most Ontarians yawn. It was on the subject of tax expenditures. I bring this up in the estimates committee in our debate over MCCSS's presentation here because I don't think many Ontarians know that we spend \$44 billion a year on tax expenditures in the province of Ontario. The allocations we're talking about today represent the fourth-biggest spending priority for Ontario in the province. But tax expenditures is only less than health—\$44 billion a year.

What shocks me, Minister, is that a lot of these tax expenditures are going to people like me and you, people who make good salaries, have got some affluence, RRSP contributions, stock option deductions, various other things, with capital gains deductions. A lot of us affluent folks who have been living and working from home in this pandemic—working hard; I know you have, I know I have.

My question to you is, in this moment, could we not have found a way to connect this ministry with the Ministry of Finance, with Treasury Board, to say, "Let's take a pause on the amount of money Ontario invests in affluent folks" like you and me—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): One minute left.

Mr. Joel Harden: —and redirect that money to make sure we have an emergency benefit that applies across the caseload, that we'd still have now, that we wouldn't have to claw back CERB from people in this moment? What do you think about that idea? We will get into more detail in the next round, Minister, but what do you think about this idea, that we reallocate with a cross-ministry approach, as you were talking about earlier this morning, some of the funds we are currently investing in affluent folks, who, frankly, need the help less than people living on \$1,169 a month? What do you think about that, as a general idea?

Hon. Todd Smith: I think we will talk more about that in the next round of questioning, but I just wanted to point out, when you were talking about all of those monies, we spend almost as much in this ministry, MCCSS, each year as we do in paying down our debt as well in this province. There are a lot of things that the Ontario government can do better. There are a lot of great initiatives out there. I think—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry, Minister. With that, we're out of time on this rotation.

We go to the government side. MPP Pettapiece, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: I want to again thank the ministers and their staff and all those involved in this committee today.

This question is directed to Minister Dunlop. Before I ask the question, Minister, I think I've told you this story before; it's something I like repeating. We have three sons, and we're very proud of what they do. They all have work in their chosen professions. One of them is a police officer. For about five or six years, he was involved with the sex exploitation unit at his police service. He dealt mostly with the child pornography business, which is terrible, but that's what he did. Every once in a while, through their intelligence-gathering, they would come across someone who was involved in human trafficking and those people they exploit too. He didn't tell me about his cases, and he shouldn't, but he would just say that his reward was catching these people. It's a dirty business, it's a terrible business, that these people are being drawn into this and exploited the way they are, on any level.

We've heard from survivors, their families, Indigenous communities and organizations, human trafficking service providers, victim service workers, child welfare workers and other front-line service providers that human trafficking is a problem that impacts every single community across our province. We have also heard from these same people that survivors of human trafficking face unique and complex barriers to receiving the support that meets their unique needs.

We know that our province is, and has been for quite some time, a hub for this horrific crime that robs people of their safety, and that some of our most vulnerable, including children and youth, are at heightened risk of being targeted by offenders. This is a horrific crime that should not coexist within Ontario.

I wonder if you could tell us about what our government's plan is to address human trafficking in our province and what steps have been taken to combat this horrible crime?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Pettapiece, for sharing some personal insight. I'm sure your son has shared some horrific stories.

I know all the members on this call today can agree that human trafficking is a horrific crime that's happening here in Ontario. It poses a real and serious danger. It steals the safety, health and livelihood of those who are being exploited and abused, often resulting in long-term trauma, and this trauma can be emotional, physical and mental.

1510

Human trafficking violates human rights. It is an affront to the humanity of every individual and family caught in its nightmare existence. It upends families. It weakens communities. It shatters lives. It should never be tolerated or coexisted with, and the outcomes are injurious and harmful.

Human trafficking knows no boundaries. Every day, offenders are preying on our children, our youth and vulnerable people for the purpose of sexual exploitation, a crime that robs them of their safety and dignity, and has a devastating impact on the lives of victims, families and communities all across Ontario.

Unfortunately, Ontario is a hub for human trafficking, with the most police-reported incidents of human trafficking in the country occurring within the province in 2019. This accounts for approximately 55% of all police-reported incidents of human trafficking nationally. However, due to the fact that instances of human trafficking are regularly under-reported, these numbers only capture the tip of the iceberg and are likely much higher.

When I first became minister in 2019, I had the opportunity to join many of my colleagues to participate in numerous round tables with survivors, Indigenous communities and organizations, those on the front line, police officers, sex work advocates and other people working with survivors to learn first-hand about human trafficking in this province.

They told us that we need more awareness of human trafficking, more education supports for adolescents and children. There are gaps in services for certain populations, including for Indigenous people, children and youth, people with disabilities, and those with mental health and addictions. They told us that we need to increase specialized human trafficking supports across our province. One thing that was stated repeatedly was the importance of having these discussions and the need to have a strategy.

I also want to specifically mention the work of the Solicitor General, who is co-leading the strategy with me. In opposition, she was a passionate advocate on this issue, and has been an amazing partner throughout our work on this file. Our Minister of Infrastructure, Laurie Scott, has also been a champion of the victims and survivors in her efforts to combat this disgusting crime. Both of these women are such incredible role models to myself, and I

am fortunate to be in this caucus with them and to help in this work.

Last year, our government announced a comprehensive \$307-million five-year strategy to combat human trafficking and child sexual exploitation. Ontario's new anti-human trafficking strategy is the largest investment in combatting human trafficking to date in Canada. Through the strategy, we are strategically investing across ministries to support a proactive and comprehensive approach to combatting this devastating crime.

Our strategy is based on four pillars. Firstly, we are raising awareness of the issue, delivering training on human trafficking to equip front-line service providers across sectors with the skills that are needed to respond to cases of trafficking and raising public awareness to help prevent trafficking before it occurs.

Secondly, we are protecting victims and intervening early, which is crucial to effectively combatting human trafficking. Our strategy prioritizes initiatives targeted to children and youth, and prevention and intervention, as well as supports for child victims.

Thirdly, we are supporting survivors and recognizing the need for specialized, trauma-informed, community-based supports to help them heal and rebuild their lives, and to reduce the risk of re-exploitation.

Finally, we are holding these offenders accountable. To keep pace with the increasing volume and complexity of human trafficking cases across the province, our strategy provides a coordinated approach to law enforcement, with an increased capacity for policing, crown prosecutors and intelligence-gathering.

And, as importantly, we know that Indigenous women and girls are particularly targeted by offenders, so to ensure Indigenous women and children get the supports they need, we have provided funding specifically for Indigenous-specific resources which are embedded across our new strategy, providing significantly more supports to address the unique needs of Indigenous communities.

The strategy takes a balanced approach, with funding primarily distributed towards survivors and supports and holding offenders accountable, followed by investments to protect victims, vulnerable at-risk populations and early intervention, and then raising awareness. It provides a more comprehensive and stronger response to human trafficking that addresses the key gaps in the previous strategy, including intervention and support for one of the most vulnerable populations, that being children and youth.

Most recently, the government passed new legislation and amendments to existing legislation to build upon the province's \$307-million anti-human trafficking strategy, the Combating Human Trafficking Act, 2021, which reinforces Ontario's commitment to fight human trafficking and demonstrates the continued leadership in responding to this pervasive crime. This groundbreaking legislation makes Ontario the first jurisdiction in Canada required to maintain an anti-human trafficking strategy, ensuring that combatting this crime remains a priority for the future.

Developed with input from survivors and those working on the front lines, this legislation also provides important new tools to support survivors and better protect children and youth, demonstrating once again our government's strong and unwavering commitment to fighting this crime and keeping the people of Ontario safe. The strength of our approach speaks to the magnitude of this crisis not only in Canada but around the world, and demonstrates our government's commitment to ensuring that combatting human trafficking is a priority.

I will now turn it over to my deputy, Deputy Fougère, to provide more details on who is at risk, the engagement process and the cross-government collaboration that went into the strategy.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: Thank you, Minister Dunlop.

I am Marie-Lison Fougère. I am the deputy minister responsible for the office of women's issues at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

As the minister pointed out, Ontario is a major centre for human trafficking in Canada. It happens across the province in urban centres, in rural areas and in remote communities, as well. We also know that certain populations—and the minister has already mentioned some of them—are more vulnerable to being targeted, lured and exploited into trafficking. These include, of course, children and youth, including those in contact with the child welfare system, and Indigenous women and girls. Other populations may also be at increased risk of being targeted by traffickers. They are marginalized people such as 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, newcomers, migrant workers and people who may experience mental illness or addiction challenges, poverty, homelessness or bullying in school.

Unlike what may be assumed in some circles, no community is immune to human trafficking. It can happen in any community. That said, the statistics are pretty clear that women and girls are most often targeted. Nearly three quarters of victims identified by police are under the age of 25, and 28% of victims are under the age of 18. So this is a serious crime, and it affects a lot of people in a very, very dramatic way.

Recognizing the complexity of this problem and the need for many perspectives to inform the response to human trafficking, our approach has been deliberately informed and shaped by extensive engagement through various provincial round tables. We made a point of reaching out to and tapping into the experiences of survivors through the Human Trafficking Lived Experience Roundtable—I might add, a first in Canada. We also drew heavily on the perspectives and findings of the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, as well as the report released by the Ontario Native Women's Association, called *Journey to Safe Spaces*, and other experiential sources when it comes to human trafficking. We also consulted extensively with the law enforcement community, including police, prosecutors and so on. The input and feedback of partners and stakeholders made it clear that it is a multi-faceted problem, and it is not a problem that can be solved

overnight, but that the complex problem of human trafficking had to be tackled with the coordinated efforts and actions of multiple partners, including, in government, multiple ministries. As a result, we actively worked across government to come up with the strategy. A total of eight ministries, including our own, are partners, and were partners, in the development of the strategy, and are currently working hand in hand for the implementation of the strategy.

1520

To illustrate the scope of this cross-government undertaking, I will take a few seconds to name the ministries that are involved in the implementation of the strategy. They are, of course, our own ministry, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services; the Ministry of the Solicitor General; the Ministry of the Attorney General; the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs; the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries; and the Ministry of Transportation.

This cross-government undertaking is warranted, given that an effective response to human trafficking entails a range of actions in different sectors. To counter human traffickers, it may mean, for example, raising the awareness of the trucking industry along Ontario's 400-series highways. It means educating children and youth about the signs of grooming and luring, and also educating teachers, school principals, parents about the signs. It also means focusing our investments, our supports on victim services. It's extremely important, as the minister has already indicated, to focus on victims and survivors and making sure that those who exit human trafficking have the supports subsequently in order to heal and to rebuild their lives.

In addition to working closely with community groups, educators, Indigenous leaders and other partners, we also collaborate, and we keep collaborating, with other jurisdictions—that is, with our federal, provincial and territorial counterparts—recognizing that human trafficking happens across boundaries. This is not confined to provincial borders, so it is extremely important to recognize that this is very much a national and a pan-Canadian problem.

To conclude, as underscored, the anti-human trafficking strategy takes a comprehensive approach and seeks to proactively combat human trafficking. Our supports will continue to prioritize awareness-raising, because a lot of people still don't know about human trafficking and do not know how to recognize the signs of human trafficking; preventing child sexual exploitation before it happens; and supporting survivors and holding offenders accountable.

I will now invite ADM Rupert Gordon to share more details on the strategy and some key milestones that have been achieved to date through implementation.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thank you, Deputy.

Working together across government and with multiple sectors across the province, we've achieved many milestones. The ministry has made significant progress in implementing the strategy announced last spring.

In collaboration with colleagues at education, we've updated the elementary health and physical education curriculum to include mandatory learning about online safety and consent. We released an interactive digital tool to help children and youth learn about how traffickers lure, groom and manipulate young people into trafficking, so they are quick to recognize when it may be happening to them. This tool, called The Trap, has been downloaded by nearly 4,000 individuals already.

We worked with Indigenous organizations and communities to develop a guide that will allow elders, community members and other front-line workers to teach children, in a culturally appropriate way, to be able to identify the tricks and tactics traffickers use to lure children. Over 2,500 individuals have accessed Speak Out to date.

We are investing \$96 million over the next five years in community-based services across the province to provide more supports for victims and survivors, particularly children and youth. Just last year, over 5,000 individuals, including victims, survivors and their families, accessed critical supports. These supports will help front-line service providers across Ontario to quickly identify people at risk or victims of human trafficking and connect them to available and appropriate supports.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes remaining.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: We're just in year one of the strategy. We have much more to do.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge the passage of the anti-human trafficking legislation, which contains an extraordinary series of amendments designed to further the implementation of this strategy.

In order to share the impacts related to the Child, Youth and Family Services Act, I want to turn things briefly to my colleague David Remington to talk about the important element of this amendment.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Rupert.

The amendments we made to the Child, Youth and Family Services Act were informed by lots of participation from Indigenous service providers and lawyers and youth-serving agencies. The amendments will provide grounds of protection that explicitly include child sex trafficking in a manner that's not tied to the person having care of the child, so the parent or the caregiver. They will provide authority for child protection workers and peace officers to temporarily remove 16- and 17-year-old youth involved in sexual exploitation to an immediate location where they can provide voluntary access to other services and supports, and they will strengthen the offence provisions and corresponding penalties in situations where offenders interfere with or harbour a child in the care of a children's aid society.

The amendments will help better protect children and youth from sex trafficking by clarifying the roles of children's aid societies in sex trafficking. They will provide an option for child protection workers and peace officers to intervene and temporarily remove 16- and 17-year-old victims from sex trafficking situations, and they will help deter sex trafficking—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say that we're out of time.

Colleagues, I'm going to have a 10-minute recess. We'll be back at 3:36.

The committee recessed from 1527 to 1537.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Hello, everyone. We're back in session.

This rotation goes to the official opposition. MPP Harden.

Mr. Joel Harden: I want to begin where we left off, Minister Smith, and talk a little bit about where we can find some money to increase benefits for folks on ODSP and OW.

As I mentioned, the Financial Accountability Officer of this province has disclosed to all parliamentarians of our Legislature that the second-biggest spending item on the province's balance sheet right now is tax expenditures: \$44.4 billion. I understand the merit of a lot of these tax expenditures; a lot of them make a lot of sense. What troubles me, though, is that in this pandemic, we continued some tax expenditures that were accruing to some of the more affluent folks in this province, as I mentioned earlier, including parliamentarians of our Legislature, who work really hard and are paid decent salaries—and we work hard for those salaries. But what I'm struggling to understand is why we wouldn't think about closing some of the tax expenditures that we have in Ontario or at least reducing them to some extent so we could recirculate revenue.

What Mr. Weltman, the FAO, pointed out in his report to us not long ago, published in February 2020, was that, essentially, 20% of Ontario households are accruing about 80% of these benefits and, in some cases, like capital gains exemptions or stock option exemptions, these are assets held by a very narrow amount of folks in our province. I dare to say that if we were to ask those folks and say, "Hey, during a pandemic, could you go without some of these tax expenditures, some of these writeoffs that you don't end up having to pay, so that when you pay your taxes you can have these reductions in your income taxes, so someone on ODSP can get groceries this week, so someone on ODSP can take some kind of transportation"—because there were moments in our pandemic, if you recall, Minister, when there was a debate about whether or not public transportation was in fact safe. A lot of workers in the public transportation industry were contacting us, worrying about that. I was contacted, and MPP Gretzky and I'm sure many of us were contacted by ODSP recipients, OW recipients, who were saying, "In order to get to that critical appointment, I've got to take an Uber. I've got to take a safe cab. How am I going to pay for that?"

I'm just wondering, at a high policy level, Minister, if you might comment on whether or not it's a good idea for us to ask folks in our province like you and me to forgo some of what the province is investing in us, and that we share some of that with people. Particularly, I'm thinking of folks on ODSP and OW, who have been having such a hard time during this pandemic. What do you think?

Hon. Todd Smith: Good afternoon to everybody again. It has been a long day and a long discussion, and this is taking it to a whole new place. So thanks, MPP Harden, for bringing us into this discussion. We've taken a different approach with the government, but I'm interested to hear more about your ideas as we continue to have this conversation here this afternoon, and ways that perhaps you and the NDP are thinking outside the box on tackling some of the issues that we are facing.

We made the early investment of a 1.5% increase to those on social assistance, OW and ODSP, when we were elected to government. That was an \$80-million investment that we made into individuals on social assistance. We've also brought in some of these tax credits.

I do appreciate the fact that you do appreciate some of the tax credits that are there and that some of them have merit, like the LIFT tax credit that we brought in, which actually eliminates or seriously reduces personal income tax for over one million people in the province of Ontario. That's the low-income individuals and families tax credit. I would assume that you agree that that's probably a good one, because it has helped a lot of individuals either escape poverty—and I appreciate the fact your hand is up and you're going to want to comment on that.

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you, Minister. No, actually, I'm always happy to talk about poverty reduction strategies. In fact, the conversation I'm interested in having this afternoon is on how we reallocate some of the funds Ontario is currently investing, and that's what I think a lot of folks don't understand.

Mr. Weltman is telling us that \$44.4 billion every year is invested in tax expenditures that are disproportionately benefiting—the 12 costliest ones that we have, at least—the top 20% of Ontario households.

Let me drill down a little bit into one of them. I know a lot of us are saving for the future, saving for retirement. It's kind of weird for me to think about that myself, at age 49, but we're all in that habit of thinking about how we put some money aside now to save for later. There's an entire financial services industry prepared to sell us products, and mutual funds in particular, that can charge—Minister, I'm sure you're aware of this, as someone who is always talking forthrightly about spending our money wisely. At a household level, some of these financial services products are costing people 30% to 40% through their eventual retirement savings over a lifetime if they pay these MERs or these fees to these financial services industries. What shocks a lot of people to figure out is that we're indirectly subsidizing those.

So the next time anybody watching this is in any one of our big cities—let's hope it's soon—and sees one of those huge life insurance companies or those big bank towers, we can take some shock in the fact that through tax expenditures to the existing RRSP industry, because we are not capping those RRSP fees or those RESP fees, we're taking the people's money and we're circulating it to organizations that make billions of dollars every year, which reward their executives handsome salaries and

bonuses, particularly during this pandemic, which drives me crazy.

I'm struggling to understand why we didn't, at the beginning of this pandemic, go to those households, and the Premier could have a fireside chat with one of those folks in one of his many press conferences and say, "This year, you're going to have a bit of a haircut on what you can expect to deduct in your taxes through your RRSPs or through your capital gains or through your stock options, because some of our neighbours are living in abject poverty, and this pandemic is making it even worse."

So I'm asking, because you and I are coming up to an election in a year—the people are going to be looking for us to say, "How are you going to pay for these promises? How are you going to pay for the promise of giving someone on ODSP or OW a livable income?" Minister, what do you think about that? What if we actually said to people making stock-option tax expenditures—let's take that one, because this is a very small amount of our folks in our province who have significant stock wealth. What if we ask them, "Hey, to give your neighbour on ODSP or OW a decent meal, why don't you forgo some of that tax writeoff, so your neighbour down the street who is suffering can get some help?" What do you think about that?

Hon. Todd Smith: Interesting.

I'm shocked, by the way, to find out that you're 49 years old. You look much younger than I do. I'm 50, and you look much younger than I do; there's no question about that.

I'm wondering if we're getting a little bit of a sneak preview of the NDP campaign platform here this afternoon from MPP Harden on how—

Mr. Joel Harden: I don't write it.

Hon. Todd Smith: You don't have that much pull?

Obviously, there are all kinds of different discussions that we may have and could have, going forward, on these various tax credits. Some of the tax credits that are there, as we mentioned, are doing a great job at helping to lift people out of poverty, like the LIFT credit that I mentioned earlier; there are others. There is the potential to explore things. I'm interested to hear what other ideas MPP Harden may have for the NDP election platform coming up in 2021, or 2022, I guess. But we've introduced a number of these tax credits as well. So, yes, \$44.4 billion is a big number, but some of them are making huge differences in the lives of people.

I think about the Ontario Childcare Access and Relief from Expenses tax credit that we introduced and then enhanced by another 20%—the CARE tax credit, as it's known. This provides families with low and moderate incomes out there—and there are many of these people with low and moderate incomes—up to 75% of their eligible expenses for child care. It's a very, very important tax credit. I know you've acknowledged that there are a number of worthy tax credits out there, but this is one—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Sorry, Minister. My apologies.

MPP Harden, you had your hand up?

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you, Chair.

You've offered me a useful bridge, Minister, because I do want to switch gears a little bit.

I will confess to you and the whole committee here that I do not have a personal role in writing the platform. There's a number of great pieces out there already. We've got a great piece on housing, a great piece on what we're calling the Green New Democratic Deal, and I'm very excited, too, with our vision of taking profits out of home care and long-term care. You can read up all about that and be held in suspense for later for everything else.

I do want to switch topics, Minister, and I'm wondering if Minister Dunlop may be the appropriate person to weigh in on these questions, or yourself. It's totally up to you.

I have to confess to everybody in this committee, I've been haunted by a story since March, and it's the story of David Roman from Barrie, if you're familiar with this story, this tragic death of this youth in care. Since then, I've done some research. I've reached out to the great Irwin Elman, who was the child advocate in this province for a long time, to try to understand how this happened. The more I've learned about this story, the more I begin to understand how a child with a disability, for a number of reasons in their life, ends up in a situation of extreme danger. I'm wondering what we can do better through MCCSS to protect kids like David. The very notion to me that a 24-year-old was given very little training to look after children who have lived with significant trauma and violence, who, not surprisingly, visit that violence on other people—Minister, I'm going to make the assumption you're familiar with this story. I haven't been able to forget about it ever since I first read about it, and the more I've talked to advocates, including in Barrie, about this, the more questions are raised for me about what we could do to protect these children better. I'm wondering if you have any comments on this.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that question, MPP Harden.

I am familiar with the case. I won't speak specifically to it, but I'd like to talk about the exact need for a child welfare redesign. I'll speak specifically to some of the things that we are doing with residential licensing and inspections, which I think are very important steps in moving forward with a redesign.

I also have ADM Remington on the call, who, I'm sure, would like to jump in.

I'd like to start off by talking about the things that we are doing as far as residential licensing and inspection. The ministry has responsibility for licensing and, in some cases, funding and delivering residential care for children and youth under the CYFSA. Residential care is delivered for foster homes, staff model homes and children's residences, which also includes youth justice facilities and treatment centres.

Licensed residential service providers must comply with the requirements that are set out in the CYFSA—its regulations, licence conditions and the ministry policies.

The government is taking important steps to increase the transparency, the oversight and the accountability in the children's residential services sector in Ontario and,

over the next fiscal year, there will be operational improvements in these areas, such as program verification on assessing licensed residential service providers, program descriptions that are submitted to the ministry and their publicly communicated promotional material, including on their websites, to the actual programs that are being delivered. We're also—yes?

1550

Mr. Joel Harden: I'm sorry to interrupt you mid-stream—

Hon. Jill Dunlop: No, I saw your hand go up; sorry.

Mr. Joel Harden: I wanted to drill down on something. It may be my socialist brain, Minister, that gets me stuck here, but I'm struggling to understand why we wouldn't make sure every single public dollar in our province wasn't invested in supportive care for kids who find themselves through whatever event in their life as youth in care.

I understand that David was a kid with ADHD who ran into significant amounts of trouble with his family, with the law, and ended up in a foster home in a highly dangerous situation. What media reports of this incident and others have told me—I've corroborated this with Mr. Elman—is that we allow for-profit providers in this sector to operate a significant amount of homes, including this particular home in Barrie. I know you're not going to talk about the cases before the courts; I respect that fact. I'm just wondering why we've entered into this framework at all, why we've entered into a framework where public dollars are being invested in some cases in for-profit operations. It would seem to be that once we turn that corner, for youth in particular care, some of the most vulnerable youth we have in this province, who are looking for that good break to get themselves back on the right track, those dollars are going to be shortchanged against staff. In the case of Barrie, a 24-year-old without any adequate training, witness to a traumatic incident—and it has not been the only incident.

So I'm wondering if you can help me understand today what the case is to allow for-profit operators to function in this sector and why this shouldn't be 100% done by public and non-profit agencies, who would put every single dollar we invest in them into care and appropriate supports for kids like David. What do you think?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that question.

I think we would both agree that the child welfare system has been broken for years, so there's a definite need to redesign the system that was in place that this government inherited. That has been something I've been working on since day one.

I'll flip to ADM Remington to further answer the question.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Minister.

I think every child death in the province is a huge tragedy. We work really closely with the coroner's office to understand the circumstances and the intersectionality with youth and the challenges and systemic factors across, for any youth who dies in the system, and it is an opportunity for us to make sure that it doesn't happen again.

The question around the mix of profit and not-for-profit: It is a really complex system that has grown over the years. We are doing a lot of work. We introduced a quality care standards practice last year, and it came from the work in the coroner's office in the youth inquest that was happening in 2018 and the work that they did on Safe with Intervention. It was the foundation for creating what quality care looks like in Ontario, and that foundation, those standards, are rolled out. All the community service providers have them; we're consulting on them.

We need to strengthen the entire residential system, I would say, for for-profit and not-for-profit. It's not like the system is working well for anybody—

Mr. Joel Harden: I'm sorry, Mr. Remington, to interrupt you mid-thought there.

Chair, I put my hand up, just for the record. I was following the rules.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, please go ahead.

Mr. Joel Harden: Help me understand, ADM Remington, why we have this system in the first place. I take what Minister Dunlop has said, I take what you've just said, about how it has been a broken system. But where did we come to that fork in the road, that we thought it was a money-making enterprise for some folks to offer care to some of our most marginalized youth? Did we have at one point in the province of Ontario a fully public and non-profit system for youth in care? When did that end? What was the policy rationale for that? Do you know this? I've asked, and I haven't found any kind of deep answers.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you for the question. I actually don't know the answer to that question in terms of how long and how far back this goes.

I've been with government for a number of years, and we've always had a mixed system. I would say, over the years, some transfer payment agencies have moved out of providing residential care. It used to be that, years ago, a number of children's aid societies had direct-operated residential care. Over the years, I would say—and I don't know when it was, but I'll say in the 1990s—a lot of them started to get out of that residential business.

We're encouraging residential service providers, children's aid societies to lean back into the space, especially our Indigenous partners. In Parry Sound, Nipissing, we have Indigenous partners who were working together with children's aid societies in that area to create a residential program—short-term, treatment-focused—for kids, and it's in the community, not sending kids from the north south. We do that all the time, and we take them out of their community, we disconnect them from family.

The idea is to create more local capacity with skilled workers. Part of the whole quality care standards is to make sure we skill up the workforce so that we can deal with these really complex, challenging kids.

Part of child welfare redesign, I'll just say, is to be able to intervene in the lives and trajectory of families early on so we can get them the real help they need, so actually—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. David Remington: —they don't come into the care of children's aid societies in the first place.

We have a lot of work to do, MPP Harden, and it's a lot of work, together, that we need to do with our partners.

Mr. Joel Harden: Indeed. It sounds like you've had the same conundrum I've had from a research perspective. It sounds like this has been around for a long time.

Just apropos the earlier discussion I was having with Minister Smith, it would seem to me that a really good use of the public's resources in Ontario would be to bring these services into public and non-profit hands, to have—I'm happy to hear about a quest for tighter observation of standards in this critical, vulnerable sector, but I fail to understand why looking after some of the most vulnerable kids in our society should be a money-making enterprise.

People I know who have opened up their homes to foster youth have some of the biggest hearts I've ever met—people in this entire country. I would love to think that we don't have to incent people into that work as a money-making opportunity. I would like to see a future where what happened to David and other kids never happens again. It remains disturbing.

I do, on the record, want to thank all of the journalists who have covered this story to expose ourselves to this. ADM Remington, Minister Dunlop, I'm sure you knew about this long before, but it has certainly been a revelation for me—and particularly the connection between kids with disabilities that have not been diagnosed and treated and folks who find themselves in care; that's a very disturbing link for me—and what we can do as a province to help those kids, help those families inasmuch as we can.

I take your point: Keep kids out of care to the extent that we can.

Chair, am I almost done, or do I have a few minutes?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): No, you have five seconds, MPP Harden.

Mr. Joel Harden: I'll just say thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I think we'll call it a rotation and go on to the government.

MPP Coe, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Lorne Coe: My question is to Minister Smith.

Minister, a weekend ago, I had a veteran, Steve Cosgrove, celebrate his 95th birthday—he's one of the last veterans we have in Brooklin, which, as you know, is in the north part of my riding. In the course of delivering some scrolls, one from myself and one from Premier Ford, through the president of the Royal Canadian Legion—I dropped them off at the president's home. In developing the scroll, I spoke about our veterans, including Mr. Cosgrove, and the tremendous sacrifices they made to protect our province and country and our way of life. I raise that because, as you and Minister Dunlop know, our government has made a commitment to be there when our veterans need us, because they're our heroes. Consequently, I was really proud to honour this commitment by supporting the Soldiers' Aid Commission Act, 2020, as it was passed last year. I was also pleased to be able to speak in support of the bill.

Minister, can you update the committee members on the status of the Soldiers' Aid Commission's modernization and tell us what investments have been made this

year to ensure we're getting support to veterans who need it, our heroes?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks very much, MPP Coe. It's great to see you.

Happy birthday, as well, to our veteran, who we honour and thank, Steve Cosgrove, on his 95th birthday. Having gone to these birthdays myself with veterans who served in the Second World War, I know how emotional it is. I could almost hear the emotion in your voice as you were talking about his service to our country and what a pivotal and formative time that was for our country of Canada. So to Mr. Cosgrove in Brooklin, happy 95th birthday. We thank you for all that you have given.

1600

Thanks so much for the question, MPP Coe.

This is a big ministry that we're responsible for here—almost \$18 billion and lots of different programs, as we discussed yesterday afternoon and here today as well. We look forward to continuing our discussion Tuesday next week as well.

One of the great programs in here—and I'm really proud, as I know you are and have indicated—is the new Soldiers' Aid Commission Act, 2020. It came into effect on January 1 of this year, and it has greatly expanded the mandate and role of the Soldiers' Aid Commission.

As you would know, for over 100 years, Ontario has supported veterans through the Soldiers' Aid Commission. The commission was first established way back in 1915 by an order in council. At that time, they were helping returning veterans coming back from the First World War and their families with problems faced upon re-entry to civilian life, such as finding housing and employment. There was no ministry of community and social services back in 1915, so this was pretty groundbreaking at the time, to assist these families. Following the Second World War and the Korean War, eligibility for supports was expanded to veterans returning home from these conflicts and their families as well. Steve Cosgrove would have been one of those returning home from the Second World War at that time.

Unfortunately, 15 years of neglect by the previous government saw the number of veterans served by the commission having been decreased every single year, because it was only those from the First World War, Second World War and Korean War who were eligible to receive funding from the Soldiers' Aid Commission. In fact, of the nearly 230,000 veterans in Ontario, 93% were not eligible to access the Soldiers' Aid Commission funding. This would include a long list of Canadian men and women in Ontario who served their country throughout the later decades of the 20th century and into this century, serving in UN peacekeeping missions in the Balkans, in Rwanda, in Somalia and elsewhere, including the many who fought in Afghanistan. These veterans face many ongoing challenges, including post-traumatic stress disorder, physical injuries that they may have sustained, unemployment and homelessness, unfortunately, all the while trying to navigate the complex support system that exists.

The choice for our government was really clear. We were not going to let the commission sit idle, as the previous government did. We chose to modernize and expand services to support a whole new generation of veterans and their families who have given to this country. The program went from supporting, as I mentioned, only World War II and Korean War vets and their families to eligible veterans and their families in the province of Ontario.

To support this expansion of the program, the ministry has invested up to \$1.5 million in funding annually to allow for the commission to assist eligible applicants with payments of up to \$2,000 over a 12-month period for items such as home repairs, medical devices, mobility devices, and supports to help get veterans back into the workforce. Building on this commitment to support those who served our country and their families, and as announced back in the 2020-21 budget, the government will also be making investments to support veterans' mental health and their transition to employment through the True Patriot Love Foundation, which I know we hold dearly. They do great work for our veterans, as well, thanks to the work that True Patriot Love Foundation does in our communities.

We're proud to say that the Soldiers' Aid Commission is the only provincial agency in Canada that delivers financial supports directly to our veterans.

Our vets and their families have made tremendous sacrifices to make our province and country a better place. Support of our veterans and their families was not simply the right thing to do; it was the best thing that we could do to help our veterans reintegrate into our communities, our neighbourhoods and our society here in Ontario.

This holds a special place in my heart, because as you know, I come from the Bay of Quinte, which is home to the largest air force base in Canada, 8 Wing at CFB Trenton. I have many friends and neighbours who are members of the current military serving around the world, and those who are veterans as well, who have called the Bay of Quinte region and the Trenton area home.

I'll now ask my assistant deputy minister on this file, Rupert Gordon, to share some more details on how we're focusing on helping our veterans get better outcomes.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thank you. Evidence suggests there is a continued need for a modernized and expanded Soldiers' Aid Commission. One in four veterans have difficulty adjusting to civilian life. In 2019, 39% of regular force veterans who left the Canadian Armed Forces between 1998 and 2018 reported their transition to post-service life was difficult or very difficult. One third of veterans with families reported their release was also difficult for their spouse, partner or children.

Veterans can also face financial challenges. Veterans in their first three years transitioning to civilian life have lower incomes compared to their final year in the Canadian Armed Forces. Low income rates for veterans range from 4% to 8%, which is lower than the rate for Canada. Veterans are overrepresented in the homeless population and among people with disabilities. Veterans face various physical and mental health challenges. They have a higher risk of suicide than other Canadians and are more likely to

have activity limitations that also impact their employment. Thirty-five per cent of veterans have health-related activity limitations at work, compared to 13% of Canadians. Female and medically released veterans also have a greater difficulty in the labour market.

The Soldiers' Aid Commission provides financial assistance to Ontario's eligible veterans and their families in financial need. The commission will consider applications to support eligible recipients with financial assistance for central expenses in the following categories:

- housing-related items;
- modifications or repairs that support mobility, accessibility or health and safety, things like modifying a home to make it wheelchair-accessible;
- assistance to secure and maintain housing, including things like first and last month's rent;
- specialized equipment and assistive devices to support mobility, accessibility or health and safety, and this can include things like wheelchairs and scooters;
- health-related items and services to support physical and mental health, and examples of these could be prosthetic devices or eyeglasses;
- personal items, services and expenses to support basic needs.

As part of the program changes, the program now includes employment-related supports to better support the needs of working-age veterans. This could include expenses like training costs and equipment required for work such as tools.

In regard to the commission itself, the new legislation provides a clear mandate to administer the expanded financial assistance program for more eligible Ontario veterans and their family members, all with improved oversight and accountability. Commissioners continue to serve without remuneration, and their travel expenses for in-person meetings, when required, will be reimbursed, per government directives. The commission has transitioned to remote meetings and remote application review and approvals. This has allowed for more expediency and efficiency in their review and processing of applications.

I thank the member for the question and for the opportunity to speak today about the modernization of the Soldiers' Aid Commission.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you very much for that response.

Minister, I want you to know that as your discussions with the presidents of the [inaudible] Branch 112 and Branch 152 up in Brooklin. They and the members of those Legions and their families want to say thank you for the work you and your staff did in reforming the Soldiers' Aid Commission Act and the effect it has had on their families going forward.

I want to move into another area, and it deals with the Family Responsibility Office. Other members on this committee will know that this is an area where we get a lot of inquiries, and it's one of the reasons why the Family Responsibility Office is one of the areas our government is working to modernize. The reason for that is, the Family Responsibility Office plays an absolutely essential role in

the lives of those children and families who receive support from the program. However, in my time as an MPP—it's now six years since I was first elected in the by-election in Whitby–Oshawa, now Whitby—I have heard from many constituents who struggle to recover support payments for their children.

Minister, could you please tell us about the work your ministry—and it's excellent work, with your leadership—is doing to improve the Family Responsibility Office's services and assure parents are receiving the support they need?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, MPP Coe. I remember walking through the snow-covered streets of Whitby with you six years ago to make sure you got elected there in Whitby. That was a lot of fun. And it has been great working with you for the last six years.

It's a great question. I can tell you that MPP offices are getting far fewer calls regarding flow issues now than they were six years ago. That's because of the work that has happened in the Family Responsibility Office to improve service delivery there. We really do recognize the role that the FRO plays in ensuring the financial security of families right across the province. Currently, the Family Responsibility Office has over 150,000 active cases. These families rely on FRO to help them receive their court-ordered support payments.

1610

In 2019, FRO introduced a new service model as part of a transformation strategy. The goal was to create a better client service experience, increase efficiency there, and address issues in order to keep payments flowing to recipients. Key elements of the new approach include a proactive process for onboarding all clients when their case enters FRO—the FRO team reaches out to all payers and recipients to make sure they understand what their responsibilities are and how FRO will work with them through a support payment process—and targeted service experience and tailored collection enforcement approaches that are focused on achieving outcomes more effectively, ultimately reducing the need for aggressive enforcement and also really reducing the appearances at court. The transformation was a significant change in how FRO delivered services, and we're very encouraged by the feedback that we have received so far.

Our government hasn't stopped there, though. The Legislature recently passed Bill 276, as you'll know, the Supporting Recovery and Competitiveness Act, which included amendments to the Family Responsibility and Support Arrears Enforcement Act. It will remove red tape by changing some key administrative practices and will allow FRO to take a more proactive approach with their clients.

The Family Responsibility Office also works actively with MPPs and their constituency office staff to resolve issues when a client contacts their local MPP for assistance with their case. In order to ensure that MPP offices are able to get in contact with FRO, there is a dedicated service channel for MPP offices which is closely monitored. It provides a specific contact via telephone or secure email

for every office. I know your constituency office probably have communications with the FRO office, albeit not nearly as much as they did prior to 2019 because of the changes that we've made. I've heard from my own office staff, and we're receiving far fewer inquiries about FRO since the implementation of these changes.

I'd like to ask ADM Sparrow to expand on how these changes have improved the services of FRO for families across the province and what this new model looks like from the client's perspective.

Trevor?

Mr. Trevor Sparrow: Thank you very much, Minister, and thank you, MPP Coe, for the question.

I'm very glad to have the opportunity to talk about the work that we're doing at the Family Responsibility Office over the past few years to improve the service delivery and the service experience for our clients and ultimately the outcomes—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to interrupt you, but just for the purposes of Hansard, I need you to identify yourself by name and title.

Mr. Trevor Sparrow: My apologies, Chair. My name is Trevor Sparrow. I am the assistant deputy minister at the Family Responsibility Office in the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

As I was saying, and as Minister Smith has laid out and as you mentioned in your question, MPP Coe, FRO plays a really critical role in ensuring that the support that is ordered by the courts and is depended upon by families is collected and disbursed to the people who deserve it and need it.

At the Family Responsibility Office, we did have some significant challenges and issues through the years that have been raised with us by different stakeholders, be it directly by our clients, through the local MPP constituency offices or by the Ombudsman's office at different times as well. That's why FRO undertook an analysis to identify what our critical organizational issues were, what the process and service delivery issues were, in order to develop a new service delivery model for the Family Responsibility Office, with goals, as the minister laid out, of managing cases more proactively rather than waiting and taking a reactive, enforcement-based approach, and really working to build rapport and work with our clients to achieve outcomes, rather than a heavy enforcement focus.

We also looked to balance workload effectively across teams to reduce the number of escalated issues that we receive here at FRO and ultimately to build client confidence by creating a more consistent, more responsive and positive client experience.

We did implement our new service model in September 2019. This included a new proactive, needs-based service approach, redefining, really, from top to bottom processes and procedures of all of our service delivery and enforcement processes, changing our organizational structure to align with the new work, a significant amount of training for all FRO employees, and critical enhancements to our technology platforms to not only enable us to work in the new model, but also to properly measure and monitor the

business more effectively to make sure that we're delivering service in the way that we intend to and to make sure that we're achieving the goals that we laid out.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. Trevor Sparrow: As the minister mentioned, the new model includes an onboarding process which really seeks to make contact with our clients, make sure they understand their responsibilities and ours, make sure that they know how FRO works, and make sure that we establish a relationship from the beginning, rather than, as might have happened in the past, introducing ourselves to our clients by way of a pre-enforcement letter, which set us off in a very different mode.

I'm happy to say that, so far, we're seeing some really encouraging signs, as the minister suggested. We're seeing things like our ability to return our clients' voice mails in a timely way has increased by more than 20% since the middle of last year, when we were able to start measuring it with our new technologies. Our client requests that we're able to process have gone up by almost 66%. The number of client requests we are processing within the 30-day timeline has gone up by 96%. Escalations that we receive are down 52%. We answer 26% more of our calls live, rather than having clients need to call us again or calls going to voice mail. And our call wait times in our call centre function are down from 27 minutes to eight minutes when we measure year over year. So we're really proud of the work that we're doing so far.

We also want to say, as the minister mentioned, we have a great relationship with the constituency offices, and we have a special service channel created to interact and work with the constituency offices, on behalf of our shared clients, in resolving issues that they bring to our concern. And yes, the volume that we receive through that channel is down significantly since the transformation.

So we're really proud of the work that everyone on the team here at FRO has done over the last couple of years, and we're very encouraged.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, we go to the next rotation. Official opposition: MPP Harden.

Mr. Joel Harden: I want to switch topics here, back to the employment services transformation. I believe, Minister Smith, you were talking a bit about it to MPP Gretzky, but there are some other concerns, as I understand it, that folks in this sector have, other questions they have, so I'll pose these to you.

We know that one of the things the government is proposing is an expansion based upon pilots that were run, so we have a few questions about how that expansion is going to be working. Fedcap is one of the organizations involved in this. We understand they had a very profitable year recently—\$1.2 billion in contracts—and they've disclosed to their investors that a big part of that source of revenue was from the new project right here in the province of Ontario.

We were wondering if you could help us understand how much Fedcap has received to administer the employment services they've run to date, if there's a dollar figure attached to that.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for the question, MPP Harden.

Just so we're clear, our employment service transformation is very key to what we're trying to accomplish here at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, and that's ensure that the people on Ontario Works and ODSP who can work get to work and have the supports they need to get to work. But the program is actually run through the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, MLTSD, so that's Minister McNaughton's ministry.

Having said that, I don't have the specific answer to your question. Nelson, the ADM on this file, may have some information on it.

What I can tell you is that when we were designing this, together with our partners at MLTSD, in the three prototype areas that have been designated for the new employment service programs early on, we wanted to make sure, as prototypes, that we had a for-profit, a not-for-profit and a public partner that was working in each area and evaluating the performance of each of these partners before we moved forward across the rest of the province, which is what we announced yesterday in conjunction with Minister McNaughton and his team at MLTSD.

You're talking about Fedcap, which is operating in Hamilton-Niagara, but we also have WCG, which is a not-for-profit, and that's providing services in Peel, and then we also have Fleming College, which is our partner operating in Muskoka-Kawartha. We're evaluating the performance of all three prototypes and then continuing with the RFQ process on the next round as we expand this across the province, keeping in mind that we're not doing Toronto right now and we won't be expanding the prototypes in northern Ontario—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Sorry, Minister; I apologize for interrupting.

1620

MPP Harden, you have the floor.

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you, Minister, for the answer. What I take it to mean, then, from your response is that this is something Minister McNaughton would be able to avail us of—the specific amount that has been invested in Fedcap for the projects they're running in Hamilton and Niagara as one of the three. My assumption here is that, having now seen the evidence from that particular activity, the government is signalling that they want to extend this organization's work.

I have a couple of questions perhaps you or ADM Loureiro will be able to answer.

Specific to the work that Fedcap has been doing in Hamilton and Niagara, what we understand has happened from advocates in the sector is that Fedcap is claiming a 94% employment placement rate. Is that something that has been communicated to you from Minister McNaughton's team?

Hon. Todd Smith: I don't have that information. Does Nelson have that information? Nelson Loureiro is the ADM on that file. I don't know if Nelson is there.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: I'm here. Hi, Minister. Thank you, Minister, and thank you, MPP Harden, for the question.

Two things—one is, the minister is correct; we don't have the information on the payments to Fedcap. However, we can get those from the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development and share them through the Chair, MPP Harden. We will do that for you.

In terms of the actual numbers, I could only speak to numbers related to what is ours when it comes to persons on our programs, whether Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program. Again, I can reach into the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development and get numbers for the entire Employment Ontario program. That includes, as you are aware, people who are also coming in from the province and not specifically from Ontario Works and ODSP.

Some numbers I did get from the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development that I can share: Over 14,800 clients in all three areas have started an integrated employment service action plan with Employment Ontario. I believe the minister mentioned this previously, that 44% of those are persons with disabilities, 39% of those are racialized persons—and these are all self-identified—and 13% are youth with higher support needs. Of those 14,800, 7,900 of those clients were referred to Employment Ontario through the ODSP or Ontario Works caseworker. This represents that over 54% of the referrals to Employment Ontario are coming from our programs. That is an encouraging number.

Those are the data I have with me here today. I will get you the data to your questions through the Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Harden?

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you, ADM Loureiro. I'll just add some questions, and they will be in Hansard, and if you wouldn't mind taking those to add to your list, I'd appreciate it.

These will be lists, again, of the Fedcap project that has been run in Hamilton and Niagara. So given that this is the claim Fedcap is making to their investors, can we confirm—first question—are these people now completely out of the social assistance system, or have they been back?

When you're corroborating these numbers with Minister McNaughton's team, I think it would be really important for us to understand the impact not necessarily of what Fedcap is doing but of the CERB benefit, which clearly took a lot of folks who were drawing upon social assistance and Ontario Works out of the system with an actual basic income of a significant amount of money. We were talking about that earlier.

More questions: How many people had been unable to fulfill the requirements of the new system for whatever reason, and have any been cut off? What happens to recipients of ODSP whose partners fail to be compliant for any reason, including not being able to provide proof of

being a caregiver? Does that person lose their assistance in the new model? If yes, who determines this?

A few more questions—again just for the record, for Hansard—for you to take on: Does the plan for the municipal delivery of life stabilization include new and additional funding to provide for anything from Internet access to housing supplements? Where can Ontarians' service providers in these regions, who have been concerned about the impact of this integration on their clients, access this information about prototype outcomes? Is there anything in there that you have within your purview, ADM Loureiro, or is that still information we need to pass on to Minister McNaughton's team?

Hon. Todd Smith: I think there is information there, potentially, that Nelson could answer.

I would just like to point out, too, MPP Harden, before we turn it over to Nelson just for a moment—and I won't take a lot of time, because I know you probably have lots of other things you want to get to as well. But I think it's really important to note that the changes in these prototype areas to client-facing services for Ontario Works began on January 1, so we're still in the very, very early stages. Here it is in June, so they've only been up and running for six months now. We're using lessons learned in best practices and information that we're gathering to inform how the rest of the rollout continues across the province when it comes to the expansion of the employment services offices.

I'll turn it over to Nelson, and he may have some answers to some of your questions that you just asked.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister Smith, and thank you, MPP Harden.

The minister is right: We, in the Ontario Works system, have only begun since January. For some of the questions you have, that data would be very preliminary, but I would take back your questions to the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development and see what is available and what could be offered to answer your questions.

Specifically on participation requirements when it comes to the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services or the Ontario Works program or the ODSP program: Again, we are taking a supportive approach to how we are delivering these services, how we are supporting clients through life stabilization into employment services and ensuring that we're working with the clients through a coordinated, integrated and common action plan in conjunction with the client. We are working with our clients on referrals to Employment Ontario and ensuring that our clients receive the necessary supports prior to being referred to Employment Ontario.

The numbers I shared with you are through the coordinated action plan that is being done. It's a three-legged stool: It's between Employment Ontario, ourselves in terms of the social assistance programs, and the client. So it is a common action plan, and these referrals reflect that.

Hon. Todd Smith: If I could add just one more thing to what Nelson has had to say, part of the program—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry, Minister. MPP Harden?

Mr. Joel Harden: I'm sorry to interrupt you, Minister. I just want to make sure I follow on this particular train of thought—and then back to you.

The particular question I have, then, ADM Loureiro, moving on from OW recipients to ODSP recipients—I'm interested to know if there are targets for moving long-term disability recipients to employment, if there have been any targets set. Do you have an answer for that internal to the ministry?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: In terms of—

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes, there are targets—sorry, Nelson. There are targets that we have set; we do want to transition thousands of people into employment.

The one point that I'll make, and then I'll let Nelson talk about the targets we've set—the other really important piece to what we're doing in our employment services transition here—I spoke about it a little bit earlier, MPP Harden, when I was talking about the youth employment pilot, particularly the one in Sault Ste. Marie that I was speaking of. It's so important, as well, that Employment Ontario and our ODSP and OW caseworkers are also working with employers and helping employers hire individuals who are facing challenges and barriers—because there is that stigma, and I know you're aware of it. People are maybe a little bit skeptical or hesitant as employers, but we're working with them every step of the way. They need the manpower. They need workers. They need employees. So a really important piece is working not just with the clients, but also with the employers. I just wanted to add that.

But over to you, Nelson, for MPP Harden's question.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Harden?

Mr. Joel Harden: Before we go back to ADM Loureiro, what I'll say, Minister, as an open offer, a sincere offer—here in the city of Ottawa, we have a fantastic organization you may or may not have heard of called Causeway. Causeway has built up a terrific employers' council and a very proactive model for those who actually are able to seek significant or even partial employment, and it is an art, as I'm understanding, not a science. It's very person-specific.

1630

Let's talk about these targets. This is what people want to know: What are the targets that have been set? And what can you tell us today about what the targets are for folks who are long-term-disability recipients moving into employment with some of these services we're discussing?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: I'll take this again from two pieces, and one is, there are targets set in the performance management of the service system manager. I will bring it back to the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development to get you what those targets are. Those targets are based on ensuring that we are supporting people who require different intensities of support. Some of those individuals are persons with disabilities, and there are targets set on ensuring that the service system managers are held accountable to support persons with disabilities effectively. I will take this back and, as part of your questions that are in the Hansard, bring it back to the Chair.

The second part are targets that we've set in the Poverty Reduction Strategy. The targets we've set there are 60,000 individuals to employment by 2024, with 2% of those being persons from the Ontario Disability Support Program specifically. As a reminder, we support persons with disabilities who may not be on the Ontario Disability Support Program as well through the Employment Ontario model, but this specific target is through the Poverty Reduction Strategy—again, 60,000 by 2024, of which 2% are persons from the Ontario Disability Support Program.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Harden.

Mr. Joel Harden: How much time do I have left?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Five minutes.

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you. What I will say then—again, this is more commentary that I hope will lead to another useful question. As I said earlier, my friends here in Ottawa at Causeway, who have been doing this work on employment services for people with disabilities for a long time, keep telling me, “Joel, this is very person-specific,” and they have expressed extreme frustration in the past with a one-size-fits-all approach.

I understood that in previous Legislatures, before this particular government, there was a real interest to get folks into the personal support work profession. Don't we know that now? But my goodness, this is challenging work. This is some of the most difficult work. It's important work. I actually think there's a case to be made for folks who have lived with trauma, who have lived with disabilities, to be some of the best care workers we can imagine—in fact, they're doing it right now. But as I understand it, in previous governments, folks were really encouraged into this profession without a lot of support, and it led to burnout, it led to difficult incidents, it led to frustration. So I would just flag that for Minister Smith.

There's a lot of potential—and something that has been impressed upon me by people with disabilities, their families, caregivers or advocacy organizations is, first of all, we don't see their contributions to our society enough. We just accept that they'll always be there; we don't offer thanks when thanks are due.

And then secondly, we are maintaining an income security regime that is decisively insecure. We're kind of pushing people into a situation where they have to make some pretty awful choices in order to keep body and soul together, and we certainly don't want that to continue.

I'm very interested to find out how these 60,000 folks are going to adjust themselves into the employment market. I sure hope that we invest enough money.

You won't be surprised to hear that I would sure love to see all those three pilot projects, Minister, be using every single dollar not to help investors but to help people. But I understand you're doing a modelling and you're extending the modelling. I take the targets that you communicated to heart.

If we can measure pre-pandemic and current pandemic—what is the number that we can think of, as far as OW recipients who are part of the official paid employment workforce? The number that I've seen here, and I'll just corroborate this to you, Minister, or to the ADM, is 75,000

people in the province of Ontario who are basically, it would seem to me, a prop for low-wage employers in the province of Ontario. I'm very concerned that some of what we may be encouraging in an employment context is employers taking advantage of folks who are desperate for work, who want to contribute, and not paying the kind of salaries that folks deserve, entry-level salaries—we have the minimum wage, of course, but the proliferation of part-time work and people trying to stitch this together. So that was the cohort communicated to me—75,000 people. Does that make sense—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Two minutes left.

Mr. Joel Harden: —given information the ministry has?

Hon. Todd Smith: I don't have that information; perhaps Nelson does.

What I would say to that—and I appreciate the perspective that you bring on it—the supports that we're providing to individuals will help them get full-time jobs and full-time work and maybe transition from some of that precarious work I believe you're speaking of.

I see Nelson is on the line and perhaps ready to give you a little confirmation, or some new information on that statistic.

Nelson, do you have anything you can pass along?

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister Smith.

The number I have is from December 2020, MPP Harden, and that is cases with earnings. In that, there might be more than one individual in these cases, but it's around 50,500 cases with earnings. The minister mentioned earlier that only 1% of individuals exit to employment from Ontario Works, and that's another data point that we do have.

Hon. Todd Smith: I would just add to that, if you'll allow me, Joel, to say we know and we're very hopeful—I'm very optimistic and I hope you are, too—that with stage 1 occurring now and the province soon to open into stage 2 and then stage 3 by, hopefully, sometime in July, that the economy really is going to bounce back. We saw that 350,000 jobs had been created prior to the pandemic's arrival. I am very optimistic. I refer to it to my colleagues in cabinet and my staff as the roaring 2020s about to begin and the fact that we are going to see a real upsurge in employment and economic activity—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say that we're out of time on this rotation.

We now go to the government. MPP Cuzzetto, the floor is yours.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I want to thank Minister Dunlop for working very closely with the children's aid society of Peel, and as well as coming out to Armagh House, in my riding of Mississauga-Lakeshore, which is a women's shelter.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on Ontario's most vulnerable, including women and children fleeing violence, who need to know that they can leave an unsafe situation and seek refuge in an emergency shelter.

Could the minister describe what has been done during this critical time to support service providers to ensure

they have the health and safety measures in place to continue to support vulnerable women and families—from emergency shelters to children’s aid societies providing services for children, youth and families during this pandemic? And what has been done to further support and protect the health and safety of our front-line workers who have shown up for work every day to support women and families in need at this critical time?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Cuzzetto, for all your hard work. I know you’ve been quite busy during the pandemic delivering food to vulnerable people in your riding and your region, so thank you for your advocacy. And thank you for the great question.

You are absolutely correct that COVID-19 has had significant impacts on some of our most vulnerable. Earlier, I spoke about the youth who are leaving the care of children’s aid societies and the impact COVID-19 has had on them, but there are a lot of other individuals who have been impacted, including women and children who are fleeing violence.

Every year, there are 50,000 calls made to one of our crisis lines, including Assaulted Women’s Helpline, Fem’aide and Talk4Healing, from individuals needing to flee from their abusive situation. On any given night in Ontario, there may be 2,000 women and children in safe respite, having escaped from their abusive situation through our violence against women emergency shelters.

We know the profound impacts of domestic violence. Not only does it put women and children at immediate risk for their personal safety; the trauma of violence against women and children can cause long-term physical and mental health problems.

Tragically, the conditions created by the pandemic have intensified the prevalence and severity of domestic violence, and yet there may be a lack of awareness or a reluctance to engage these critical supports when they may need them the most. With consistent messages to stay home, women may be unaware that emergency rooms, shelters and transition homes remain open during COVID-19, and/or they may face barriers to accessing these services. Medical staff have expressed concern that some women may be discouraged from reaching out so as not to burden or overwhelm the system, and concerns about exposure to the virus may also be a barrier, or accessing resources outside the home.

1640

We want every woman and child to know that they are not alone and that help is always available. That is why our government launched a public awareness campaign in March of this year to inform those who are fleeing violence that there are services and places, such as VAW shelters, that they can access to stay safe and that they are to remain open and available. Through the tremendous hard work, creativity and resilience of our VAW sector partners, these critical services have continued to operate throughout the pandemic.

Working in partnership with our key stakeholders and partners, such as the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses, the Ontario Association of Children’s

Aid Societies, Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario and Action ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes, has been crucial over the course of the response to COVID-19. VAW shelter and counselling agencies have successfully adapted to the changing conditions of the pandemic, including increased use of virtual technology, in order to continue providing the much-needed services to support them to leave violent situations.

We also know that now, more than ever, our children, youth and families have been significantly challenged, including by housing insecurity, mental health and addictions, and intimate partner violence. Children’s aid societies in Ontario are continuing their child protection services. Although agencies across the province have modified their business practices to respond to health and safety considerations, their core protection services continue.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the front-line workers, including many others, such as our incredible crisis counsellors, shelter workers and child protection workers, for their tireless efforts to support women and children in our province. These workers have shown resiliency by adapting their work and safety measures to adapt to the changes and the needs of women and their dependants, which have become more complex. These workers have shown the true Ontario spirit this past year, and their work does not go unnoticed.

Keeping everyone as safe as possible while ensuring the critical services that women need and rely on has been our priority. Our government has been making investments since the very beginning of the pandemic to support our heroes on the front lines who are helping those fleeing violence in such turbulent times. This upcoming year, we will be investing \$69.1 million to continue existing COVID-19 supports, including the COVID-19 Residential Relief Fund, the COVID-19 community supports fund, infection prevention and control champions, personal protective equipment and the transitional support fund.

Our ministry’s residential service providers were and continue to be supported through the COVID-19 Residential Relief Fund to address extraordinary costs from COVID-19. The residential relief fund covers costs such as additional staffing, residential respite for caregivers, personal protective equipment and supplies, costs to support physical distancing, transportation to minimize client exposure, and additional cleaning costs.

Our 2020 budget built on this work to include an additional investment over two years to help both residential and non-residential service providers in the social services sector continue infection prevention and control measures. This includes resources to support our ministry’s implementation of an infection prevention and control model in response to future waves of COVID-19 and in conjunction with recovery planning efforts as well as development of the COVID-19 community supports fund. The CCSF is targeted to non-residential programs and complements the COVID-19 Residential Relief Fund.

The community supports fund covers costs such as additional staffing, PPE and supplies, costs to support physical distancing and transportation to minimize client

exposure and any additional cleaning costs. The ministry is assessing needs on an agency-by-agency basis to distribute this funding to support COVID-19-related expenses. These investments are in addition to the financial flexibility granted to agencies to shift funding within their organization and across program areas to focus on the critical services and needs in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak.

To help combat the tragic rise in violence against women over the course of the pandemic, we have invested an additional \$1.5 million to further support victims of gender-based violence. This investment supports domestic violence victims and survivors of human trafficking by supporting front-line agencies in adapting to remote service delivery, and supports continued operation during the pandemic. We have also invested \$250,000 in additional funding to meet increased call volumes to the Assaulted Women's Helpline experienced as a result of the pandemic.

Children's aid societies continue to provide services to children, youth and families during the pandemic and have been encouraged to use technology where possible and appropriate, while also observing local public health recommendations.

From April 24 to August 13, our government provided pandemic pay on hourly wages and monthly lump sum payments for eligible staff working in congregate care settings or working closely with our most vulnerable, including those working in VAW emergency shelters.

I'd now like to turn it over to ADM Gordon to talk about the key cross-sector partnerships to support women and children fleeing domestic violence.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, MPP Cuzzetto.

I'm very pleased to be here today to take time to talk about the important work of our ministry and how we're collaborating with the VAW sector. I'll take the opportunity to provide some more detail on some of the health and safety measures implemented to strengthen infection prevention and control capacity at MCCSS-funded congregate care service providers to help them keep reopening efforts—residents, clients and staff and their families safe from the pandemic.

The ministry provided guidance to sectors and IPAC protocols through the vulnerable populations action plan which have proven effective in keeping infection rates in congregate care settings low and preventing widespread transmission in sites once an outbreak is detected. Cases of COVID-19 amongst residents and staff in congregate care settings have generally increased at a slower rate than cases in the community, despite higher risk factors.

The ministry has also been supporting employers, including the VAW sector, through emergency orders that allow for staffing flexibility and redeployment in order to respond to staffing challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ministry has worked closely with the Ministry of Health to appropriately prioritize residents, staff and essential caregivers in high-risk congregate care settings and people with intellectual and developmental disability in

phase 2 of Ontario's vaccination distribution plan. We've encouraged our congregate care service providers to engage in vaccine preparedness and readiness activities so they were ready for public health units.

The measures we've put in place have worked. Infection rates in congregate settings such as VAW shelters have remained low, and we've been successful in preventing widespread transmission in sites once an outbreak has been detected.

I'm now going to turn to my colleague Assistant Deputy Minister David Remington in the child welfare and protection division to speak to the critical infection prevention and control measures.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Rupert, and thank you, MPP Cuzzetto, for the question.

I really appreciate the opportunity today to talk about some of the partnerships we've had with the Ministry of Health, helping our agencies through this really difficult time in the pandemic and supporting vulnerable populations to adhere to infection prevention and control measures. I just want to say, before the pandemic, I don't think we had used the word "IPAC" too much in our ministry—so lots of work to do.

I want to take a moment to express appreciation for the sacrifices that all Ontarians have made in the last several months and the past year, and in particular, those staff who have been supporting some of Ontario's most vulnerable individuals in our residential settings.

As the minister has said, the COVID-19 Residential Relief Fund has been super in helping agencies to address staffing shortages, residential respite for caregivers and personal protective equipment supplies. We had a really great partnership with the Ontario children's aid societies at the beginning of the pandemic to leverage their supply chain and be able to distribute personal protective equipment to multiple agencies throughout the sector. As the deputy said earlier, over 31 million pieces of PPE were distributed to those residential care providers to keep folks safe—so just a really great partnership and an ability to leverage quickly and adapt quickly to the pandemic.

An additional screening measure to deal with COVID-19 has been the provincial antigen screening and the ministry's work in congregate care settings. Expanding the use of rapid antigen testing provides more support so that folks are able to catch the virus early and able to detect when we have a challenge. On a voluntary basis, the rapid testing is currently available. It supports a broad range of community residential settings, including adult and children residences, supportive housing and other congregate care settings such as violence against women shelters, to help stop the spread. It has been a real collaborative effort. The antigen testing—so far we've seen, as of May, eight asymptomatic cases that were identified. By identifying these cases early, it prevents spread into the homes. Right now, we have 200 locations using 9,000 tests a week at scale and lots of work happening in this space.

1650

We're also working closely with the Ministry of Health to leverage local partnerships and really make sure that

people understand infection prevention and control measures, pooling infection prevention and control capacity across the government and across communities to support one another, identified as hubs. We have key champions that support working together so that we can make sure that everyone understands the benefits of using these protective measures.

I'll now turn it back to ADM Gordon to talk about the ministry's support and awareness of the efforts in the violence against women sector and some financial supports in underserved communities.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thanks very much, ADM Remington.

As the minister noted, it's critical that the public knows that our crisis lines and shelters are open throughout the pandemic. That is why MCCSS launched a social and digital media campaign to increase public awareness that shelters remain open to provide safety and support to all women and children across Ontario.

The violence against women public awareness campaign ran March 8, 2021, to March 31, 2021, to increase awareness that individuals can still seek help if they are experiencing domestic violence or at risk of harm, even while COVID-19 restrictions are in place. The campaign included Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat social media ads, out-of-home display ads and search ads. The result? Over 17 million impressions served across social, paid search and out-of-home. Snapchat was the top driver of Web traffic to the campaign landing page; 78% of Facebook and Instagram ads targeting women were delivered to those between 25 and 44 years of age; and for search ads, 48% of the people who clicked on the ads were women 25 to 44 years old.

An additional social media campaign based on boosted posts began on June 1 and will end on June 18. The campaign is currently live on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat to continue to increase awareness that individuals can seek help if they're experiencing domestic violence.

The campaigns encouraged people to seek help and resources from the ontario.ca/safe web page or to call one of the provincial crisis lines, including the Assaulted Women's Helpline, Fem'aide and Talk4Healing.

As mentioned in Minister Dunlop's opening remarks, \$1.5 million in funding supported over 72 front-line counselling agencies and sexual assault centres to help women obtain much-needed counselling supports to keep them safe. Without this investment, counselling supports would have been significantly reduced or unavailable for many women who would not have had access to in-person supports during the pandemic, potentially increasing the need to access emergency shelters. We expect these investments to have long-term positive impacts on the system by enabling organizations to expand service offerings and provide more choice to survivors about how they receive services.

We've also supported the shelter system through our partnership with the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses, whose 95 emergency shelter member organizations support women across Ontario as survivors of domestic violence. We supported them with funding of

\$170,000 to build capacity across the sector through a wide variety of leadership and training programs, and we continue to make these available during the pandemic through online training modules.

As you may know, the government's 2021 budget includes an additional \$2.1-million investment over three years to expand victim and sexual assault services in underserved communities, to expand free legal support services for survivors of sexual violence across the province, and to improve collaboration across the sector to provide seamless supports for victims and survivors. The 2021 budget also announced \$18.5 million over three years for the Transitional and Housing Support Program, to support victims of domestic violence and survivors of human trafficking to find and maintain affordable housing and help them transition to independence. These benefits are important always, but will be even more so as our province recovers from COVID-19 and we work to support the recovery of women and children impacted by domestic violence.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Investments have not only maintained the operations of crisis lines and shelters but have also supported the opening of new services to support children and youth who are sex-trafficked. Under the anti-human trafficking strategy, capital and operating funding was approved to support the creation of specialized residential services for trafficked youth. These services are specifically designed to fill the current gap in anti-human trafficking programs and services for the province's youngest victims of this heinous crime.

Some \$2.63 million in capital funding supports the creation of two specialized residences for trafficked youth, and \$2.9 million was approved to operate these new specialized, licensed children's residences for trafficked youth. I'm pleased to report that the first opened in May 2021. These investments will support the recovery of exploited children as Ontario recovers from COVID-19. They reflect the Ontario government's ongoing partnership with the VAW sector to ensure that the essential services and supports that women and children need every day, but especially in these days of pandemic stress, remain available to support them and protect them.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that, ADM Gordon and ADM Remington.

And thank you very much for the question, MPP Cuzzetto. Like I said, you've been quite busy during the pandemic. We've seen you delivering food all across your region. I know your constituents are quite happy, and the organizations that you've been supporting throughout the pandemic have really relied on the service that you've provided. I appreciate the question, and also the opportunity I had to visit your riding and tour one of the women's shelters there—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say that with that, Minister, we're out of time.

We now go to the official opposition for their rotation. MPP Harden.

Mr. Joel Harden: Building from the last round, Minister Smith, I recall the number being corroborated as far

as folks who are on social assistance, particularly OW—as of December 2020, 50,500 cases of people with earnings. So I'm wondering if you have a figure, as part of the Poverty Reduction Strategy, that you can share with the committee about the percentage of working Ontarians—which would certainly include low-wage working Ontarians like this—who need access to food banks, housing help programs. Do you have that number?

Hon. Todd Smith: I appreciate the question.

Nelson is with us. I don't know, Nelson, if you have access to that kind of a statistic or not, but—

Interjection.

Hon. Todd Smith: Karen Glass may have it?

I don't know, Karen, if you have access to that type of information or not.

I don't know if we've seen Karen lately, but she is responsible for a number of the programs, like the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan, the Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Youth Opportunities Fund, within the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, and she is the assistant deputy minister there in strategic policy.

If Karen is not available—

Mr. Joel Harden: I think she is, Minister.

Hon. Todd Smith: Oh, is she there?

Ms. Karen Glass: Sorry, Minister. Yes, I seem to have lost all my pictures of people, but I am here. Thank you.

Thank you for the question. We do not have those numbers, actually, Minister—and to the question, MPP Harden. We would be happy to facilitate that through the Clerk when we can access them.

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you for that.

What I can certainly confirm for all ODSP recipients and OW recipients I know in the city of Ottawa is that there is regular food bank usage. It was one of the big concerns of the pandemic, because a lot of these organizations are closed—"How can I find access to safe and healthy food?" For folks in both of those categories—in the case of Ontario Works, they're trying to make that transition into paid employment. What it confirms to me, at least, is that there are a heck of a lot of folks in our economy who are struggling, given their employment. It would seem, then, that having a job isn't necessarily, in and of itself, a ticket out of poverty.

What about, as we've been trying to talk about today, the social supports that help us have good-paying jobs, that mean you can afford to live anywhere in this province, particularly some of our bigger metropolises that are very expensive, absolutely expensive?

My question, then, Minister, following on that, is, given that you're overseeing this larger project of transformation in employment services, what are the kinds of jobs that you expect can be offered through these employment provisions, given that we obviously want to be placing people in a good fit for them? When you look at it from even a basic standpoint of salary and hours, what's your goal? What are you thinking of?

1700

Hon. Todd Smith: Obviously, we want people to be successful in getting employment, and we want to create

jobs. That's why we've brought in this employment transformation that we've been talking about all day. The more people we can get into the workforce, obviously, the better. We want to have good-paying jobs.

At the same time—to your previous points about food bank usage—it's absolutely true; more and more people have been accessing food banks throughout the pandemic. That's why we invested \$765 million into the social services relief fund, into the 47 different municipal partners that we have, working with our colleagues at the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and distributing that funding to them.

You touched on Feed Ontario, for instance, one of the partners that we've been working with throughout the pandemic, as well, to get them food boxes so that they could send them out to individuals who were finding themselves in difficult situations early on in the pandemic—and, actually, throughout the pandemic.

It's why we've invested in the Student Nutrition Program and programs like that. Even though children haven't been in school throughout the entire pandemic, those types of programs have been able to continue because of investments that we've made into that program. I've got to say, the only reason that those were successful was because of the volunteers on the ground in those communities. These were the teachers and principals and custodians and clerical workers in the schools, and parent council representatives who were making sure that those types of programs were able to continue. I went to a number of them—one of them up in Peterborough that I recall, with MPP Dave Smith. They were actually shipping food baskets and boxes to families. In my area, the Food for Learning program, for instance—they weren't actually delivering the food; they were delivering gift cards for grocery stores, so that families could go out and purchase what they wanted. There have been a lot of innovative ideas going on.

To your question about employment services—because we got distracted there by food banks, and I did want to touch on your comments: They have been instrumental in helping people throughout the pandemic. When it comes to getting people into good-paying jobs, one of the things that we've really been focused on—and Minister Dunlop has actually been very involved from a women's perspective—is getting people into good-paying jobs like the skilled trades. We've invested a lot of money into skilled trades programs, which will be invested into people. We know that if you take the time to pick up a skilled trade, you're going to be guaranteed—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister; my apologies.

MPP Harden, you had your hand up.

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you very much. Minister, I completely concur with you about the importance of the skilled trades—very important professions. I have a particular question in that light, then; it's something that got brought up in our earlier round.

Something that I certainly consider to be a skilled trade is personal support work. I think about the kind of skill that it takes to build trust with an elder or someone living

with dementia, to help that person communicate in a way that's safe for them, to help them with eating, to help with them with any kind of cultural competency that may be required if they've all of a sudden left their home and their culture and they're now in residential care. There's a lot of skill that goes into personal support work.

I'm wondering if we can just have a conversation right now, at this point. What I'm thinking about, as I've heard members of the government say many times in the House in debate, is the crying need we have to fill PSW positions in Ontario and the commitments that the government has set. One of the things that continues to worry me—and I see it in our city, here in Ottawa—is that we continue to be very reliant on for-profit companies to staff those positions, on temporary contract agencies.

Recently I was meeting with folks I know you know very well, at OASIS—very talented people who oversee the developmental services sector—and they told me explicitly that the pandemic pay increase that was implemented in the province of Ontario had the single biggest workplace impact for them that they had ever seen. To hear earlier today in our conversation that that has been extended—that's very good news. They said to me that what it meant for them is far less reliance on contract agencies to fill absences that, boy, are happening all the time, when parents have to stay home, when things happen as a result of the pandemic.

I'm wondering if, in fact, Fedcap, or some of these other employment agencies, are going to be working with people on social assistance to find employment. Let's just speculate that some of those folks may—emphasis on the word “may”—be able to find work in caring professions like personal support work or other kinds of caring professions. What about the idea of only having employment agencies like this working with public and non-profit PSW organizations? Because the benefit, then, is that we could make sure that those folks who were previously drawing upon OW, or who will for the rest of their life draw on ODSP, who are going to act as care workers and do an incredible service to our province get every single cent the province of Ontario puts towards that particular occupation. I remember from the Auditor General's report in 2016, we lose as much in home care—which is the lowest-paid of all the PSW professions—as much as 52% in administration to some of the for-profit companies operating in the sector. That boggles my mind. That's a question I would have for you, Minister. If we were to think about these particular employment service projects, referring OW recipients or ODSP recipients on a part-time basis into PSW or caring work—what about making explicit to these employment agencies, from your position as minister, that those groups should be working with public and non-profit groups? We can maximize every single dollar we invest from the people of Ontario into working conditions and for the clients, for the care services they get. What do you think?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for the question.

I did have an opportunity earlier this week with my colleague, your colleague, Dr. Merrilee Fullerton, the Minister

of Long-Term Care, to visit one of those public training centres which is at Loyalist College in Belleville. We visited virtually with the PSW students who are in the accelerated program to get more young people—not necessarily young people, but more people—working as PSWs.

I would agree: Personal support workers are so, so important. I don't know if you know this—you probably don't—but prior to getting into politics and prior to being the news director at Quinte Broadcasting, I worked for three years as an orderly at a long-term-care facility in Moncton, New Brunswick. So I know just how difficult a job it is. I think that's why my back is as sore as it is today, because of those years working as a PSW—

Mr. Joel Harden: Too many lifts.

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes, for sure.

To your point: I think this is an all-hands-on-deck approach. We really do need to have a huge influx of personal support workers in our province to provide support for those who are already working in the sector, but also to fill the jobs of the future that we know are just around the corner with our aging population that we have in Ontario and all the investments we've announced through Minister Fullerton's ministry when it comes to new and redeveloped long-term-care projects. We're going to need 27,000 PSWs, so it really is going to be all hands on deck.

I know in that accelerated program, there are thousands who are going to be entering the profession. We're going to need as many as we can come up with.

So I would say that—and I see you have your hand up. I just wanted to make, if I could—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Harden had his hand up.

MPP Harden.

Mr. Joel Harden: Don't worry, Minister; I'll let you come back on that thought.

That's interesting to know about your employment history. You do, obviously, from that have a sense of what folks are going through, with developing that trust and the hard physical labour that goes into this profession.

I'm glad you were at home at the Loyalist training centre. What concerns me more are the quick five-week programs set up by some of the private career colleges and companies like Bayshore, ParaMed and CarePartners who—again, it's hard to get these records. They do contracts, as you know, with the Ministry of Health, and those contracts are not publicly available documents. They're very hard to get a hold of.

Anecdotal evidence I've been able to get by my own wiles leads me to believe that sometimes an organization like CarePartners could be billing the Ministry of Health \$28 an hour for a PSW providing work in the community, and that person, most often a woman and most often a woman of colour or even a newcomer to our country, is getting \$16 to \$17 an hour.

We're trying to figure out how we can get people who have lived some difficult lives, because that's who we're talking about with social assistance and OW—because a lot of those people have great capacity to care; they do

good caring work already—to think about this as an occupation. Why don't we think about these employment referral services working only with public and non-profit organizations? I don't, frankly, think there's a good financial case to give Bayshore's investors more money. I would much rather figure out how we get every single dollar into the living conditions and working conditions of people in this sector.

1710

The other thing that makes me quite concerned with this particular moment is, as you know—you're an eastern Ontario person; I am too. I am up here right next to the Ottawa River, with my friends from Quebec over there. So there's always a compare and contrast of public policy that goes on here in the city of Ottawa, and what we know is that the government of Quebec has hired almost 10,000 new care attendants. When I bring this up with Minister Fullerton, she's quick to say, "Those aren't PSWs, Joel; those are orderlies." I look at them as care professionals, whether they're orderlies, as you once were, Minister, or whether they're PSWs. These are care professionals doing important work. They had a minimum salary, as you may know, of \$50,000 a year—no surprise, they had a flood of applications. They had a lot of applications. They had a lot of commitments around employment standards in this sector.

When I look at what the employment service agencies are going to be doing for folks on social assistance, that is what's on mind for me, Minister—getting people into the professions where you've worked, where so many people have worked.

Why don't we figure out a way to make sure there's a requirement that we partner with organizations and we put every single dollar into the pay packet of that care worker and into the care that resident gets, so we can—hey, I'm not always going to say my friends in Quebec are right and we're wrong, but in this case, it would seem they've got a good idea. Why don't we follow it?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for the question. I appreciate the conversation we're having here.

I think a mix of different training partners is probably going to help us achieve the goals that we want to reach as quickly as possible.

Before we were cut off previously, I just wanted to clarify that when it comes to the three prototypes, I believe earlier I may have mentioned that Fedcap was a for-profit or insinuated that it was a for-profit; it's actually the not-for-profit in the three prototypes. It's the one in Peel that's the for-profit, and that's the same one that has been hired by John Horgan's government out in BC to provide the services out there. I just wanted to make sure, for the record, that that's cleared up, in case there was any question as to which was the for-profit and not-for-profit.

We were previously talking about tax credits. We introduced the new temporary Ontario Jobs Training Tax Credit as well in this year's budget. That is going to be instrumental in getting people into the skilled trades or other jobs, and PSWs have been highlighted as one of the training programs that is eligible for that tax credit as well. We're investing public money into ensuring that we're filling jobs

we know have to be filled. So this \$2,000 tax credit is going to be available. It's going to provide relief of 50% of eligible expenses, and it's going to support individuals with their incurred expenses related to higher education, including the PSW program, but also graphic design programs, heavy machinery training programs. We know that one of the most critical things we have to do is get more people into those types of jobs, because we have a lot of huge projects that we've committed to, including all of the subways in and around the GTHA. Getting that work done, we're going to need some heavy machinery folks to operate the equipment that we need. And a whole litany of other programs would qualify for that \$2,000 tax credit.

We're investing public money to fill jobs we know are going to—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): My apologies, Minister. MPP Harden.

Mr. Joel Harden: I want to put us back on the track again of drilling down on anticipated savings with this extension of employment services transformation.

In particular, page 28 of the report talks about the freeing up of resources in social assistance offices now that the program has been designed to expand province-wide.

I'm wondering if you could elaborate or if someone from the ministry could elaborate on how much of that transformation of employment in social services is anticipated to cost—where these savings are coming from. Give us a better sense of what that looks like.

Hon. Todd Smith: I've done a lot of talking today, so I'll let Nelson take this one, if that's okay.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Since we're sharing, MPP Harden, my in-laws are from Vankleek Hill, so we have a connection.

Mr. Joel Harden: You're kidding me.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: I'm not kidding you.

Mr. Joel Harden: Wow.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister Smith.

The savings we are talking about are actually a reinvestment of the administrative capacity that we're freeing up to support life stabilization activities and to better support clients. That is the reinvestment we need in order to support better outcomes for people. We can't have our caseworkers spending over 50% of their time on administration. That is what we're freeing up: that administration. When I say "caseworkers," I'm talking about both on the Ontario Disability Support Program as well as with our municipal partners on the Ontario Works program. So it is a reinvestment to better support people into greater independence, and also employment outcomes where possible.

Mr. Joel Harden: What I'm trying to figure out, then, is, if the anticipated savings are going to be rolling back into allowing ODSP workers and Ontario Works workers to have more time with clients, are there anticipated targets of where we want caseloads to be? That's what I'd like to do for the rest of our time this afternoon. I certainly am concerned, in conversation with a number of OW and ODSP workers, that caseloads are—I don't think the word

“unwieldy” describes it. I honestly wouldn’t be able to last a week in a profession where I had 400 people to look after, many of whom have significant needs. Have there been any targets set there?

Hon. Todd Smith: These workers are doing great work, for sure. That’s why we’re trying to free up as much time as we can for them.

Given the fact that we have 30 seconds here, I will hand it over to Nelson, and he can probably fill the remaining time with the title that he has in this department.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Nelson Loureiro, assistant deputy minister of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, SA portfolio.

We are looking at a new service delivery model, and that’s exactly what we’re co-designing today. We are—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): And I’m sorry to say, with that, you’re out of time.

The next rotation goes back to the government. MPP Roberts, please.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: We’re in the final hour of today’s committee deliberations, and we thank both of you and all of the ministry staff for being here today, for being so patient and going through a really broad range of programs that are oftentimes so important for supporting vulnerable folks across the province.

The topic that I want to talk about, Minister, is one that you know is very near and dear to my heart, and that’s the Ontario Autism Program. As most folks, I think, on this committee know, autism policy in Ontario is what brought me into politics, and my younger brother Dillon, who’s on the spectrum. Of course, when we ran in the last election, in 2018, we had an Ontario Autism Program that was facing some major challenges that had been decades in the making. We had a program that was underfunded, with a long wait-list. We had a program that didn’t provide a range of clinical services that were needed. And we had a wait-list that, frankly, wasn’t moving the way it should be.

I’m very proud that our government took action to start to rectify these issues. We doubled the OAP budget to \$600 million per year so that we could address the number of children receiving nothing at all through the OAP. We also brought together our amazing Ontario autism panel that provided a slew of recommendations to expand that program out to offer foundational services: early years support, urgent services and, of course, core services. I know that today, as this program is still being rolled out, we’re now up to 36,000 children who are receiving some level of support through the Ontario Autism Program, which is more than three times the number of children who were being supported under the previous government. So I’m really pleased with the progress that we’re seeing so far. There’s still more to come, but so much great work has been done thus far.

Minister, while these supports are much needed—the things like foundational services, early years etc.—I know that the ultimate goal is to get as many kids as possible into core clinical services within the doubled \$600-million budget. I’m wondering if you could provide this committee

with an update on the progress that has been made thus far on achieving this worthwhile and needed goal.

1720

Hon. Todd Smith: I absolutely can. Thanks very much, MPP Roberts. I want to thank you, as my parliamentary assistant here at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, as well, for all the work that you’ve been doing, not just on the autism file, but on a number of files that we’ve been working on. I certainly have had the opportunity to meet your family and Dillon up at your office, back in the summer of 2019. I know how important he is to you. I know how he has been your inspiration as we work towards a new Ontario Autism Program, one that’s going to serve all children in the province of Ontario. So thanks for the question.

We’ve been working really hard. A lot of people, as you mentioned, the Ontario autism panel and the Implementation Working Group—all of those members have been working really hard, and our ministry staff, on implementing this groundbreaking needs-based Ontario Autism Program. As you indicated, there have been mistakes made along the way on the file, dating back to the early 2000s. That’s why our government has taken the time to listen and work with the members of the autism community, to understand how to better support children and youth on the autism spectrum and their families. With the recent doubling of the autism budget, as you pointed out, to \$600 million, we’ve got an opportunity to create a world-class autism program here in Ontario.

I would like to recognize the time, again, and dedication of the advisory panel that worked tirelessly through the summer of 2019 a couple of floors below me right now, here on University Avenue in Toronto, to deliver that comprehensive set of recommendations that have formed the foundation of our new OAP. It has really become our road map on the path forward, and we’ve been following it every step of the way.

I’d also like to again point out the Implementation Working Group members, those 12 volunteers from the community, including autistic individuals, parents, researchers, clinicians and service providers, who have been meeting weekly since January of last year, analyzing the data and the research and offering their expertise and their input on key design elements that are new to autism services here in Ontario. Their work will result not only in an autism program that was built and designed by the community but what I’m confident will be the gold standard right across the country. This truly is a program that was built by the community for the autism community.

Beginning in March, the ministry began inviting families to participate in the launch of core clinical services. That’s a key step in the ongoing implementation of the new OAP. A broad group of families are being invited to participate in the launch, including children of different ages and genders and cohorts. For example, children receiving childhood budgets, interim funding or behaviour plans, as well as different geographic areas from across the province, are participating in the start of core services. Launching these core clinical services will provide the

ministry with an opportunity for early evaluation prior to full provincial implementation, and it's going to allow for further refinement as needed. It will also provide families with an opportunity to share their experiences and help us refine the process and refine the tool that we're using for the allotments.

An important part of the launch of core clinical services is the needs determination process, and I can tell you that in line with the recommendations of the autism advisory panel, it has been a key area of focus for the clinical and research experts on the Implementation Working Group. This process is focused on putting the child at the centre of all decision-making. Care coordinators are going to work with families to collect information about a child to determine their level of support need. Following the completion of this process, families will receive a corresponding OAP funding allocation, and families will work with a clinician of their choice to access eligible core clinical services. That, of course, includes the whole gamut of services that are now part of the OAP: behavioural services, speech-language pathology, occupational therapy and mental health services. This process really was informed by the experts, including researchers and clinicians from a range of disciplines, and takes into account a child's need at different ages and stages.

In addition to making core clinical services available for families, we're building a comprehensive program with multiple pathways to care for children and youth on the autism spectrum. For example, we've implemented foundational family services, which are under way, to further support families with their child's ongoing learning and development. These services are currently being provided by over 35 different service providers across the province, and that's at no cost to families.

The program will also support young children to access early intervention programs during their preschool years, and it's going to prepare them to enter school for the first time—because we know how important these early years are to successful outcomes.

We know that urgent needs can arise that require more immediate support, and that's why we're establishing urgent response services as part of the new OAP, as well.

To support families during this transition period, we extended our commitment to provide one-time funding by a full year, so all families registered up until March 31 of this year would be eligible. In addition, all families who have received interim funding or childhood budgets will receive an additional payment so that they can continue to purchase eligible services and supports they feel are most appropriate for their child as the province continues to implement the OAP. This is particularly important given our current circumstances, dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing the challenges and uncertainty that families are facing as a result of COVID-19, we've also extended the amount of time, from one year to 18 months, that families have to spend their childhood budgets and interim funding. We're really committed to getting this right, and that's why we're taking the time to ensure that

we get this right. We're going to continue to support children and youth during the transition.

You mentioned the 36,000 families who are currently receiving funding through the OAP, and they're getting support through the existing behaviour plans that were in place, the childhood budgets or the interim funding. That's three times more children than at any time under the previous government.

Jennifer Morris has been working extremely hard, along with the Implementation Working Group and the panel during the summer of 2019, and our team and our staff here. I'll ask ADM Morris to provide some additional comments on the progress that we're making on the implementation of this new program for Ontario.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Thank you so much, Minister, and thank you, MPP Roberts, for the question and also for all of your work as we advance the new program.

As the minister noted, one of the key recommendations made by the autism advisory panel in their report back in October 2019 was the establishment of an implementation committee to provide ongoing input and support to the government on the implementation of the panel's recommendations, to bring form and life to the vision that the panel had laid out. Aligned with that recommendation, in December 2019, the government announced the establishment of an Implementation Working Group who would be responsible for providing advice and input on the implementation of the program. The group has been quite remarkable. It's composed of individuals on the autism spectrum and parents of children on the autism spectrum as well as leading research and clinical experts representing a range of disciplines, including social work, occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, pediatrics, neuropsychology, behaviour analysis and children's mental health. It includes individuals with clinical and program expertise in the area of autism service delivery and represents organizations such as the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, Child and Community Resources up in Sudbury and McMaster Children's Hospital. It also includes representatives from Ontario's northern and Indigenous communities and members of the former autism advisory panel to help facilitate consistency and continuity between the two pieces of work.

The mandate of the Implementation Working Group is focused on four key areas. They are providing advice on a standardized, clinically informed process to determine each child's level of support need and corresponding funding allocation, taking into account the need for service caps, as recommended by the autism advisory panel. They are also helping us design early intervention programs and our urgent response services, including eligibility criteria for these programs. They're involved in capacity-building initiatives, with specific attention to northern, rural and remote areas in the province. Finally, they're advising us on the proposed timelines, sequencing and phasing of implementation of the new program elements as well as the transition plans to support children and families entering the new program.

Members started meeting in January 2020, as the minister mentioned, on a biweekly basis, and in some cases, subgroups have been meeting on a weekly basis since then. They have participated in over a hundred meetings with the ministry over the past 16 months. We have asked them to review published research, analyze data, examine what is happening in other jurisdictions, and apply their clinical and professional knowledge and their lived experience in order to fulfill their mandate.

1730

The members have been extremely committed to their work. Even through the challenges of the last year, they continued to work virtually. They never missed a beat as a result of the pandemic. They transitioned immediately into virtual discussions to keep the work going. The majority of their time has been working to develop the process to identify a child's level of support need and their corresponding funding allocation. As they quickly learned, there are no existing tools or processes that identify a child's need and align those needs to funding as it relates to autism. As a result, they provided significant advice on the development of a made-in-Ontario needs determination tool, the first of its kind, and we're pleased to be implementing this new process with 600 families as we launch core clinical services that are under way.

Guided by a standardized tool, a care coordinator will meet with a family and ask a series of questions to understand the child's or youth's goals and strengths as well as their support needs across nine domains, including social interaction, activities of daily living, sensory systems, motor skills, play and leisure, interfering behaviours, mental health, cognitive skills, and communication. In addition to those domains, the care coordinator also will consider factors such as their developmental and life stages as well as coexisting health and environmental factors.

Based on the results of this standardized and clinically informed process, care coordinators will identify the intensity of support needs as being extensive, moderate or limited across different age ranges. The result of this process will result in an OAP funding allocation for core clinical services, which may include behavioural services, speech-language pathology, occupational therapy and, for the first time in the OAP, mental health services, depending on the needs of the child.

The funding allocations were informed by published research and provincial data, with input from clinical experts from the working group, and reflect the estimated amount of service that a child with a defined level of support need might access.

The determination-of-needs process will be completed with each family at least annually to help ensure that their child's profile of need reflects their child's changing support needs over time. It's critically important to note that this process is separate and distinct from the clinical assessment that is completed by a clinician as the first step of treatment planning. Families will work directly with their chosen clinicians to develop treatment options and plans for their child.

As the launch is under way, we look forward to hearing from families and care coordinators about their experience in the process. This feedback is going to help us inform our next steps as we move forward with a province-wide implementation.

In addition to the launch of core clinical services, the ministry has also issued several selection processes to choose service providers for a number of key streams of the new program, including early years services, an entry-to-school program, urgent response services, and an independent intake organization. These processes are essential for implementing the new program and are the result of the advice and input we have received both from the autism advisory panel as well as the Implementation Working Group. We were pleased to see really strong interest from service providers, both public and private providers, in applying to deliver the new caregiver-mediated early-years programs.

Following the release of a call for applications in December 2020 for an independent intake organization, the ministry is finalizing an extensive evaluation process, all of which is being supported by the Fairness Commissioner. This independent intake organization will play a key role in the OAP and will be accountable for overseeing many functions, including intake and registration, wait-list management and data collection, employment and training of care coordinators, and building regional networks of local service providers to support service delivery and capacity-building.

The selection processes for the entry-to-school program and the urgent response program are currently under way, and we look forward to receiving proposals from interested service providers for those program streams as well.

Aligned with the autism advisory panel recommendations, and based on the advice we receive from the Implementation Working Group, the ministry is also working on a number of strategic actions for the short and long term to build sector capacity and build a more responsive service system.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Two minutes left.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: We expect that this plan will have the biggest impact in northern, rural and remote communities and where capacity issues are most acute.

The scale and complexity of the changes ahead of us are significant and require careful planning, and we're working closely with our experts from the Implementation Working Group to make sure that we get it right. We continue to make good progress and look forward to continuing to implement the key elements of the program over the next year to better support children, youth and families.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Mr. Roberts.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Chair, how much time remaining?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You've got a minute.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Well, I'll just say again, ADM Morris, thank you for all of the work you've been doing on this file as well.

Minister Smith, we've come so far on moving this forward. I agree completely—a huge thank you to the Implementation Working Group for all of the hours that they've put in

over the past number of months. I'm very proud of Anne Huot, the chair of the Implementation Working Group, from right here in Ottawa, a former VP at CHEO. She has been wonderful to deal with and so passionate in making sure that we get this program right.

I'm very pleased, as you mentioned, that we're also looking at how we can deal with some of those capacity issues across the province, particularly when it comes to northern Ontario and ensuring that we get service up to some of those rural and remote areas and some of those Indigenous communities as well. That's why it's great that on our Implementation Working Group we had the representation from the northern communities as well as representation from Indigenous communities, putting a critical eye onto implementation and how we can deal with these issues.

We're probably out of time, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You are.

Now to the official opposition: MPP Harden.

Mr. Joel Harden: We are going to return to a discussion on employment services transformation for what I think will be the last round from the opposition.

Again, just so I properly understand how the three pilots have been evaluated, I'm wondering, Minister Smith, if you can help me understand if there were performance-based benchmarks for the contracts that have now expired that are going to be moving forward—if you could just help me understand that, from all of the three participants.

Hon. Todd Smith: The targets that we've set, as indicated earlier, are to transition more people off of social assistance, where possible, into employment. The targeted number is to have 60,000 individuals moved into employment by 2024. We want to increase that gradually.

ADM Nelson, if you want to pick up on that, you can go ahead.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, MPP Harden.

As the minister mentioned, the targets that the minister mentioned are from the Poverty Reduction Strategy, specifically around 60,000, and 2% of those being from ODSP.

To your question, MPP Harden, around specific performance measures related to the contracts that have been signed with the service system managers: We'd have to go back to the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development and get what those are.

Mr. Joel Harden: When you get that information, we'll definitely be interested to know what that is. Certainly, when any organization has their contract renewed, I'm going to make the assumption that they've met their targets, if we're talking about an expansion.

Let me just ask that question, Minister, or ADM Loureiro: Is it your understanding—because I'm assuming you're in regular contact with Minister McNaughton and that team—that there have been not the longer-run 2024 targets but shorter targets? You may not know what those are for our conversation this afternoon. But do you know if there are shorter targets and if those targets have been met?

Hon. Todd Smith: I'm not aware of the targets. I know the statistics, and Nelson relayed those to you earlier. I believe that was during one of your rounds of questioning, MPP Harden. The statistics that we have seen so far with the number of individuals—say, for instance, 44% with disabilities who have moved in, and the number of people who have been successful in getting into employment.

1740

The one thing that I want to drive home and the one point that is really important to this discussion is that we want to support the individual. There are so many things happening here all at once. There's the Poverty Reduction Strategy, absolutely; there's the social assistance renewal project that's under way, as well; and the employment services transformation. Those are all so key, working in harmony to lift people off of social assistance or out of poverty and into employment where possible.

The one thing that I would like to make sure that everybody understands is that this really is about putting the person at the centre of all of this. We're not forcing anybody to take a job that they don't feel is appropriate. We want to work together with the caseworkers in a person-centred way to ensure that—as I mentioned earlier, for the young lady up in Sault Ste. Marie who was really interested in horses in that youth pilot up there, they were able to find employment in an equestrian job for that young lady, and get her the supports that she needed in the community, as well, to make that a success.

Ultimately, what we want is for these individuals to be successful in what they do and enjoy the work that they have. So instead of forcing them into something now—while we did talk earlier about trying to encourage people to get into lines of work where we know we need to fill those jobs, like personal support workers, for instance. We know we're going to need 27,000 of those to fill some of the promises that we've made around the four hours of care—and all of the buildings that we're putting up, the redevelopments and such, and the aging and health needs of the people of Ontario. We're encouraging people to get into that line of work or perhaps pick up a skilled trade. The average age of a skilled trade worker in Ontario is even older than us, so we need to encourage young people to get into the skilled trades as well. While we can always encourage those young people or individuals to do that, we would never force them into that. We want them to have the choice of where they get their training. We want them to have the choice in the job or vocation that they would like, to be as successful as they possibly can be, going forward in their lives.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Harden.

Mr. Joel Harden: I certainly agree with that sentiment.

Again, Minister—the last time I'll mention it—any time, as a standing invitation, because we're both eastern Ontario people, if you want to talk with the Causeway folks here through a Zoom event or whatnot. I do not have to be involved in the slightest. That is precisely what they're attuned to—they're attuned to how you specifically support every single person with a disability and their

relationship to paid employment. It is, as I was saying earlier, an art and not a science. Everybody will have a different journey.

I want to pursue a different topic now. It kind of returns me to those quotations from previous Premiers that I brought up earlier as I was trying to understand what has motivated Ontario to keep social assistance benefits so low. One of the only conclusions I could come away with is this sense that has been pervasive for years that we need to keep the benefits low or the risk is that people will use them fraudulently. I know we've seen an active debate on this—about the CERB, federally. There's an active, very heated debate about how, for a lot of people who have been hand-to-mouth in this period, CERB was a lifeline. We were happy to work with our federal NDP caucus to fight for that. People are now, post-tax time, having some cold water splashed on their face about how much of that they actually have in their bank accounts at the end of the day, even if they're low- and modest-wage workers.

I want to revisit this particular lingering supposition—I would articulate it that way—in our social assistance system that we need to keep benefits low because if the benefits are too generous, there's a risk that, as Premier Hepburn once said, this will encourage idleness; this will encourage people taking advantage of the generosity of the public purse. I raise this because it has come to my attention that the MCCSS has recently hired 17 program integrity analysts to monitor recipients for fraud allegations. I'm wondering, Minister, if you can comment on why that was a priority for the ministry, if it's driven by this historical philosophy that would appear to have driven the decision to keep benefits low, the concern around fraud.

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes, I absolutely can. I know ADM Loureiro will pick up on whatever I miss.

Again, one of the key issues we heard from our workers at ODSP offices and OW offices, for that matter, was that they're spending too much time on things that aren't helping people. We do get thousands of fraud complaints that need to be investigated. Not all of them are found to be fraudulent in activity, but what that does is take away the caseworker's time, to investigate these types of complaints or allegations they're getting. They're responsible for that right now. That's why we've hired these program integrity workers. They're going to be responsible for investigating those—and there are thousands of them that come in every year that need to be investigated. The hiring of these program integrity workers is one of the several changes we're making that is going to transform the system and provide better support for our most vulnerable people out there, because their caseworkers are going to be able to focus on them more effectively and get the results for them, rather than investigating these fraud complaints or doing all the paperwork that's attached to that.

I hope that helps.

Nelson, I know you can pick up on that. Go ahead.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Harden?

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you. Just at a high level, so I properly understand it, these 17 individuals will be responsible for alleged fraud allegations of 500,000 ODSP recipients?

Hon. Todd Smith: Well, no, it's not that many.

I'll hand it over to ADM Nelson Loureiro.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you for your question, MPP Harden.

We are centralizing the fraud investigations. Last year, we received 26,000 fraud investigations, and we are centralizing them for the reasons that Minister Smith outlined. In terms of removing that work from the caseworker, it does a few things. One is, it reduces the work so they can focus on other things and focus on supporting clients to better outcomes as well. It improves the relationship between the client and the caseworker, where you have a centralized unit—versus a caseworker who is supporting clients through their life stabilization activities and their goals as well. That's what we're doing. It was 26,000 last year—that we are centralizing through this staff in order to have our caseworkers focus on helping clients, helping people.

Mr. Joel Harden: Can you clarify for me, ADM Loureiro or Minister Smith—the complaints are coming from where, precisely? The complaints are coming anonymously through the ministry? They're coming from other recipients? Where are these complaints coming from?

Hon. Todd Smith: You can answer that, Nelson. Go ahead.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you. They're coming from multiple sources. They come from a fraud hotline. They can come through letters to caseworkers. They can come through faxes. They can come through multiple sources. The majority come through our fraud hotline. It is a phone number you can call to make an allegation. Many of these allegations go unsubstantiated, but they need to be investigated, and they come from multiple sources. They sometimes come from our internal data sources as well. We have data exchanges with third parties like the CRA etc. where we may get flags that indicate there is something that needs to be investigated within the case. That's what this unit is doing.

Mr. Joel Harden: I want to say, bridging to another topic, I hope to see the day soon when we don't need to have a fraud hotline for social assistance. To me, at least, it reinforces the view that the folks who are on social assistance, who are some of the most marginalized people we have in our province, in the case of OW, people with permanent disabilities who are on ODSP—I'm uncomfortable, I just want to say for the record, as a critic in this area, that we maintain that. I think it reinforces a view that fraud is widespread.

I actually look forward to seeing what the 17 individuals will be doing. I have a lot of faith that the people who are, day in, day out, working with folks who are living in difficult circumstances, really tough circumstances, and those people themselves, can figure out ways.

1750

I look forward to the day when the Ministry of Finance has a fraud hotline for the amount of fraud that goes on in a Maple Leafs game, with business taxes being deducted and the people paying for high-priced tickets and expenses for folks who, frankly, don't need the help.

A different question: We've had requests from stakeholders in social assistance that the overpayment investigations that have begun in this moment of the pandemic, when overpayments have happened—that there be a moratorium on those, just given the circumstances people are living in. Often these are not large amounts. Minister, ADM Loureiro, I'm wondering where we're at on that. Has the ministry considered that—that there be a moratorium on seeking redress for repayments, particularly in this period when money has been really tight?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for that question, MPP Harden. I do know that we are being flexible with our—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We're having difficulty with your sound, Minister.

Hon. Todd Smith: Well, that's funny, because it has been working well all day.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I know. You have a great voice. You must have had a history with this stuff.

Hon. Todd Smith: I'm only anticipating that perhaps my microphone is getting tired.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): It's always possible.

Hon. Todd Smith: Because I'm not. Joel and I, we could continue—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): No, no, you're bopping along. I can see that.

Hon. Todd Smith: We could continue to do this all day. I really enjoyed it this afternoon, Joel.

Can you hear me okay now?

Mr. Joel Harden: It's faint.

Chair, what do you think we should do?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Well, speak as loudly as you can, Minister, and we'll limp towards the finish line.

Hon. Todd Smith: Hopefully, you don't put a bullet in me when I cross the line.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Not for this. Absolutely not.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, Chair. Maybe—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Oh, that's better.

Hon. Todd Smith: I was going to say, maybe in the interests of everybody, we pass it over to Nelson, because you can hear him loud and clear, and so he can identify himself one more time.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister.

Nelson Loureiro, assistant deputy minister of social assistance policy planning and innovation at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

Overpayments are assessed and collected where assistance is received that exceeds the amount the person was eligible for. However—going to where the minister was going—if a social assistance recipient is experiencing financial hardship, including loss of earnings or exceptional costs due to COVID-19, they can discuss their situation

with their caseworker. There is discretion to reduce the rate of recovery of an overpayment in cases of financial hardship or positive recovery of overpayments in cases of financial hardship.

Mr. Joel Harden: I think it's pretty safe to assume, ministry-wide, program-wide, that everybody drawing upon this level of income is in financial hardship, so I'm glad that flexibility exists on a case-by-case basis. Rather like the discussion we were having earlier this afternoon about whether or not the province should have extended the temporary emergency benefit to the whole caseload as opposed to those who contacted their worker—this is a very similar discussion. I think any way we can help people figure out a way to eke out even a tiny shred of dignity, given the poverty we ask people to live in under these programs, would be welcome system-wide. Just given the incomes we're talking about here, ADM Loureiro, it would be welcome system-wide.

I want to move to a different topic that's related. It's something that has been brought up with me a lot. I'm not sure, Minister Smith, if this is for you or one of the ADMs. I'm curious to know what the policy rationale is for potentially removing people from social assistance when they enter into romantic relationships with people who are not social assistance recipients. I have heard a number of social assistance recipients—OW and ODSP—who have told me that there once was a time when people would check how many shoes were on the mat outside the apartment door. As someone living in poverty, someone living with trauma, someone in a difficult position in their life, on OW, or someone with a permanent disability, they felt that was a discriminatory act against them. I'm wondering if folks could enlighten me, because I've never actually had the opportunity to have this discussion in a policy sense with the ministry—why that exists and why there isn't more flexibility to make sure that folks can enter into relationships and not have their social assistance impacted.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for the question. Can you hear me okay now?

Mr. Joel Harden: It's faint, but I can hear you.

Hon. Todd Smith: Okay. I'll get a little bit closer. We'll hug the mike, as they say.

Maybe what I can do—I'll pass it on to Nelson again—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): That's great, Minister. We can hear you.

Hon. Todd Smith: Oh, you can hear me?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes. Hug that mike.

Hon. Todd Smith: Okay. It's good to know. I'll hug the mike.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Two minutes left.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thank you very much, Chair.

I have heard this as well, and we've been having discussions with the team here at MCCSS about that. As a matter of fact, I believe I was in a meeting not so long ago with a number of people from your area, MPP Harden, up in Ottawa, talking to them about this specific issue. So we are continuing to investigate that.

As far as the history of it goes, I'll pass it over to Nelson, just to bring this one home.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Minister.

As the minister mentioned, we are looking at rules that exist—and I'll call them rules or policies, as you mentioned, MPP Harden—through our recovery and renewal plan, that, as the minister mentioned, are problematic currently.

However, in the case of the relationships etc., as you mentioned, it is assets and income—it is how we look at the policies related to assets and income. If the person is now in a common-law relationship or a marriage or a relationship where they're living together for a period of time, we do look at that as a joint unit. We call it a benefit unit—not to get too technical—and we do look at the assets, income and the rules as they associate with social assistance eligibility across that benefit unit.

In some cases and in some circumstances, for somebody who is potentially joining into a relationship etc., the assets and income rules apply, and we need to look at eligibility accordingly. However, in saying that, we are looking at rules—

Interjection.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Sorry, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We've come to the end of that rotation.

Colleagues, I have two minutes left on my clock. I'm going to suggest that we wrap for the evening. As they say, I see 6 o'clock when I look into the distance.

I don't see any great objection, so the committee will now adjourn until Tuesday, June 15, 2021, at 9 a.m. Thank you all.

The committee adjourned at 1758.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES

Chair / Président

Mr. Peter Tabuns (Toronto–Danforth ND)

Vice-Chair / Vice-Présidente

Ms. Donna Skelly (Flamborough–Glanbrook PC)

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong (London–Fanshawe ND)

Mr. Toby Barrett (Haldimand–Norfolk PC)

Mr. Lorne Coe (Whitby PC)

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto (Mississauga–Lakeshore PC)

Mr. Randy Hillier (Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston IND)

Ms. Jane McKenna (Burlington PC)

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell (Thunder Bay–Atikokan ND)

Mr. Michael Parsa (Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill PC)

Mr. Randy Pettapiece (Perth–Wellington PC)

Ms. Donna Skelly (Flamborough–Glanbrook PC)

Mr. Peter Tabuns (Toronto–Danforth ND)

Substitutions / Membres remplaçants

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky (Windsor West / Windsor-Ouest ND)

Mr. Jim McDonell (Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry PC)

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff (Niagara West / Niagara-Ouest PC)

Mr. Jeremy Roberts (Ottawa West–Nepean / Ottawa-Ouest–Nepean PC)

Also taking part / Autres participants et participantes

Mr. Joel Harden (Ottawa Centre / Ottawa-Centre ND)

Clerk / Greffière

Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna

Staff / Personnel

Ms. Laura Anthony, research officer,
Research Services

Ms. Sude Beltan, research officer,
Research Services