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Standing Committee on Estimates

Ministry of Children, Community
and Social Services

Ministry of Energy,
Northern Development
and Mines

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Tuesday 15 June 2021

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

Ministère de l'Énergie,
du Développement du Nord
et des Mines

1^{re} session
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Mardi 15 juin 2021

Chair: Peter Tabuns
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Peter Tabuns
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Tuesday 15 June 2021

Mardi 15 juin 2021

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

MINISTRY OF CHILDREN, COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): 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 five hours and 50 minutes remaining for review of these estimates.

When the committee adjourned on June 11, the official opposition had just finished their rotation. We will now go to the government for their round of questions. Who will be leading off for the government? MPP Roberts, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Am I unmuted?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, you are. We can hear you clearly.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Perfect. Okay. Thank you, Chair.

Good morning, everyone, and good morning, Ministers. Thank you again for joining us today to continue our deliberations. I want to lead off with a question for the associate minister. Obviously, recently, with the discovery in Kamloops, the issue of violence in our Indigenous communities has come front and centre, and I know that this is something that you have been passionately involved in, specifically around the issue of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls. We know that the history and tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls across Canada is one that needs to be addressed by every government. Every person should be able to live free from fear and harm wherever they are. This includes Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQ+ people.

I know that our government has been working on responding to the final report that was released two years ago and recently provided Ontario's strategy. I also know that a priority was made to have Indigenous voices, particularly Indigenous women, leading the strategy.

My question is about that plan forward, but also how it was created. I'm wondering, Minister: Can you expand on what went into creating Ontario's response, the goals of the strategy and how we can get to the root causes and create solutions? Also, can you speak to the need to address the issue of violence from a multi-ministerial and multi-sectoral approach? Thanks, Minister.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you so much, MPP Roberts. Good morning, Chair. Good morning, committee members and staff who are supporting us today.

All Ontarians deserve to live free from violence and abuse of all kinds. The tragedy of violence towards Indigenous women and girls is completely unacceptable and must be met with real solutions. This violence has devastating and long-term impacts on women, children, families and communities across the province.

We have developed a whole-of-government response to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Pathways to Safety: Ontario's Strategy in Response to the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was launched on May 12 and represents Ontario's plan to address violence against Indigenous women, children and 2SLGBTQ+ persons. We are proud of the important work we have conducted to date, as well as the work we are committed to doing moving ahead to ensure that Indigenous women, children and 2SLGBTQ+ people live safely.

Ontario has been taking proactive action to respond to violence against Indigenous women, children and 2SLGBTQ+ people within our province, including the establishment of an Indigenous Women's Advisory Council. This work has been and continues to be Indigenous-led. We listened carefully to the survivors, families and loved ones who participated in the national inquiry and our own engagements. We are deeply grateful for the leadership from Indigenous partners and organizations who have shaped the vision for Ontario's path forward to address the root causes of violence against Indigenous women and children.

We are also grateful to the Indigenous Women's Advisory Council for their expertise and commitment to the ongoing partnership of this work. The council provided critical input on the development of Ontario's strategy. Our government has expanded the council's mandate beyond March 2022 to ensure that Indigenous voices continue to drive the strategy's priorities and help build on the province's progress to date in responding to violence against Indigenous women, children and 2SLGBTQ+ people. Our strategy sets out how all sectors across Ontario can continue to address and eliminate the root causes of violence so that future generations of Indigenous women and their families are safe to live their lives free of violence.

Ontario's strategy is built on the foundation of cross-government work, such as the child welfare redesign, the anti-human trafficking strategy, poverty reduction, the Ontario Indigenous Children and Youth Strategy, the long-standing Indigenous Healing and Wellness Strategy, and leveraging the Roadmap to Wellness, Ontario's mental health and addiction strategy. Each one of these strategies has a distinct Indigenous lens and approach attached so that they are receiving the culturally appropriate supports that are needed.

For example, in our anti-human trafficking strategy, we have the Anti-Human Trafficking Indigenous-Led Initiatives Fund, and have ensured that Indigenous practices and customs are woven into the work that is being done. Attorney General Doug Downey, in our recent legislation, ensured that there are considerations for the expansion on the use of restraining orders. We've engaged with Indigenous children's aid societies, as well, for the work with children and youth in the child welfare system who are at a high risk of being trafficked. We have the Indigenous Children and Youth Strategy, which is a key part of our work in the child welfare we design. I will let ADM Remington speak more to that, but I want to say that we are working closely with First Nation, Métis, Inuit and urban Indigenous partners in this space, including with the expansion of customary care, the ongoing work to create circles of care and the designation of Ontario's 13th Indigenous children's aid society.

We've also ended the use of birth alerts in this province, which is something I'm particularly proud of. It was part of the calls to justice as it disproportionately impacts Indigenous women and other minority communities.

In Ontario's Roadmap to Wellness, which was announced by Minister Tibollo and Minister Elliott, there was a specific stream of Indigenous supports that respects Indigenous cultures and practices. We also have public education and prevention campaigns and community-based services that are by and for Indigenous communities, including the Family Well-Being Program, the Kizhaay Anishinaabe Niin/I Am a Kind Man program and the Kanawayhitowin/Taking Care of Each Other's Spirit program.

As I mentioned before, the Indigenous Women's Advisory Council has been absolutely incredible in their work on the province's response but also in many other aspects. With the expansion of their mandate, we will ensure that Indigenous voices are leading our work, and they will also be providing integral advice on our continued work to combat human trafficking, the ongoing work of the child welfare redesign, including child, youth and family well-being, as well as broader violence prevention initiatives.

I will now pass it over to ADM Simmons to speak more on our response to the final report, and if there is time, ADM Remington can speak to the work we're doing in the child welfare system with respect to Indigenous children and youth.

ADM Simmons?

Ms. Barb Simmons: Thank you, and good morning. Assistant Deputy Minister Barb Simmons for the office of women's issues.

Thanks, MPP Roberts, for the question, and thanks, Minister, for the introduction. I'll just go into a little more detail on how we approached the development of the strategy in partnership with our council representatives.

MCCSS and Indigenous Affairs Ontario worked closely with 10 other ministries as well as the Indigenous Women's Advisory Council to help steer our strategy on the critical issues impacting Indigenous communities and to specifically address the actions in the calls for justice as part of the national inquiry report and the advice received during other engagements with Indigenous partners through this process. The 10 partner ministries are the Ministries of Health; Education; Labour, Training and Skills Development; Transportation; Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries; the Ministry of the Solicitor General; the Ministry of the Attorney General; Municipal Affairs and Housing; Energy, Northern Development and Mines; and Colleges and Universities. You can see it's quite the whole-of-government cross-cutting approach. Each ministry has a clear and vital role to play in this strategy.

0910

We also know, of course, that violence isn't only physical, it doesn't happen in a silo, and it is often a result of many factors that need to be adequately addressed. So bringing all of these partner ministries to the table helped us make sure that we were looking at a holistic approach and getting at the root causes of violence.

In advising Ontario on the development of its strategy, the council helped us define priorities and develop a framework. As we go forward, the council will continue to advise on the development of performance indicators extremely critical to mark progress toward the end goal of the strategy, as well as working in partnership with us on Ontario's public reports on progress.

Some history on the council: We created it in June 2020 to help with the ongoing work of our response to the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls national inquiry. Several initiatives were rolled out prior to the creation of the council in response to the strategy as well.

The council membership represents a wide diversity of Indigenous partners and communities across the province, including the First Nations provincial territorial organizations; Nishnawbe Aski Nation; the Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians; the Anishnabek union of Indians; Grand Council Treaty 3; independent First Nations were represented; Six Nations of the Grand River—our co-chair Sandi Montour represented the Six Nations as well; the Chiefs of Ontario, of course; Tungasuvvingat Inuit community; the Métis Nation of Ontario; the Ontario Native Women's Association, represented ably by our co-chair Coralee McGuire-Cyrette; and the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, represented superbly by the recently retired Sylvia Maracle.

The co-chairs, as I referenced, are Coralee McGuire and Sandra Montour. They have been absolutely fantastic in their leadership. They have stood alongside us in partnership. They have given us their strong advice and direction. They met frequently both with officials and other ministry

staff, as well as with the minister, to provide leadership on this front.

The strategy is made up itself of over 118 initiatives under six pathways that reflect the findings of the national inquiry. These will help create the changes and sustain the changes required to eliminate the root causes of violence and advance reconciliation. The pathways include:

- the pathway to security;
- the pathway to justice, covering the justice sector;
- the pathway to health and well-being, including mental health; and
- the pathway to culture, including education.

In addition, we added two pathways, labelled pathway to responsibility and accountability, which encompasses initiatives designed to ensure that the regular progress reporting we have committed to is effective, and a pathway toward addressing systemic anti-Indigenous racism, which will look at initiatives to get at root causes of racism and systemic violence.

The strategy itself builds upon well-established and foundational initiatives, as the minister mentioned—initiatives that have already demonstrated some strong outcomes; initiatives that our partners at the council, as well as additional Indigenous communities, organizations and people have named to use as wise practice that should be followed and built upon.

Ontario has worked to develop long-standing relationships with Indigenous partners, in order to create those culturally appropriate programs that have had a positive impact in preventing and responding to violence against Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people. These key programs have been recognized as best practices, as I mentioned, and part of the strategy involves seeking input from our partners on the actions we should take to strengthen that work further.

Those foundational initiatives include:

- supporting a continuum of healing, health and wellness programs in First Nation urban and rural communities, as well as Métis and Inuit, through the long-standing Indigenous Healing and Wellness Strategy;
- supporting improved outcomes for Indigenous children and youth through the Ontario Indigenous Children and Youth Strategy, which includes the long-standing Family Well-Being Program;
- continuing to support Indigenous-specific anti-human trafficking programs and services for victims and survivors under Ontario's Anti-Human Trafficking Strategy;
- continuing to advance the Ontario Indigenous Children and Youth Strategy through a distinct Indigenous approach to child welfare redesign;
- leveraging and continuing to build on the Roadmap to Wellness: A Plan to Build Ontario's Mental Health and Addictions System, which includes specific investments for programs led by multiple ministry partners which advance calls for justice related to mental health and addictions.

Included in the strategy as well are approximately 30 new and expanded initiatives being approved or already approved through individual ministry processes. It's truly a whole-of-government approach.

Similar to our anti-human trafficking strategy, we've taken the approach that there is always room for improvement, being flexible and targeting our initiatives to meet current circumstances. That's why we're constantly looking at how we can expand and support the existing initiatives while building new ones or enhancing aspects of existing strategies to address gaps we may find and which our partners may identify for us.

Among those new initiatives, MCCSS, including the Office of Women's Issues as a partner, colleges and universities, and labour, training and skills development are working with urban Indigenous organizations that provide comprehensive social and employment-related supports, including wraparound supportive housing, child care, mental health supports and skills development, and in particular supporting sole-parent Indigenous women, to create pathways for these women to post-secondary education and employment. The strategy also commits to responsibility and accountability by continuing to work with Indigenous partners and the Indigenous Women's Advisory Council on regular progress reporting over the next five years.

Performance measures for specific initiatives, population-level indicators, and measures of success and progress for the entirety of the response will make up our accountability framework. We began our discussions on this framework on June 8, with an initial session with our Indigenous Women's Advisory Council.

Finally, the strategy includes a cumulative investment of over \$1.6 billion. This includes funding for core foundational programs, new initiatives and programs that received funding for expansion.

We recognize, together, including our council members, that it will take long-term coordinated and sustained action to address and eliminate the root causes of violence. We look forward to continuing to work with the Indigenous Women's Advisory Council and with our many ministry and Indigenous community partners to continue to address violence against Indigenous women, children and 2SLGBTQQIA+ persons.

I will now pass it over to ADM Remington, who can also speak to the work we're doing in the child welfare space and working with Indigenous partners.

Mr. David Remington: David Remington, assistant deputy minister for child welfare and protection in the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. Thanks, ADM Simmons, and thank you, MPP Roberts, for the question and the opportunity to speak about the work we're doing.

As the minister said, the Ontario Indigenous Children and Youth Strategy is a co-developed framework that we've worked with Indigenous partners on over the years that really seeks to fundamentally transform the way child welfare works. It's rooted in holistic, preventive and culture-based programs to support Indigenous communities. It's responsive to the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls calls for justice and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action. Every part of our work in child welfare is guided by the OICYS, or the Ontario Indigenous Children and Youth Strategy.

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

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Chair.

We've also invested \$95 million to support Indigenous community prevention. These types of programs—I just want to profile a couple, but the Family Well-Being Program is one that has three goals: to end violence against Indigenous women, to reduce the number of Indigenous children and youth in the child welfare system, and to improve the overall health and well-being of Indigenous communities. It's the first of its kind, and the Family Well-Being Program was co-developed by Indigenous people for Indigenous people to serve Indigenous people. It's really based in traditional land-based teaching and ceremonies, trauma-informed counselling, addiction support, safe places and coordination of services.

We invest \$35 million in this program to support 34 partners in 220 positions across Ontario of front-line workers in 250 delivery sites. A third-party evaluation said that the Family Well-Being Program substantially improved family well-being. It reduced violence and it helped families stay together in the reduction of child welfare involvement. Our work together has supported Indigenous communities, and this work is very supported in the work that we're doing together to improve the lives of others.

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A study on the Indigenous friendship centres said that this program has the potential to reduce \$42 million in savings for government over the long term in mental health supports, suicide prevention, policing, and family and social service costs. The Ontario Native Women's Association reported that it effectively helped 173 families, including 251 families that were helped to stay out of child welfare apprehensions, and 87 families, including 156 children, were reunited.

We announced an increase last year for the Roadmap to Wellness of \$5.4 million—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say, with that, we're out of time on this rotation. Before we go to the official opposition, I want to note I understand that MPP Jill Andrew has joined us. MPP Andrew, you have to confirm your identity and your location in Ontario. MPP Andrew?

Ms. Jill Andrew: Yes, hi. I was having a little difficulty unmuting. I am here in Toronto. Thank you, Chair.

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

It is now time for the official opposition rotation. Who will be taking that? MPP Armstrong, the floor is yours.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you. I'm watching the mute and unmute now. It's more successful to respond. Good morning, everyone. Thanks again to my colleagues and the minister and associate minister and all the ministry staff for being here today.

I wanted to go back to the Ontario Autism Program just to kind of finish up some of the questions that I had. The FAO estimated that with the new service levels, and if the wait-list were to be flattened, the province would need to

increase the OAP annual budget by \$96 million to \$996 million by 2025-26, and families have been told by this government that the \$600 million is fixed.

How does this government plan to ensure that families that need the services get those services? I would like to ask the minister, please, to address that question.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, MPP Armstrong. Good morning to you and your colleagues and all of my colleagues at committee this morning. I'm pleased to just reinforce the fact that our government has committed \$600 million year over year to families with children in the Ontario Autism Program.

As you know, and from our discussion the other day, the Ontario Autism Program is now much more robust. It includes all kinds of different programs that were not previously included in the Ontario Autism Program under the previous Liberal government, with the \$300 million that had been allocated by them for the children across the province.

So there are \$600 million available each and every year to families to access all of those services. There was a strong focus on ABA under the previous program, and, certainly, ABA and those behavioural programs are extremely important, but not for every child. I think that's one of the things that I heard loud and clear as I travelled the province, and I know the autism panel and the Implementation Working Group continue to hear from families, that they did want access to speech-language pathology; they wanted access to occupational therapy and mental health supports; they needed that urgent crisis piece, which is in development; they needed that foundational family services piece, which is so important and is currently under way and serving more than 20,000 families across the province; they needed to have that early intervention piece, the one that prepares children for school, which is so important. All of these programs are in development.

As you know, we have the 600 children who are in the new needs-based Ontario Autism Program who are being assessed as we speak by their care coordinators, and then will be putting together their action plan when it comes to the treatment they're going to be receiving in conjunction with the clinician who is going to be working with their family. They'll be reassessed to ensure that that needs-based assessment tool is working properly, and then we'll bring thousands of children into this new needs-based program in Ontario. But at the same time, they will continue to be able to access all of those other programs that are currently being developed.

There are a lot of pieces to this. There were over 100 recommendations, as you know, in the Ontario autism panel's report. The Implementation Working Group—I'm looking forward to meeting with them later this week, with my deputy minister, Janet Menard, just to thank them for all the work, first of all, that they've been doing, because they've spent over a year now as the Implementation Working Group, making the difficult decisions to move this program forward and helping us in every way. Those are clinicians, researchers, academics, people who work in the sector and families with children with autism, and

adults with autism are working on the Implementation Working Group as well. It really has been a team effort to roll out what is going to be the gold standard across the country when it's completed.

To speak a little bit more specifically about the actual dollars and the funding allocations, I can bring in Jennifer Morris, who I know we spoke with, I believe it was, Thursday and Friday last week, as she is the assistant deputy minister responsible for the children with special needs division.

But just before I bring Jennifer in—if that's okay, MPP Armstrong—to answer the specifics of your question, I just wanted to again say that while children with autism are a priority for the government, all children with special needs in Ontario are a priority, and that's why we've invested \$240 million. It's the first investment in children with special needs who are receiving services from our children's treatment centres in more than a decade. The previous Liberal government did nothing to enhance the ability to get services for all of those other children aside from autism. So we've increased the autism program by \$300 million, but we've also added \$240 million for all children with special needs who are receiving services from their children's treatment centres, as well as the investments in all of the capital projects—and I know one of my colleagues has a question about that later on this morning, so we can go into greater detail on some of those capital investments.

But, ADM Morris, if you wanted to pick up on MPP Armstrong's specific question about funding, that would be great.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Thank you. Jennifer Morris, assistant deputy minister, children with special needs division. Good morning, MPP Armstrong, and thank you for the question. And thank you, Minister.

To the minister's point, I think that when the FAO made those projections, it was based on a previous construct of the program which had the government funding only behavioural therapy for a small number of children, and I believe, if my memory serves, the calculation was an extrapolation of, "If you're spending this much for this many children, you therefore will spend this much for X number of additional children." But the reality of the new program is that there are a number of brand new interventions that were not in place at the time the FAO made their projections.

The importance of early intervention cannot be understated, particularly in an area like autism. It's an area where certainly our clinical experts and families have long advocated for earlier intervention with their children, when we know that there is the optimal opportunity to make shifts in that developmental trajectory of children. So the work on the new program has focused very much on how we get kids into service, into the therapies they need, in evidence-based programs, literally from the age of one. And so the early intervention programs, the caregiver-mediated early years programs, the entry-to-school programs are going to serve thousands of children in a way we were never able to serve previously in the Ontario Autism Program.

In addition to that, as the minister stated, currently there are well over 20,000 families accessing foundational family supports, and those supports include a range of opportunities. It's not just a workshop on a video screen. You can meet with clinicians. You can get advice from them in a series of meetings following a skill-based workshop. It's very focused on the individualized needs of children. So again, it's the kind of intervention that the previous program was lacking in terms of being able to support families and children with all of their needs, and we project well over 30,000 to 35,000 families are going to access those services in the coming year. In addition to that, we have our school transition supports. Well over 10,000 children are being served in those school transition supports. Those will continue. This is all in addition to core clinical services, which in the coming year are going to serve more children than we've ever served before.

0930

So despite the FAO's projections based on a previous construct of the program, I think the reality is that the \$600-million budget, which is twice the amount of resources we've had before—the targeted program streams that are very clearly rooted in evidence in terms of what has the greatest impact for children with autism are going to have a much different impact on the projections as we continue to roll out the program.

Thank you.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you so much for that. I want to clear up—oh, my camera went off by mistake there. I wanted to clear up the waiting list. How many are currently on the waiting list today, how many of those are legacy kids, how many since you became government have been added to the list, how long will it be to clear the list, and how much is that going to be?

So how many are currently on the waiting list, if you can answer that today, and how many families are legacy? I know it's a lot of questions, so you can do two at a time if you want, but that's the roster of questions I'm looking to get answers on.

Hon. Todd Smith: ADM Morris can pick up on some of this, MPP Armstrong, but the thing that's most important—and Jennifer just touched on all of the different programs that are available now. This is far different than any previous iteration of the Ontario Autism Program. And when we say that this program was developed by the community for the community, I mean that is exactly true, and that's the point, right? This is a far more wide-ranging program that addresses the actual needs of all children out there in the province.

Right now, anybody who applies for foundational family services that's registered with the OAP has the ability to access the service right away. There are 36,000-plus children in the province who are receiving support or service from the provincial government, which is more than three times at any time in the province's history. Far more children now are receiving supportive services from the government than at any time in the province's history.

When it comes to core services or, in this case, the previous program, it was just the behavioural program,

that number—and Jennifer can give you the exact number or close to the exact number—has been extended because any kids that were in that program had the ability to continue on in that program, the legacy program as it's called, the one that was in place with the previous Liberal government. Many that were in that previous legacy program elected not to continue within that program because they wanted access to the other services that are now available, like speech language or mental health or occupational therapy or other services.

So there are 36,000 kids that are in those legacy programs, receiving the childhood budgets or receiving the interim funding that's available through the province. But at the same time, any child and any family can access those foundational family services right now and the myriad of other programs that are going to roll out as well.

ADM Morris, I don't know if you can be a little more specific than I was there with answering MPP Armstrong's question.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Thank you. I'll give it a shot. The total number of children registered on the wait-list currently is 46,891. Of that, there are 3,889 children in behaviour plans. The number of children in behaviour plans goes down every year for a couple of reasons: (1) children turning 18 and aging out of the program; and (2) exactly as the minister has described, families opting to end a behaviour plan and receive a childhood budget or one-time funding instead. The reason they do that is to access the range of services that are available to them through that funding and that are not available to them through an existing behavioural plan. We also have families whose children have been on behaviour plans for a number of years and they want something different. We've certainly heard a number of reasons from families why they would opt out of a behaviour plan and receive a childhood budget.

Of the 46,891 registered, 3,889 are currently on behaviour plans. The remainder have all been invited to receive a childhood budget or interim one-time funding. All 46,891 people registered on the current wait-list have received an invitation to receive funding, whether through a childhood budget or through one-time funding. So obviously there are significantly more people receiving support to purchase services for their children than ever before.

In terms of your other questions, MPP Armstrong, you may have to remind me of what they are.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I'll start asking them one at a time, because it is difficult to get them all in. How many families have been added to the wait-list since you became government, and then how long will it be to clear that list?

Ms. Jennifer Morris: On the first question, added to the wait-list, we'll have to go back and double-check that. There were 22,000 children on the wait-list on March 31, 2019, in addition to 10,000 children who were in behaviour plans, so roughly 32,000. Over the last two years, it has increased by about 12,000 or 13,000 children. But I'd have to get you the precise numbers. I don't have them going back to the beginning of this government's mandate.

Hon. Todd Smith: I would just add to ADM Morris that those children aren't actually waiting and those families aren't actually waiting. As soon as they're registered in the Ontario Autism Program, they can begin receiving services immediately. That's one of the things that I heard from families when I was travelling the province in the summer of 2019: Upon receiving diagnosis, in many cases, they were waiting years and years, and in most cases, never receiving any kind of support from the government or any kind of programming, because, first of all, the funding was not enough in the program. It was 25% of the families out there who were using up all of the funding that was available, which left 75% of the families in the province without any kind of service at all, which is why it has been really important to bring in things like the foundational family services so that those families who could have been waiting for years were receiving some support. Also, they were receiving funding, so they were receiving either a childhood budget or interim funding.

None of the families that are on the—and I'm using parentheses—"wait-list" are actually waiting to receive services. They may be waiting to get into core services, if that's what they choose or that's what's determined is the clinical treatment for their child. But, ADM Morris, not all children require core services, correct?

Ms. Jennifer Morris: That's correct, and there is a range of intensity that families will be seeking for core services for their children and a range of therapies that they'll be seeking. Some may want a brief intervention with the speech-language pathologist, which is very different from intensive behavioural therapy, which can be upwards of 20 hours a week for a child.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you. What does the invitation mean for families in accessing services?

Hon. Todd Smith: It's a letter that's mailed out to the families, and they respond to the ministry to access the funding or the services that are available. ADM Morris, if you want to pick up more specifically on that, go ahead.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Thank you. A family registers for the Ontario Autism Program. They are provided with an Ontario Autism Program—

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

Ms. Jennifer Morris: —file number. They can use that to access services immediately, like the ones the minister has been describing, foundational family services.

I'm sorry, I've lost the second part of your question.

0940

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: It was—

Hon. Todd Smith: The invitations.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: The invitations.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: The invitations. I'm sorry. I apologize. So once children were registered, it would trigger an invitation from the ministry to invite them to apply for a childhood budget or one-time funding, if they so chose, and that is where we have seen a number of them who didn't respond to those invitations, despite us following up with them a number of times to do so. There are different levels of need from different families, expressed

in different ways, for services and for the resources from the program.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: The \$300 million that the Liberals had, and then the Conservatives put another \$300 million in—that's a total of \$600 million. Has that been spent on the Ontario Autism Program? Has that amount been fully spent in the budget last year? Is there any leftover money that wasn't spent in that program?

Hon. Todd Smith: We've spent the \$600 million, and we're going to continue to spend \$600 million every year. Again, there are all kinds of different ways that that money is being spent, depending on what the families choose. Unlike previous iterations of the program, where it was all spent on behavioural, or mostly behavioural, now all of those other programs are available to families to access—including a number of free programs, as I mentioned, like foundational family services, that don't have any costs attached to them. You don't have to necessarily receive funding in interim funding or a childhood budget or behavioural program funding to access those types of services. The same is going to be said for the—I always get the name of this wrong, Jennifer—early-to-school program—

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

We now go back to the government. MPP Roberts, the floor is yours.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Thank you so much, Chair, and thank you again, Ministers. I want to talk about something that's really near and dear to my heart. It was a top priority for me after I got elected, and I know, Minister, it's been something that you've been pleased to support. The broad topic is capital investments, and the specific project that I want to raise is the CHEO 1Door4Care project. This is going to be a real game-changer for the people across eastern Ontario and in Ottawa, providing service to over 40,000 families across the city, providing a range of mental health, special needs and rehabilitative services to these children in a new state-of-the-art facility on the CHEO campus.

I recognize that this is part of a broader capital strategy that the ministry is engaging in that includes some other exciting projects—I know there's one down in Chatham-Kent—and so I'm wondering, Minister, if you could share some details on your efforts to support the community and social services sector through some of these new and innovative capital strategies, projects and funding.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, MPP Roberts—PA Roberts—for the question, and thanks for your work on this file, as well. You've been a tremendous advocate for CHEO over many years, particularly in your last three years here as a member of provincial Parliament, and I know they appreciate your advocacy and your efforts in raising the issues on behalf of the folks at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario.

Our capital and infrastructure strategy is certainly a huge part of our overall ministry transformation agenda. Our plan impacts every program within the ministry, and these investments will enable us to improve services and outcomes for our clients, some of which, as you know, are

the most vulnerable in our society. Over the next 10 years, we're going to invest more than \$600 million in our major and minor capital programs. That includes:

- \$200 million in partner facility renewal funding to support local needs across the sector;

- another \$50 million over the next four years to upgrade our directly operated youth facilities;

- \$16 million in funding to our rural and remote VAW sector and supports for developmental services agencies;

- \$4 million over the next two years to support our anti-human trafficking strategy;

- more than \$300 million in funding to our children's treatment sector, supporting children's autism and special needs programs; and

- \$5 million over the next three years—\$1.75 million per year—to support the modernization of our Ontario Disability Support Program offices and to address the future office space requirements of our social assistance recovery and renewal strategy.

I'll start with the Partner Facility Renewal program, otherwise known as PFR, which provides the ministry's service providers with an opportunity to apply for funding to support their critical minor capital projects. Eligible recipients of PFR funding include any agencies that have a standing relationship with the ministry, including those that provide services supporting autism, child welfare, children and youth with special needs, developmental services, early learning and child development, Indigenous healing and wellness, interpreter and intervenor services, violence against women, anti-human trafficking and youth justice services, just to name a few. Over the last three years, my ministry has already invested more than \$46 million in PFR grants to support over 1,300 projects. This is in addition to the \$200 million that's planned for the future. For 2021-22, we're planning to roll out a new round of community grants, totalling almost \$15 million.

Some of our minor capital investments in 2021 supported key projects that assisted community agencies in the delivery of child welfare, developmental services and violence-against-women programming. The member for London—Fanshawe, who is with us this morning, may be interested in the \$105,800 investment that we made in London for the Children's Aid Society of London and Middlesex. That was to replace a humidification system. The member for Toronto—St. Paul's, who I understand is here as well, may be interested in the \$249,200 investment that we made in Toronto for various VAW community agencies for wheelchair accessibility and building repairs, such as leaky basements and roof repairs. And the member for Windsor West, who was with us previously, may be interested in the \$140,700 in investments that we made in Windsor for various DS community agencies for wheelchair accessibility, emergency lighting installations, building roof replacements and walkway repairs.

Those are the kind of projects that we're talking about that are imperative to make these buildings viable into the future. These building repairs ensure that services can continue to be provided in an accessible and safe environment for clients and the staff who work in those facilities as well.

In addition to the PFR program, our ministry continues to support service providers through timely major capital investments. This includes investments that will support three major children's treatment centre redevelopment projects. In 2019-20, over 110,000 children and youth received one or more rehabilitation services in treatment centres, and with increased investments by our government, that number is expected to increase.

One of the ministry's current major CTC initiatives is the Grandview Kids redevelopment project, which is located in Durham region. Grandview has been working with our ministry on this project, and they have recently received approval to move into the construction phase of establishing their new children's treatment centre there. A request for proposals was released back in May for the redevelopment of the children's treatment centre through a collaborative effort between our ministry, Infrastructure Ontario and Grandview Kids. This partnership will see the construction of a new approximately 106,000-square-foot children's treatment centre. That triples the amount of available space for specialized programs, clinical treatment and support to thousands of children and youth with special needs. Grandview's current 30,000-square-foot facility was constructed in 1983 and doesn't meet their current program demands. The new CTC will consolidate programs and services and expand space by enabling an integrated service delivery model.

As you know, we're also partnering with the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. By the summer of 2026, CHEO is targeting the completion of a new approximately 200,000-square-foot children's treatment centre that's going to double the current available space and expand capacity, reduce wait times and modernize services at CHEO. The consolidation of services from eight current sites into one will streamline the service experience for families. It's going to make attending multiple appointments there much easier. CHEO has been working with our ministry and has recently completed extensive planning work to prepare for the start of the construction of their new 1Door4Care facility in Ottawa.

Recently, we also announced our support for the development of a new approximately 55,000-square-foot Children's Treatment Centre of Chatham-Kent, which will more than double their available treatment space. I know our colleague MPP Rick Nicholls was advocating for this facility in his community and he's been successful. The current facility that was built back in 1984 is 24,000 square feet, and the catchment population and service demand has vastly outgrown the scope of their building. This new build will improve access to rehabilitative services for thousands of children and youth with special needs who are currently receiving services in a facility which is unable to accommodate the service demand there.

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On the theme of supporting our agencies that deliver critical autism and other special needs programs, we're also collaborating with the Ministry of Health and partnering with Health Sciences North to relocate and retrofit their children's treatment centre in Sudbury. Not only will

this investment continue to support the many families in need of services, but it will also assist the hospital in relieving overcrowding and addressing hallway medicine, which is a critical government priority. Progress on this construction project is well under way and we estimate it to be completed in the fall of this year. I know I had the opportunity to announce that last fall.

The one thing about all of these projects that you don't often consider is the need for parking. Often, we're dealing with accessibility issues in some of these older spaces. All of the spaces that we're talking about will have the appropriate parking facilities available on top of the extra space inside.

In our developmental services sector, we've made a \$3.3-million contribution toward the completion of the Lou Fruitman Reena Residence. That's a \$38.1-million, 80-unit, six-storey residence in York region. Our contribution supported accessibility enhancements and programming space for 30 of the 80 units. The Lou Fruitman Reena Residence will provide housing and programming for 135 high-needs individuals with developmental disabilities, and other vulnerable persons in the region. And I know, MPP Roberts, you and I and Minister Dunlop, one of our first meetings that we had after being moved to this portfolio in 2019 was with Reena to talk about this Lou Fruitman building. I'm so pleased to see it taking shape up there in York region.

Individuals who live below the poverty line have increased physical and mental health risks, and they have a higher likelihood of neglect in their lifetime. Over the last three years, the ministry has also invested more than \$30 million in partner facility renewal grants in the DS sector, supporting more than 966 projects across the province.

I know Minister Dunlop wants to outline some of the projects that she has in her sector, in particular support for women and girls who are fleeing violence, so I'll pass it over to Minister Dunlop.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, Minister Smith. We are continuing to make significant capital investments to the violence-against-women and human trafficking sectors. We have continued the partnership with Nellie's women's shelter by investing more than \$11 million towards the construction of an accessible 40-bed shelter that will increase bed capacity from their current 36-bed shelter and consolidate community support, outreach and administrative services. With construction nearing completion, we are excited to see this much-needed space open in Toronto later this summer.

We're very pleased to be partnering with Anduhyaun to support the needs of Toronto's Indigenous women and children. We have invested \$6.8 million to support the acquisition and construction of a new, accessible 18-bed emergency shelter in Toronto. Anduhyaun offers culturally appropriate emergency shelter and outreach programming to Indigenous women and their children. The new shelter will replace their current leased site, which is not accessible and not suitable for service delivery. We anticipate the project will be completed in the summer of 2022.

As part of our anti-human trafficking strategy, we have committed approximately \$6 million to construct specialized residences for children and youth under the age of 16 who are victims of human trafficking. Early intervention and prevention efforts are crucial to effectively combat human trafficking, and these specialized residences will provide prevention and intervention services as well as supports for child victims. The first two facilities are expected to be completed this summer, with a third planned to be completed in 2022-23.

I would also like to note that while this year has brought new challenges, we continue to proceed on important new projects, and at the same time prioritize short-term needs to address COVID impacts. Despite an overall challenging environment, the ministry still rolled out more than \$8.7 million in PFR funding to almost 300 projects at 132 agencies. Transfer payment recipients, particularly in congregate care and residential settings, could also access funding through our COVID residential relief funding and COVID community services fund. These programs allowed agencies to access funding for Plexiglas barrier installations and physical distancing modifications to support adherence to public health guidelines.

For our directly operated facilities such as the Child and Parent Resource Institute in London, our ODSP offices and youth justice locations across the province, we invested almost \$1.7 million. These investments allowed our facilities to meet public health advice for social distancing and enhanced cleaning needs to protect staff and clients.

The last year has definitely been challenging for our partners and clients. While there's still lots to do, we are making investments that will support our sectors to meet the growing needs of their communities.

I will now ask our ministry chief administrative officer to speak to how we are ensuring our investments are having the largest impact possible.

Mr. Drew Vanderduim: Thank you, Minister. My name is Drew Vanderduim. I am the ministry's chief administrative officer and assistant deputy minister for business planning and corporate services division with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

Just a little bit of background on our capital portfolio and grant processes: There are 34 government-owned sites and approximately 4,500 transfer payment recipient sites that operate to deliver the ministry's essential programs and services. It is indeed a large and diverse portfolio.

Our government-owned facilities include youth justice direct facilities, probation and parole offices, our ODSP support program offices, and our child and parent resource centre in London. Our transfer payment recipient sites include those locations delivering services on behalf of the ministry, including indirectly operated youth justice facilities, child welfare services, developmental services, residential facilities, women's emergency shelters, complex special needs supports for children, children's treatment centres, anti-human trafficking residences, just to name a few.

Our TPRs are independent of government and run by local boards that are responsible for their own day-to-day

management. A combination of funding sources is employed by these agencies to meet their infrastructure needs to ensure program continuity. While the ministry is a substantial funder and supporter of our agencies, funding is also available to them from federal and municipal governments, as well as the private sector.

MCCSS works to undertake significant improvements in its strategic long-term infrastructure planning for both directly and operated capital portfolios over the last year. Through the implementation of an evidence-based framework for infrastructure decision-making, MCCSS now has a program-specific vision for infrastructure that cuts across all sectors and realizes long-term operational efficiencies and supports sector transformation, economic growth and recovery, many of which the ministers have spoken about today.

Infrastructure investments are administered by the ministry through two main programs: One is our major capital grants and the other one is our minor capital grants. Our ministry works in partnership to jointly fund our major capital projects, many of which have been discussed. Projects like Grandview children's treatment in Durham and the Lou Fruitman Reena Residence in York have had communities, municipal governments and donors rally behind the proposed outcomes and contribute to the project in their communities. We encourage these project partnerships, as they not only foster collaboration, but also ensure local support and local investment.

As the minister has mentioned, we also provide funding to our minor capital grants, which are administered through our PFR program. Each year, TPRs apply for building repair, maintenance, program expansion and code compliance for things such as fire code funding etc. The ministry responds with a human-centred approach by prioritizing requests that preserve the quality, safety and accessibility of what is a substantial portfolio and the services being delivered there.

To support short- and long-term strategic planning, the ministry employs an evidence-based decision-making approach. One of the main inputs for the development of our capital plans are assessments of our physical assets. We do conduct assessments for transfer payment sites. A building condition assessment is an inspection of a physical site. It presents objective expert findings on a transfer payment site's current physical condition, including the estimated costs we have addressing deficiencies, repairs and maintenance. It also looks at the expected life cycle of all of our building components. We also get baseline asset information to complement program delivery.

Common elements that come out of these assessments are a facility condition index and rating, year-over-year building component costs, total estimated building replacement value and total square footage. The holistic, program-specific, site-specific and region-specific data attained from these assessments drives our ministry's analytical capacity for evidence-based decision-making and, by extension, supports a variety of short-and long-term asset management strategies.

Our portfolio has an average age of 43.7 years.

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

Mr. Drew Vanderduim: Our TPR sites are in good condition, as determined by our average facility condition index rating. Twenty per cent of our portfolio is in the lower end of that index rating and will require repair over the next five years. These findings are taken into consideration as we develop our infrastructure plans and prioritize major capital projects and our minor capital investments.

In addition to the assessment of physical buildings, we also look at program-specific needs to make the best possible decisions regarding building and operating maintenance—renewing, replacing and disposing of our assets. For example, in the VAW sector we looked at—we have service data from 96 of the ministry’s VAW shelters that indicates the number of women and children served had increased, with many shelters working at full capacity. While this assessment of capital and service data outlines preliminary opportunities for infrastructure investments to meet the growing needs, future modelling will need to consider data from other inputs such as socio-economic factors, program variables, functional requirements and operating costs.

In the children’s treatment space, we also look at program-specific needs. We do analysis of demand and wait times. We also recognize that the evidence that we have from those CTCs—they will require increased capacity over the next five to 10 years to successfully deliver their programs. We also look at demographic data and the trend that CTCs in these regions are expected to see a corresponding increase in demand for services in Toronto central, east and west regions.

While the CTCs do not have a common infrastructure model, using evidence obtained from the condition assessments and talking to the Ministry of Health and utilizing our stats, we continue to refine our infrastructure investment strategy. Part of the strategy is a prioritization model that works with a balance of programming and infrastructure measurables to support the ministry’s evaluation of our major capital proposals.

By looking at condition- and program-specific data, we combine asset management, socio-economic—

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

We now go to the official opposition. Who will be carrying the questioning? MPP Armstrong, the floor is yours.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I just wanted to go back to the associate minister’s opening remarks around human trafficking and children in care, and the potential dangers of Indigenous girls who can be exploited by traffickers when they’re in care. I’m certainly not—I certainly think the initiative is warranted and has value, of course, so this is not about challenging the program in any way, but just about getting some information. I just wanted to ask the associate minister if they can tell us what percentage of the cases of suspected trafficking cases involved Indigenous youth in care.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Well, thank you for the question, MPP Armstrong. I’m happy to talk about our new anti-human trafficking strategy. Thank you to all parties for their support of Bill 251. I’m very proud of all of our government for the work that we’ve done to combat human trafficking. That bill really makes Ontario a leader in human trafficking across Canada as the only province to step up. Some of the work that we’ve been doing in the child welfare modernization—I’m actually going to also ask ADM Rupert Gordon to speak on this too, on the child welfare redesign.

ADM Gordon, could you speak to some specifics to MPP Armstrong’s question?

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thank you, Minister. My name is Rupert Gordon. I am assistant deputy minister of community services division at MCCSS. I don’t have a specific number in direct response to MPP Armstrong’s question about children in care. Part of the challenge is that this is really an emerging space for government to be confronting, for community to be confronting and even for researchers to be understanding, so this is certainly a factor that we are keeping an eye on.

For example, the performance management framework for the anti-human trafficking strategy does actually look at collecting race-based data, particularly in respect of Indigenous status for individuals served through the programs, but I think both from an academic research perspective and from an on-the-ground service delivery perspective, we’re still looking to get a stronger awareness of exactly how much of the specific challenge you’re raising is playing out in Ontario in respect of this particular challenge.

I might ask my colleague David Remington from the child welfare and protection division to add some comments.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, ADM Gordon, and thank you, Minister. Thank you, MPP Armstrong, for the question. As ADM Gordon pointed out, there’s a lot of work we need to do to better understand the numbers of Indigenous children and youth in the child welfare system in general. We have done a lot of work to promote identity-based data collection within the children’s aid societies, but, MPP Armstrong, we aren’t in a position, actually, to answer the question right now. We have a fair bit of work to do to actually understand the population we’re serving of Indigenous children and youth in the child welfare system, so we are asking CASs across the province to direct identity-based data to better understand the population we serve so we can answer questions like this.

We know there’s a significant portion of Indigenous children and youth involved in human trafficking; it’s just fairly anecdotal, though. I don’t think we have the kind of information you’re looking for today, but we are on the quest and working with the Anti-Racism Directorate to make sure that we have processes in place to collect that exact data.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you. Can I ask, then—my question was specifically what percentage of that were Indigenous children in care that were involved

in exploitative human trafficking. Do you know the overall number of children in care who have been exploited and involved in human trafficking? Is there an actual overall number, not necessarily just identifying specific cultural or race groups?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Armstrong. Before I ask David Remington to give more specifics: We know that Indigenous children, as well as Black and racialized children, are overrepresented in the child welfare system. I was very proud to announce last summer, and that was after a year of consultations—when I was first appointed to this ministry, I toured the province speaking with front-line workers, as well as families and youth who had been involved in the child welfare system. We held a very robust consultation that included an online piece, as well as the work that the ministry was doing with the modernization table, which really brought together the different sectors that are impacted by child welfare, such as violence against women, children’s mental health and residential services.

But we really recognized we needed a system that wasn’t focused on apprehension, but was focused on prevention and wrapping the supports around families early on, when they needed help, rather than waiting until the time when children were being removed from families, because we can all agree that children are best raised in their families and within their communities. That’s the work we’ve been doing in that area.

I’ll pass it over to ADM Remington to speak to the specifics.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Minister. MPP Armstrong, we’ll have to get back to you on the specific question that you’re asking. I don’t have that information in front of me today in terms of the number of children and youth. I’ll just speak specifically to the number of Indigenous children and youth that we estimate to be involved in the child welfare sector in general. About 30% of our children in foster care are Indigenous, and we know that number. We have a fair bit of work to do to understand the specifics of this program.

As the minister pointed out, we’re pushing into this space in a real, intentional way. We’ve developed some pilot prototype care units that are looking after working with police and children’s aid societies to be able to intervene in situations of human trafficking and remove children from very high-risk situations—even 16- and 17-year-olds, temporarily—to remove them from those situations and be able to provide options and supports to those youth.

But I can get back to you on the specific question. We’ll try to find out more information for you. Thank you.

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Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you very much. I appreciate it’s not easy, but that would be much appreciated, if you could bring that back.

Can the minister or one of the ministry staff or ADMs detail ways the Anti-Racism Directorate is actually undertaking to collect that data and coordinate that data? How are they doing that, in order to make sure that we get that

information? If I could ask the minister or the ADMs to give us that information on how the Anti-Racism Directorate is undertaking to collect and coordinate that data.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that question, MPP Armstrong. I’d like to pass it over to our deputy minister, Janet Menard.

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you, MPP Armstrong, for the question. My name is Janet Menard, and I’m the deputy minister for the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. The question you asked crosses multiple ministries, as you can appreciate. They are doing a great job as a directorate. In fact, the information that you are requesting is, at this point in time, being collected by program, and there are expectations that across programs we are aggressive in understanding the question that you’re asking.

The example of Indigenous children and Black or racialized children in the child welfare system is a really good example of that, and we are making aggressive efforts to obtain information. Part of the challenge in the child welfare system has been that children’s aid societies actually maintained their own data over the years. So we have gone through an extensive process of introducing a technology that, over time, all the societies have migrated to, and that has put in place data from all the societies, so we can have a more holistic and system understanding of racialized children in that system.

The issue and the challenge associated with that is that those societies had different practices around what they actually collected, and that has become a challenge. We’re dealing with that and have expectations around their reporting so that we can have more system-wide views of the exact questions you’re asking. In the social assistance system, we’re now being more aggressive about understanding who in our systems are racialized, as well.

The process of collecting data and then being integrated into a province-wide picture through the Anti-Racism Directorate is iterative and ongoing, and they provide tremendous leadership and guidance for us. We’re getting there, but it is program-specific. It’s a long process, but it’s one that we’re very much committed to and that differs depending on [inaudible] across government.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: I’d actually like to ask ADM Aklilu Tefera if he could jump in and do a deeper dive, as well.

Mr. Aklilu Tefera: Thank you, Minister. My name is Aklilu Tefera. I’m the assistant deputy minister, business intelligence and practice division. There’s a lot of work that is currently happening in order to get at more detail around identity-based information related to anti-human-trafficking and a number of other programs that we have in our system.

Just to speak a little bit more about anti-human-trafficking, it is, as the deputy and my colleague ADMs said, a program that touches a lot of ministries, from the Solicitor General, to our ministry, to the Attorney General, education, and it goes on to a number of ministries, so there are a number of programs that are involved. What we have done is we have worked on a specific performance measurement framework to support that anti-human-trafficking reporting process and accountability process. That

would bring us identity-based data from each program area. But we know that we have significant data in our child welfare system, as the deputy mentioned. We've been working over the years to move program data from the children's aid societies over to the ministry through technology. Then recently, we've been working with children's aid societies and with Indigenous partners to have access to that data to support reporting and accountability across the system. That would include anti-human trafficking and child welfare race-based data in relation to overrepresentation among Indigenous and Black children, in particular in the child welfare system as well as in human trafficking.

We're making a lot of progress on that. One key space in this area is the specific principles around accessing and using Indigenous data. In addition to the Anti-Racism Directorate, we're working very closely with the leadership in the Indigenous communities to be given access to the information that comes indirectly through the technology so that we can report on this. So that is a process and progress, and there's an extensive engagement that's going to be happening.

In order to support that process also, we've been engaging academia. We've been looking at some indirect data from the federal government, but also working with academia to identify some specific factors. As you're aware, human trafficking is very difficult information. It is at best under-reported, or not reported at all. So what are the specific indicators or identifiers that we can use to inform the actual services and supports that we provide at the local level across the program areas to identify and mitigate human trafficking?

There's a lot of work currently in progress, but it is a work in progress at this point. I just wanted to mention that. Thanks for the opportunity.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you. I also wanted to ask the question around kids in care. You're now having CAS workers, I guess, intervene if there is that human trafficking piece. I just wanted to ask, the training that the workers will be getting—has there been funding allocated for that specific training? Is there a cultural piece when we're talking about different races if there is that human trafficking piece, if a child is in care? How are you supporting the workers to make sure, if that's the new redesign of it, they actually have the tools, the training and the professional training in order to have that intervention that you speak about?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Armstrong. I think that's a great question. Part of Bill 251, the temporary removal of 16- and 17-year-olds, is so important, because when you look at the average age of recruitment being 13, we know that there are younger victims out there. These are young children who don't even know that they're being trafficked. They're being lured in by gifts, thinking that this person cares about them or is their boyfriend. So they really go after that vulnerability. Even removing them temporarily to connect them with resources in their community and to recognize that this is what it is, is really important.

I'm going to turn it over to ADM Rupert Gordon to talk more specifically about the training that CAS workers would be receiving.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thank you, Minister. MPP Armstrong, thank you for the question. Yes, there is a specific training allocation associated with the strategy, and it's over \$2 million over the course of five years. That does cross a number of sectors that we would be looking to support, but a key early priority, exactly to the point of your question, is CAS workers. Absolutely, there is attention to the particular dynamics of children who are often in this situation. We have spoken quite a bit about Indigenous children this morning. It's also absolutely true that racialized children, Black children, for example, are also another significant area of concern. Absolutely, the intent is to engage in that training with the workers who are involved in the care units, in particular, as a very high priority under that strategy.

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

Mr. Rupert Gordon: I might also point out, one of the other things we're going to be watching closely on that front is the specific path to proclamation of the particular amendments to the CYFSA that you're talking about and the broader process of information awareness raising and support for children's aid societies in terms of understanding those as well.

I might turn to my colleague Assistant Deputy Minister David Remington to just talk a little bit more about the general approach to supporting the proclamation of those amendments.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Rupert. Thank you for the question, MPP Armstrong. As ADM Gordon mentioned, we have a lot of training in place to support staff as we move to implement the care units, and there will be specific training for—just a reminder, on the three parts of the strategy for child welfare, we're amending the grounds for protection explicitly to include child sex trafficking in a manner not tied to the parent. So there has to be training. There is training under way with staff in those two pilot projects in Durham and Toronto to work with them, to really understand and clarify the support of when children's aid societies can intervene and the ability to temporarily remove 16- and 17-year-olds out of dangerous situations. There are a lot of caveats in place to protect children and youth in those situations as well to make sure that we only intervene in those situations where there's imminent risk to the child, and working with the police in collaboration. And then, we are also expanding offences.

We work with the Ontario children's aid societies to provide significant training in a combination—a lot of it this past year has been online, obviously—

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

We now go to the government for their rotation. Very happily, MPP Parsa has agreed to chair for the next 10 minutes. MPP Babikian, I see your hand. You have the floor, sir. Please commence. MPP Parsa, if you'll take over.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, colleagues. MPP Babikian, you may start. You have 20 minutes.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Good morning, Minister Smith, colleagues and staff. It is a great pleasure to be here today to participate in this important discussion and debate.

My question is to Minister Smith. Minister, for years, families of children and youth with special needs have faced a long wait-list for clinical assessment and services. I have personally heard, from so many of my constituents in Scarborough–Agincourt, heart-wrenching stories of how families have been struggling with this issue. These wait-lists have been growing for more than a decade thanks to years of underfunding from the previous Liberal government. Families have been challenged even further by COVID-19, which has made accessing appropriate supports and services especially difficult for those caring for children with special needs.

That's why I was very pleased to see a focus in our 2021 budget on ensuring that children and families have access to early intervention and children's special needs services. The science shows that these services are most effective and result in better outcomes for children and families when they include early intervention, proactive life planning and supports for families.

Minister, can you tell us more about the investments our government is making to address the challenges faced by families of children with special needs and whether they will address these critical areas of children's special needs services? Thank you.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thank you for the question, MPP Babikian, and thanks for your advocacy and your hard work in your part of Scarborough, but also all of Scarborough and in the GTHA. And it's good to see Chair Parsa in the chair this morning.

I can confirm, as I mentioned earlier, MPP Babikian—and thank you for the very good question. It's a good one. We are committed at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, and particularly our government, to supporting all children and youth with special needs. And when I say all, I mean all. We're making significant investments to ensure that this actually is a reality and we are seeing children on the ground receiving the supports that they need in their community.

We know that early access to services contributes to far better outcomes in the long term for them, and when children and families can access early intervention and special needs services in timely and efficient ways, then children's short- and long-term outcomes are going to improve drastically. And it's not just the children that are impacted positively by these investments; it's the parents' well-being and their ability to participate in the workforce that is also impacted positively.

As part of our 2021 budget, which was delivered back in March by Minister Bethlenfalvy—I was so proud that we were able to get this investment in the budget: an additional \$240 million over the next four years to ensure that more children and families have access to critical early intervention and special needs services when they

need them by increasing access to clinical assessments and rehabilitation services.

This investment in early intervention and special needs services will support increased access to assessments and services. Approximately 10,000 children are going to benefit from this investment. They're going to receive that support through the Preschool Speech and Language Program, and for approximately 47,000 children and youth requiring speech-language pathology, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in community-based settings and in publicly funded schools. So this is a major investment that's going to have an impact on thousands and thousands of children.

In the 2020 budget, we invested an additional \$70.3 million over three years in the Special Services at Home program, known as SSAH. This funding is going to support an additional 9,000 families caring for a child or youth with a physical or developmental disability by providing funding to purchase services that they need, including respite and services that help their children learn new skills.

Last fall, we provided an additional \$3 million annually to better support people with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, FASD. Part of the funding is being used to hire an additional 26 FASD workers across the province over the next two years. These workers are supporting children and families impacted by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder by providing information, developing service plans, helping families access services and connecting parents to support networks and diagnostic services in their communities. In addition, funding for the delivery of new family capacity workshops is helping families learn how to support their children with FASD, and new service provider training is strengthening service providers' understanding of FASD and promoting more evidence-informed approaches to service delivery in that sector.

Over the past three years, these investments, along with our increased investment, as we were talking about earlier, in the Ontario Autism Program, have resulted in an increase of \$364 million in additional funding to support children with special needs since the start of our mandate—\$364 million in additional annual funding for kids with special needs.

We've received significant positive feedback from agencies across the province on these new investments. Empowered Kids Ontario, which represents Ontario's publicly funded child development and rehabilitation sector, said this in their press release on the \$240-million investment in early intervention and rehabilitation:

“This is an amazing day for Ontario families. The government is making an historic investment in the child development and rehabilitation sector of \$240 million over four years to address wait-lists for pediatric rehabilitation and child development, making sure kids get services in a timely way.

“Empowered Kids Ontario-Enfants Avenir Ontario (EKO) and our members greatly appreciate the financial support announced today in the 2021-22 provincial budget by Minister of Finance Peter Bethlenfalvy.... This is a profound investment that ensures the high-quality care

kids and their families deserve will reach more kids and significantly reduce wait times.”

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Our ministry is going to continue to listen to children and youth with special needs and their families about the challenges that they face, and we continue to be there to support them. I'll now ask ADM Morris, who we've heard from a couple of times this morning, to provide some additional details about the positive impacts of these investments on kids right across Ontario. Thanks for the question, MPP Babikian.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Thank you, Minister. And thank you, MPP Babikian, for the question. As the minister has noted, investments in children's special needs services are critical in ensuring children's needs are being addressed at the right time, by the appropriate provider, in an integrated and effective system of support. Unaddressed needs early in life set a poor foundation for future outcomes.

Children with special needs who do not have access to early intervention services are at risk for experiencing adverse outcomes. For example, children who enter school with unresolved speech and language delays continue to perform poorly on language-based tasks throughout school and into adulthood, affecting their ultimate academic achievement and their labour market participation.

For children identified with additional needs, early intervention reduces the necessity for more intensive, invasive and costly services later in life, such as in the health care and justice systems. Research shows that quality early years supports can yield up to a 13% return on investment because of the resulting improved developmental trajectories and long-term outcomes for children.

The funding announced in the 2021 budget—\$240 million over four years—will help ensure that more children and families have access to the critical services they need, when they need them, and will build additional capacity in preschool speech and language and community-based and school-based rehabilitation services. The investment to increase access to early intervention and special-needs services will also help children and youth with special needs to regain some of the ground that may have been lost due to COVID and support their parents' ability to remain in the workforce and contribute to the province's economic recovery, which can be compromised when they need to care for their children full-time.

The ministry will leverage its investments in early intervention and special needs services to modernize the system of services for children with special needs and their families, focused on:

- improving access to early intervention supports to prevent the need for downstream, more costly and intensive services;

- improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the service system, reducing administrative burden and supporting improved use of technology and data;

- supporting integrated and streamlined service delivery, including more seamless pathways as children transition to adult services;

- improving lifelong outcomes for people with special needs in areas including community participation and

inclusion, participation and success in school and post-secondary education, and employment; and

- helping to sustain the well-being of families by providing family-centred and flexible support so that they can make informed choices and support their children.

The ministry currently, prior to this new investment, funds a range of services and supports to many children and youth with special needs and their families. Over 53,000 children are served through the Preschool Speech and Language Program each year, which helps provide assessment and intervention services for children with speech and language delays and disorders as early as possible, supporting children and their families to help them develop the communication and early literacy skills they need to be successful in school and in their communities.

Children's treatment centres serve 110,000 children in community-based rehabilitation services, speech-language pathology, occupational therapy and physiotherapy each year. These services improve children's functioning in one or more areas such as communication and mobility. In addition, over 77,000 students receive school-based rehabilitation services through children's treatment centres each year, including assessment and intervention services, speech-language pathology, occupational therapy and physiotherapy for students attending publicly funded schools.

In 2021, the Special Services at Home program, which provides direct funding to families to purchase supports related to respite and personal development and growth, served 29,100 children. As of September 2020, FASD workers were serving approximately 1,500 children and youth with FASD or suspected FASD and their families.

However, we know the population of children and youth with special needs is growing in size, and the complexity of their needs is also increasing. Decades of international evidence show that investments in early intervention provide the best value through the life course. Identifying developmental risks early and providing services to support children's optimal development help produce the best outcomes and set the stage for greater community and workforce participation.

Early childhood development concerns that are undetected and untreated can impose significant pressure on families, both directly and indirectly, which has been linked to decreased parent employment and increased health system utilization. Children who enter school developmentally lagging are more likely to need support and achieve lower academic progress.

As the minister indicated, the investment in early intervention and special needs services will support increased access to assessments and services for approximately 10,000 young children with speech and language needs and for approximately 47,000 children and youth requiring speech-language pathology, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in community-based and publicly funded schools. With this investment in early intervention in special needs services, the ministry will be establishing clear entry points to service that will help address the barriers experienced by families.

Four intended outcomes for the investment related to improving access to services include:

- faster, more streamlined access to assessments when parents have concerns about their child’s development, including in northern, remote and rural communities;
- faster access to rehabilitation services for children with special needs and their families;
- improved access to occupational therapy for pre-school and school-aged children and youth in Toronto; and
- improved satisfaction associated with family-centred care.

The investment will support streamlined local access to information and assessments and improve the ability of service providers to support the individual goals of children and their families over the life course. To improve family experiences, the ministry, working in partnership with service providers, will implement a hub approach to streamline functional assessments and support family capacity-building as early as possible. This will also rationalize initial assessments, so that a single assessment can inform multiple services.

Supports for families of children with special needs help maintain the well-being of the whole family, their capacity to care for their child and their connection to the workforce. The ministry funds a range of family support and respite programs to support parents and caregivers. Direct funding to families provides the flexibility to purchase the supports that will best meet their needs through programs such as Special Services at Home, and provides families with relief and opportunities for children with special needs to build their skills.

The Special Services at Home investment in the 2021 fiscal year provided support to nearly 4,800 more children with developmental and/or physical disabilities and their families. This means a total of over 29,000 children with a range of special needs and their families received funding for respite and support for personal development from the Special Services at Home program during the 2021 fiscal year. The new investment will also allow an additional 2,100 children and families to receive support from this program this year.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, or FASD, is a term used to describe a range of disabilities that may affect individuals exposed to alcohol in utero. FASD is among the leading causes of cognitive and developmental disability in Canada. Without appropriate services and supports, children and youth with FASD face especially high rates of mental health issues, substance use and other health and social problems, including disruptive school experiences or conflict with the law. The \$3-million investment in FASD services announced in September 2020 is supporting 26 additional FASD workers, for a total of 60 workers across the province who help families to access and coordinate services for their children.

The ministry has also funded seven family capacity-building workshops in English and in French, and a workshop for Indigenous families that provided practical tools and strategies for families caring for children with FASD, as well as developing training to improve the capacity of

service providers across sectors to understand, identify and support the needs of children and youth with FASD, and their families. In addition, the ministry is funding FASD family and caregiver support groups that provide peer-to-peer support in communities across Ontario. In 2021, the ministry supported 49 family and caregiver support groups.

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The ministry also launched a provincial campaign through social media to raise awareness of the risks of prenatal alcohol exposure and increase the understanding of FASD. In 2021, the Ministry of Health increased funding for FASD diagnostic services by \$2.8 million, to a total of \$4 million annually, to fund 12 new FASD clinics, for a total of 21 clinics across the province.

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

Ms. Jennifer Morris: MCCSS and the Ministry of Health are working together with our service providers to support collaboration between the diagnostic clinics and the FASD workers and to build seamless local pathways between community-based supports and diagnostic services.

The investments in early intervention and special needs services build on the investment in autism services and the redesign of the Ontario Autism Program. It’s important to note as well that many children with autism also access a range of our early intervention and special needs programs in the ministry. They are not prevented from doing that in any way. We certainly see a number of children with autism in all of these programs.

Together, these investments help support a more modern and efficient service system and easier access to services that support children’s and families’ individual needs. They also support the foundation for developmental services reform for adults and for children who will transition into the adult service system. Timely access to services as well as family capacity-building and early transition funding supports will enable more seamless transitions for children and families, and set the foundation for improved long-term outcomes. Thank you.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, ADM Morris, for all of that. I appreciate that. You made a very good point when you talked about the fact that on top of the \$300-million investment that has been made—the additional \$300-million investment that’s been made—in the Ontario Autism Program, couple that with this \$240-million investment for other children with special needs, but not just other children with special needs, in the children’s treatment centres—those kids that are in the autism program could potentially also be benefiting from in-school programs that are available through the local children’s treatment centre—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Minister, I’m sorry to say that we’re out of time on this rotation. We go now to the official opposition. MPP Armstrong, you have the floor.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I wanted to ask the minister and the ADM or someone who could answer, when and

how did the ministry communicate to the 37 CASs that there would be an implementation of a moratorium on aging out of care for at least the duration of the pandemic?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Armstrong. That was an important first step. I'm proud of this province for stepping up and being the first in Canada to ensure that youth did not age out of care during the pandemic. I know I have children that are around that same age, and turning 18 doesn't mean that you become an adult.

I'm going to pass it over to ADM Remington to speak further to it, but we will be holding consultations with youth. It will be a youth-led voice in moving forward and looking at a readiness model and ensuring that milestones will be hit. I won't presuppose what that will look like in the outcomes, but the fact that it's youth-led is very important. These are young people who grew up in the child welfare system, have been through it, and understand what it is like to age out of the system and into no supports. So I'll pass it to ADM Remington to speak further to the moratorium.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you for the question, MPP Armstrong. We worked collaboratively with the child welfare sector from the moment the pandemic hit. The Ontario children's aid society set up a task force to deal with COVID and the ministry was a regular participant in that group, working collaboratively to hear challenges from the sector. They expressed, at the beginning of the pandemic, that they were worried about children and youth leaving care, and we heard from advocates as well. So we communicated in writing to the sector at the beginning of the pandemic that there was a moratorium in place. We extended the moratorium twice and gave them written notice about the extension of the moratorium.

We were collaborating and communicating with the child welfare sector on an ongoing basis throughout the pandemic and then making the decision to really give us the time to do the work with first voice advocates and youth leaving care to really develop a readiness-based framework. We actually extended it till September 30, 2022. It gives us enough time to actually engage youth voice and work through the challenges and opportunities that youth see. It has been an ongoing collaboration and lots of communication throughout the pandemic with the sector. Thank you.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you so much. What I heard from some of the stakeholders I talked to and some of the youth who were involved is that it wasn't universal. It wasn't the same throughout different care facilities. How did the ministry follow up to ensure that all 37 CASs were actually implementing this moratorium identically across the regions? Because I heard that different organizations and agencies were dealing with it differently, and it wasn't consistent.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Armstrong. Before I pass it back over to ADM Remington, I just wanted to mention some of the other supports that were in place for youth leaving care. We provide up to \$1.5 million in funding to the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada for their COVID-19 youth support fund. We strongly feel that no

youth receiving services from a children's aid society should be worried about losing their support system during this situation, and we have taken that decisive action to put a moratorium on youth leaving care. As ADM Remington said, it has been extended until September 30, 2022, so that we can take that time to work with youth and have those consultations to ensure that we're looking at what those milestones would be for a youth leaving care in the future.

I'll pass it back to ADM Remington to talk more about those specifics.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Minister. MPP Armstrong, we have regional offices throughout the province. There are five regional offices that span the province. We have program supervisors situated in each regional office. I would say their job is the arms and the legs of the ministry, to be the presence in community, working closely with executive directors at every children's aid society across the province. Program supervisors were involved in talking about the moratorium with the agencies, answering questions specifically, trying to implement it in the midst of a global pandemic. I'm sure there were some challenges in terms of that consistent message, but I would just remind that we were in the middle of a global health crisis and a pandemic. Agencies were struggling and doing their best to serve children and youth. Program supervisors were following up on a regular basis, and I was meeting with the sector leadership on a regular basis, every week at the beginning of the pandemic and then every two weeks, recently, as we continue to emerge.

I think that we do our best to try to make sure that everybody understands the point of the moratorium. It was really to make sure that youth would continue to receive the supports they had in place throughout the pandemic and that no youth should age out and be looking for housing or anything else in a global pandemic. We did our best to try to make sure everybody was supported and supported other folks, even youth who had left care. We partnered with the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada with a \$1.5-million grant that provided \$1,000 for each youth who had left care who applied for this. It was really successful in terms of youth who were struggling throughout the pandemic. We did our best to support them in that way. Thank you.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you, ADM Remington, for that. As you say, people did their best to support youth during the pandemic when they were in care, and there was, unfortunately, some mixed messaging, I think, that different offices and agencies were getting. So, unfortunately, that did happen.

I do want to also ask—I know that there are discussions around, as the associate minister mentioned, extending the moratorium on the aged-18. There's also talk about making it so that kids don't age out of care. Is there any will on the government side to look at that becoming something in the future and implementing that as opposed to—because now, really, this has been a test pilot in some ways, where you've had that moratorium. It can work in the future, I think, for youth in care in a very much benefiting way. As you stated, many of us have children—not

everyone does—but people take different paths, they grow at different rates, they make decisions. Our children are lucky enough to have the guidance of parents, but not always children in care, depending on their extreme circumstances. So I'm just asking if you are considering looking at that moratorium, going forward, that it would be a permanent thing.

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Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Armstrong. I actually want to just back up a little bit. I think in your last question you had mentioned about 37 children's aid societies. There are actually 51 children's aid societies in Ontario, 13 of those being specifically Indigenous.

Your question actually makes me think back to when I was able to tour a couple of children's aid societies last summer when it was safe to do so. I visited London and Middlesex and I was asking about the moratorium and how they were finding that with the youth. They were excited about the work that was being done, but they also actually gave me an example of a situation where a young person continued to age out because they felt supported and they were on that pathway. They said, in fact, if that hadn't happened, it actually would have backtracked the young person. I think that really goes to show that when the supports are in place with a children's aid society and they're meeting those milestones and markers, they are able to continue to progress. Also, supporting youth leaving care is one of the main pillars of our child welfare redesign.

I'm going to pass it over to ADM Remington to maybe talk about some of those milestones that we are considering as part of the moratorium and what that will look like in the future. But again, I think we've said we are entering consultations with a youth-led voice and looking forward to listening and hearing from those young people.

David, if you would like to speak to some of those milestones we are considering.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Minister. MPP Armstrong, we are engaging with youth and youth-led voice to understand what youth are saying they need. What does a readiness-based framework look like from a youth's perspective? We've engaged with the Ontario Children's Advancement Coalition and Youth in Care Canada, who are partnering with the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, to really understand and do broad consultation with youth across the province. As the minister said, it's about the readiness that youth feel when they're ready to leave care, and the supports they feel that the system isn't setting up in the way that they need to be successful. So we're looking at a number of engagement sessions with youth to better help them lead the way and define what those indicators could look like.

But we are hearing things from youth already about making sure that they have stable supports in housing and making sure they have a pathway to education. We have programs like the Living and Learning Grant that provide foundational grants to youth to be able to pursue education. We're looking at access to skilled trades as well and partnering with multiple ministries to make sure that pathway is more seamless for youth. And then supporting

youth, as you say, afterwards, when they leave care, to have a supported person in their life, so really building out a framework of a connected network of supports around youth so that they aren't struggling with the day-to-day challenges. They can't pick up the phone and call someone the way our kids can—and so, making sure that that's in place when youth do leave care.

We have youth-in-transition workers and a number of folks, but we actually want youth to build out their own network of support, really. I would say, as the minister said, if you think about the Child Welfare Redesign Strategy, it's keeping kids at home in the first place. It's really supporting families to stay together and making sure that we can intervene in an appropriate way early on in the journey to support a family so that youth don't leave the care of their parents. If they can't stay at home safely with parents, then our first question should be, what about kin? What about family that we can wrap around? It's important to keep kids connected to community, to their culture, to their family wherever possible.

We think if we do this really well through the child welfare redesign, we actually will have far fewer kids in care and the system will actually start to focus away from the protection piece and into the prevention piece, which actually, if you think about it, if kids are safe and protected and have a network of supports, they're also protected, right? It's just about rethinking and reimagining the whole child welfare system.

I think for years we thought removal equaled safety. We know that not to be true. The evidence doesn't support that. The evidence supports keeping kids connected to family, connected to culture and connected to community, and wrapping supports around them to be successful and to thrive. As the minister says, we don't want them to just get by; we want them to thrive, and we want them to have all the opportunities. Thank you for the question.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you. I think prevention is, of course, the ultimate goal. You mentioned the cultural piece and staying in your neighbourhood and your community, connected to your community. As we all know, what happened in London with respect to the Muslim family that was murdered last weekend—and I'm looking to the future and evaluating that there's going to be a lot of families in distress when it comes to dealing with that trauma, dealing with that reality of what's happening literally on the street at their front door. We have the Muslim Resource Centre, which supports families and works with children's aid.

I just wanted to ask if there's a way to consider supporting them financially if they come forward to request more supports, in order to make sure that they can have support services for the community when it comes to family members and the trauma that they've experienced.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question, MPP Armstrong. What happened last week was absolutely devastating. I know Ontario and Canada stand together in support of the family. It's such a tragic situation that a nine-year-old boy is left an orphan as a result of this. It's so sad.

The point of child welfare redesign is bringing those preventative services together. We don't want people to be afraid of the children's aid society; we want it to be the place that people go to that they're able to connect with the resources in their community, whether that's mental health supports, whatever families need, ensuring that the wraparound services are provided.

David, if you can speak further to funding opportunities for local organizations.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Minister. As the minister said, it's really about working together with community folks. We have been developing prototypes as part of child welfare redesign to be able to explore where we need to delve in further, work differently with families and community agencies. We actually have a prototype from the Muslim Resource Centre that's currently in process with us right now. The tragedy was just devastating for everybody in Ontario; we know that, and our hearts go out to the family and the community. I think not only Londoners but all of Ontario was shaken to the core by this tragedy, as you talked about.

Part of our process in child welfare redesign is take an equity approach as well and to look across different sectors and community agencies and folks to really support them in what they need to be successful, and really understanding the different intersectionalities of people. Part of what we want to do is really work to better understand. When child welfare is getting involved with a Muslim family, for instance, do we really understand, and is there a voice for that family that's speaking out to support the family through the process? I would say that extends to Black families, to Indigenous families, to all sorts of faiths and cultures—that we really, truly understand. I think for years in child welfare, there has been an over-surveillance of some equity-deserving groups. We need to change that dialogue and start to really understand what the opportunities are to build on the strengths of the family and support them through this. But we are currently looking at a proposal, and we have an approach to do that and prototyping it through child welfare redesign.

Before we go out with things broad brush across the province, we want to better understand, does this work? Is it actually meeting our needs? Because for years in child welfare, while we've tried to redesign the system several times, we've not made progress. We've not been able to change the outcomes and trajectories for families, so we are committed to having a different approach this time, to actually move the needle and provide better outcomes.

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Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, ADM Remington. MPP Armstrong, I just wanted to add something else to what David talking about, the Premier's council on equality. This is to help provide advice on how we can support young people in recovering from the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, and also achieving long-term success. The council—I'm not sure how familiar you are with it, but it's bringing together an intergenerational group with expertise and with lived experience on the economic and social barriers that are facing young people when it comes

to education, skills training and employment. I know ADM Remington had touched on education, and I wanted to actually—to bring it back to that, the ministry provides \$5 million annually in funding for educational liaisons, and we recently, in the past couple of weeks, just announced an additional \$1.5 million.

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

Hon. Jill Dunlop: This is to ensure that every children's aid society in Ontario has an educational liaison, because we know how important it is, and this is speaking to the milestone, again, that young people in the child welfare system don't have as high graduation rates as children who are being raised at home. To help ensure that we're increasing that, the educational liaisons will be a very important piece. As I mentioned, one of the pillars in their redesign is strengthening these supports.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: If I have a little bit of time left, I have a question I wanted to ask about how many care for-profit homes are in Ontario in the foster system. I appreciate the correction that there are 51 CAS agencies, including of course Indigenous organizations, but how many do we have that are for-profit group homes in the Ontario foster care system?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that question. Before I turn it over to ADM Remington to speak specifically about the breakdown of the numbers, I just want to speak a little bit about the work that we are doing to increase licensing inspections in the residential group home area. Residential care is delivered in foster homes, staff model homes and children's residences, including youth justice facilities and treatment centres. The government is taking important steps to increase the transparency, the oversight and the accountability of the children's residential services sector in Ontario. This includes things like program verification, so making sure that if the organization is saying they provide these services on their website that, in fact, they provide those services. We're increasing the amount of unannounced inspections and increasing the number of foster care inspections. So far, we've already implemented—

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

We go back to the government for this round of rotation. Who will be speaking on behalf of the government? MPP Pettapiece, the floor is yours.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thank you, Ministers, for your conversation so far. Something I want to talk about today, and it's been brought up a number of times, certainly, is violence against women. Unfortunately, I have seen the results of what happens when domestic violence is in families. Fortunately, in my family and my father and mom's family, we haven't had to go through that type of thing, but certainly I've had some friends who have had tragic results from this type of thing, and it's something that we need to address.

Certainly, even before COVID, domestic violence was referred to as a shadow pandemic worldwide. Experts and advocacy groups are reporting that domestic violence has

intensified under COVID-19, triggered by the social and economic impact of the COVID public health emergency. While these conditions may impact victims of any type of crime or violence, there are specific concerns about increased domestic violence, including a disproportionate impact on Indigenous and other racialized or marginalized communities.

Could the minister respond to the concerns that incidences of domestic violence are increasing; its impacts on women and children experiencing this abuse, including Indigenous women and girls; and how her ministry is working on the violence against women sector, responding to this pandemic within a pandemic to ensure that women and children live free of fear and violence?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Pettapiece. Good to see you here today. Like you said—

Interruption.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Should I just keep going?

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: There we go.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: We all know someone who has, unfortunately, been affected by a type of violence. Every Ontarian deserves to live in safety, free from threat or fear of violence. We know this happens to one in three, and I have three young daughters, so this is something that I worry about and take very personally.

Tragically, the conditions created by the pandemic are increasing the prevalence and severity of domestic violence, while at the same time making it more difficult for those experiencing violence to exit the domestic violence situation and seek help. Moreover, women are disproportionately affected by the social and economic impacts of the pandemic. In addition to the rise and severity of domestic violence, women are also disproportionately impacted by job loss, including in the female-dominated service industry. The rise in the different forms and manifestations of violence against women and girls have not only exacerbated the economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis but will also slow down economic recovery.

Our government is committed to preventing and addressing violence against women and their dependants in all its forms and making sure that those affected by violence receive the supports they need to stay safe, heal and rebuild their lives. I have met with front-line workers, visited several violence against women shelters and regularly meet with stakeholders to get their feedback on how we can better support those experiencing violence.

In 2019, I met with the chairs, co-chairs and delegates of Ontario's 48 violence against women coordinating committees. VAWCCs are community-based, cross-sectoral committees that work together to improve collaboration amongst the VAW sector and create a more seamless service delivery experience for survivors; they are comprised of community partners such as shelters, police services, justice partners, counselling, children's services, health, education and housing. Together, it represented over 900 organizations.

The violence against women sector on a whole has demonstrated tremendous courage, tenacity and resiliency in responding to the unprecedented conditions created by

the pandemic. Collaboration, creativity and remaining in close contact have been key as our government has worked successfully with the VAW sector to ensure that the critical programs and supports that women experiencing domestic violence need continue to be available throughout this challenging time.

One of the challenges women experiencing domestic violence often face is finding and accessing affordable housing, and the conditions created by the pandemic have made it even more difficult to exit the abusive situation, seek help and find long-term, affordable, safe housing. Sadly, trouble accessing stable housing can lead women and children to stay in abusive situations, stay in emergency shelters for longer periods of time than they intended, or return to their abusers. That is why, as part of the 2021 budget, our government is investing \$18.5 million over three years, beginning in 2021-22, in 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.

The Transitional and Housing Support Program is an established VAW program which connects domestic violence survivors with critical wraparound services and supports. THSP workers are a critical resource for women fleeing domestic violence, by connecting vulnerable women not only to housing supports but also to a host of other supports, including education, legal, mental health and child care.

The rate of violence against Indigenous women and girls is a national tragedy that we cannot ignore. It is estimated that Indigenous women in Canada are three times more likely to experience violence than other women and six times more likely than non-Indigenous women to be murdered. Indigenous female youth are 3.1 times more likely than non-Indigenous youth to experience violent victimization.

On May 27, our government released Pathways to Safety: Ontario's Strategy in Response to the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Through Pathways to Safety, 118 initiatives under six pathways aim to eliminate the root causes of violence against Indigenous women, children and 2SLGBTQ+ people while building on foundational programming, a prevention campaign and public education.

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In collaboration with Indigenous organizations, the Ontario government has played a leadership role across the country in addressing violence against Indigenous women and girls. Ontario's priorities focus an explicit violence prevention lens, on transformation, resourcing and structural change within the health and wellness, child welfare, education and training, mental health and addictions, housing, transportation and justice systems.

Examples of collaborative initiatives include: ongoing investment in the Indigenous Healing and Wellness Strategy to ensure holistic and culturally appropriate supports are in place to help communities address the impacts of

intergenerational trauma; launching the anti-human trafficking strategy with Indigenous-specific resources embedded throughout the strategy to provide significantly more supports and to address the unique needs of Indigenous individuals and communities; and redesigning the child welfare system to focus on community-based prevention services that are high quality, culturally appropriate and truly responsive to the needs of Indigenous children, youth and their families. We continue to actively work with Indigenous and community partners through this challenging time to see what other supportive measures can be taken.

I would now like to welcome my deputy minister Marie-Lison Fougère to speak more about how the pandemic conditions have impacted violence against women.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: Thank you, Minister Dunlop. I am Marie-Lison Fougère, deputy minister responsible for women's issues. Thank you very much for the question.

As has already been mentioned, there is no question that COVID-19 has been a catalyst for gender-based violence. The violence is more severe. We certainly hear it from staff and volunteers who work hard and diligently to support survivors of gender-based violence. It happens more often and the pandemic has exacerbated the risk factors for such violence, be it alcohol, substance abuse and so on.

Some key statistics bear this out, and I will just cite a few. Crisis calls have doubled. Prior to COVID, the Assaulted Women's Helpline would average 4,000 calls per month. The figure doubled in its first surge and now consistently averages 7,000 calls per month. Police calls related to domestic assault have increased. According to Statistics Canada, using data from 17 police forces across the country, domestic disturbance calls, which could involve anything from a verbal quarrel to reports of violence, rose by nearly 12% between March and June 2020 compared to the same four months in 2019.

Data gathered from front-line organizations across Canada showed a 20% to 30% increase in rates of gender-based violence and domestic violence in some regions of the country in the first few months of the pandemic. According to a Women's Shelters Canada report, one in two shelters saw an increase in the severity of violence, including increases in physical attacks, forced confinement, sexual violence and emotional and financial abuse. Moreover, they reported an increase in controlling behaviour and coercive control.

I will now turn it over to Assistant Deputy Minister Rupert Gordon to provide further information about the impact of the pandemic and some of the supports we provide. Thank you.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thank you, Deputy Fougère.

The deputy just spoke about the concerning increase in the frequency and severity of domestic violence throughout the province. To support this need, VAW supports such as VAW shelters, counselling and transitional housing support programs have remained open over the course of the pandemic, through lockdowns. Crisis lines have continued to operate 24/7. All of this is thanks to the

committed people and organizations behind these services.

To support access despite COVID lockdowns and in response to increased reports of domestic violence during COVID-19, MCCSS launched a social and digital media campaign to increase public awareness that shelters remain open to provide safety and support. The campaign encouraged people to seek help and resources from the ontario.ca/safe web page, or to call the provincial regional crisis helplines, which include the Assaulted Women's Helpline, Fem'aide, and Talk4Healing.

In Ontario, a range of ministries, sectors, professionals and community members are involved in providing services and supports to women and their children who are fleeing domestic violence, including MCCSS programs and services which provide safe shelter, safety planning, crisis counselling and enhancing coordination of VAW services at the community level.

The ministry continues to support strong community services to support vulnerable populations, including investing in women's shelters and organizations responding to gender-based violence, including domestic violence. Through VAW services, we are addressing this physical and emotional safety for women and their dependent children at risk of experiencing violence or experiencing violence, through emergency shelters, counselling and other critical wraparound supports. Annually, 52,000 women are served through our crisis lines, 44,000 women receive counselling services, and over 15,000 women and their dependents receive emergency respite at our VAW shelters.

During the pandemic, we have been working with communities and organizations on an ongoing effort to address growing and evolving community needs and build capacity. For example, in 2021 we provided \$170,000 in funding to OAITH to deliver and expand on training across the province, to support 95 shelter organizations and to build expertise to address sector-identified needs. Also in 2021, we funded Action ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes in the amount of \$607,000 to engage in activities that build capacity, promote and improve the quality of French-language services in the VAW sector, and to deliver a variety of public education initiatives in cooperation between my division and the Office of Women's Issues, under the Canada-Ontario agreement. We have been taking several measures, including supporting organizations on the front line and additional funding to protect the health and safety of those who rely on our social services.

MCCSS has continued to engage with key VAW umbrella organizations, such as the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses and Family Service Ontario, and Indigenous organizations through existing funding relationships and technical tables. MCCSS works with colleagues across government in responding to violence against women and gender-based violence, and at the federal-provincial-territorial level. This includes the ministry's advice, coordinated through the Office of Women's Issues, on the federal government's allocation of

COVID-19 emergency response funding to VAW emergency shelters and sexual assault centres.

In 2021, the ministry invested just under \$190 million in community-based agencies across the province to provide services and supports to women and their dependent children who have experienced or are at risk of violence, and to survivors of human trafficking. That includes \$172 million in 2021 to over 200 community-based agencies across the province, to provide VAW services and supports that include emergency residential shelters, counselling services, transitional and housing supports, the child witness program, and provincial and regional crisis help-lines, including the three that I mentioned earlier. The programs' goals are to give women and their dependent children a safe place to escape from violence and to provide them with the supports they need to rebuild their lives.

Since 2018, funding has been provided to strengthen the VAW sector, improve remote-area issues and supports, and provide better service for children and youth. This includes \$11.5 million to address service pressures and better serve clients. This investment is intended to strengthen the foundation of MCCSS-funded services and supports for survivors of gender-based violence by helping service partners to more effectively manage operating challenges, address critical service pressures and position themselves to support innovative service solutions that respond to the diverse needs of survivors and their families.

There was \$3.6 million from the 2020 budget for supports in rural and remote communities so that women who live in rural and isolated communities can also get the help they need, right in their own communities. Through the 2021 budget, there was an additional \$2.1-million investment to provide new supports and services for victims of crime in Leeds-Grenville, Dufferin county and the Nipissing region, historically underserved areas of the province. This included the establishment of new sexual violence support services in Leeds-Grenville and Dufferin county and expanding 24/7 assistance to victims and their families in the Nipissing region.

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We've been providing \$2.9 million for prevention or early-intervention services for children and youth in VAW and Indigenous healing and wellness service agencies. This is intended for children and youth, while residing in the community-based agencies, to help them heal from the harmful effects of experiencing or witnessing family violence.

MCCSS is partnering with the Ministry of Health on a pilot to provide structured psychotherapy for women experiencing violence. This will increase the availability of critically needed mental health supports for survivors of violence and we hope lead to improved emotional safety and well-being.

In her remarks, the associate minister noted the 2021 budget investment of \$18.5 million over three years in the Transitional and Housing Support Program to support victims of domestic violence and survivors of human trafficking.

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

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thank you, Chair.

Finding and accessing safe and affordable housing is a critical step for survivors of domestic abuse, but women who are fleeing domestic violence have a complex set of needs to heal and rebuild their lives and transition to independence. Annually, the THSP serves 20,000 women. Expanding THSP helps us meet some important outcomes for women fleeing domestic violence. First, it helps us serve more women with these critical wraparound supports. Recent data has indicated a service capacity gap issue in THSP. In the longer term, we hope this will alleviate some of the pressures on the emergency shelter system through reductions in some of the lengths of stay where those women may be ready to successfully move to more stable housing, when they and their families are ready.

Across Canada, Indigenous women between the ages of 15 and 24 are over three times more likely to experience violence than non-Indigenous women. The high rate of violence against Indigenous women, girls and two-spirited LGBTQIA+ has a devastating and long-term impact on Indigenous women, children, families and communities across the province. We invest in a range of Indigenous community-based programs and services dedicated to Indigenous women and families and to prevent violence against Indigenous women, which tragically continues at disproportionately high rates. Let me highlight a few:

- the Indigenous crisis line, Talk4Healing, serves Indigenous women and community members across the province affected by violence;

- Indigenous women's emergency shelters and family violence residential programs are supported in 18 provincially funded shelters across Ontario, providing safe spaces, counselling and supports to Indigenous women and families;

- funding to Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario builds capacity and enhances service coordination across the Indigenous women's emergency shelter system, including federally funded shelters in First Nation communities;

- the Indigenous Anti-Human Trafficking Liaison Program, led by the Ontario—

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

The rotation goes to the opposition. Who will be speaking for the opposition?

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I will be speaking, Chair. Teresa Armstrong.

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

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you very much. We left off with a question asking if we could get how many for-profit group homes are in the Ontario foster care system. I wasn't sure if there is a number out there that—I know the minister deferred it to ADM Remington, if they had that number for us.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Armstrong. Yes, that is where we left off. I will pass it over to ADM Remington to speak to the breakdown of the residential homes.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Minister. Thank you for the question, MPP Armstrong.

I'm just going to talk a little bit about the size of the residential system in Ontario, and then I will give you the number and the breakdown. There are over 16,000 beds in Ontario to support children and youth in a variety of residential settings. As the minister said, some are directly operated by the ministry and some are transfer payment agencies, such as children's mental health organizations and others, that provide ministry transfer payments to agencies. And then we also have outside paid resources, which are private agencies providing services.

The breakdown of those beds: There are 345 licensed children's residences in Ontario and 120 foster care agencies, and each of those agencies have a number of foster care homes. Then we have some directly operated facilities like the Child and Parent Resource Institute, which is directly operated by Ontario, and then some youth justice facilities directly operated.

The breakdown in the residential programs is two thirds of the programs are publicly funded and one third are private. In the foster homes, about 54% are public and about 46% are private. So that's the breakdown between the homes.

We do think, as the minister said, enhancing the residential service system is important to us across the board, whether it's public or private. We have provided some trauma-informed training that was developed through CPRI, or the Child and Parent Resource Institute, and that has been really well taken up by service providers across the sectors. It's available to licensed operators or staff or caregivers. We've had over 2,600 child welfare protection workers and residential folks take that training since it has been launched. It's free online training to support them. It helps them better meet the needs of children and youth. We've also had a follow-up series now where over 1,400 child welfare protection and residential staff have taken a follow-up course that's been available to them. So a lot of work is under way to support foster care families and others and support the sector. Thank you.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you. It leads me to talk about, again, another horrible thing in society, with David Roman, the teen who was murdered while he was in care by a fellow teen resident in the group home. I know that Minister Dunlop has said more could be done to vet the foster parents. I just wondered if you could point me to the line in the estimates package that would allow for this, how you're linking that vetting process and those improvements. Where does that show on the estimates package for investment?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Armstrong, for the question. Before I pass it over to the ADM for more specifics, I just wanted to touch on the quality of care as being another one of the pillars in the child welfare redesign. We are seeking to improve the quality of the children and youth that are receiving care in licensed residential settings. As I mentioned, it is one of the pillars.

As a first step, we have released a comprehensive quality standards framework for licensed residential settings. This framework provides guidance for service

providers and others that are involved in delivering residential care on how to help better meet the needs of children and youth, support them to thrive and achieve better outcomes. It also encourages care that is strength-based, trauma-informed, culturally competent, relevant and safe, and considers the unique needs of the identities of children and youth that it's serving.

To support this implementation of the framework, we are working on new and enhanced regulations of training for the sector, and a child-friendly guide that you don't need to be a lawyer to read. It's meant for young people to better understand.

In addition, some of the new initiatives will be introduced to build the capacity of staff and caregivers to better support children and youth in their care, including prescribing new pre-service qualifications for front-line staff, prescribing pre- and in-service training requirements for foster parents, and increasing the capacity of front-line staff and caregivers in residential care to help them better support the children and youth who are in their care.

I'll pass it over to ADM Remington to speak further to this.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Minister. MPP Armstrong, what we're doing is shifting our resources within the envelope of child welfare funding and protection and residential service systems. We've added 20 more residential staff to oversee the residential sector in the past year. We are working with CPRI, our Child and Parent Resource Institute, to leverage their resources to provide the free online training and supports to make sure that folks are able to care for the most complex children that are in our communities.

We actually are working through a series of enhanced oversight with the sector. We have increased our unannounced visits and we have a serious occurrence program that actually identifies serious occurrences. They're to be reported by every residential care provider in Ontario, when something happens in their residence, to notify the ministry. We work collaboratively with the children's aid societies who are the placing agencies—they actually make the placements for children in care—and make sure that we're following up. If there's a concern about a youth in a residential setting because of a serious occurrence, we have a mechanism that we can phone through and talk to the children's aid society to flag it for them, and that we work collaboratively to try to identify risks and prevent serious tragedies from happening in the residential sector before they happen.

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We're using a combination of efforts to really shore up and support. It's about maximizing our resources, putting them in the right place and making sure that we can work collaboratively with the sector in the child residential setting, because it is a complex space. There are multiple players, and it's important that information is shared on a timely basis to make sure children and youth get the supports they need when they need them. We're increasing unannounced visits. We've actually got training in place for parents and foster parents and support people. It's a

combination of efforts that you won't see necessarily in a line item, but it's our own internal realignment in child welfare to put the resources in the right places and really focus on prevention, early intervention—and really focus on getting support to youth who need it.

Our quality of care standards are just going to underscore all that as we work with sector partners to understand, what does youth voice really mean and is it incorporated into the programs and services that are offered? And how do we make sure that LGBT2SQ kids are supported in this sector in a way that's appropriate for them, and be able to best meet their needs? So it's a combination of efforts that we're putting in place to really shore up the residential service system. We know these tragedies happen, and we are trying to prevent them in the future. Thank you.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you. I know that there are a lot of children in care who need help, obviously, because of the trauma they've been through or abuse situations or other situations. It may not always be that way, but many times it is. I just wondered if there's a trauma-informed care training that's mandatory, and if not, why not?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question, MPP Armstrong. Yes, there is training in place, and I can ask ADM Remington to speak further to what that training looks like for CAS workers and in residential services.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Minister. We do have developed now, really in partnership with CPRI, our Child and Parent Resource Institute, trauma-informed care training provided to all residential service providers. It's free of charge. It's on a voluntary basis at this point, and it's really to make sure that we can address concerns. We're working with the sector—when I think about the quality of care standards we're working on, it's in collaboration with the sector to get buy-in and support. The ministry is not trying to do things to people; we're trying to do things with people and support them and support the sector. We think the whole sector needs significant training. We're thinking about and we're putting in place some work with the sector around minimum skills and minimum standards around folks who are working with residential care providers, because that will be a mandatory training that will be put in place. We're just working with the sector right now on implementation of that and how we do this work together.

But it is about making sure that providers have the supports they need to care for some of the most complex children and youth, and it is a partnership with the Ministry of Health as well. A lot of youth have mental health concerns and issues, and working with clinical service providers in the mental health space is a really important part of our strategy to make sure that interventions are appropriate, strength-based, and providing the trauma-informed—and as you said, MPP Armstrong, we know that every youth who comes in contact with child welfare has experienced some form of trauma. It's why it's so important to us to have a trauma-informed lens and that all workers are trained in the space and understand the kind

of situations that families have been through and children and youth have been through.

We also know that every move in child welfare is trauma for children. That's part of our permanency strategy: to make sure that youth in child welfare, if they do come into the care of a children's aid society, are not bouncing around from group home to group home or foster home to foster home, that they're actually supported with the right services in place to meet their needs and able to develop a relationship and a long-lasting ability to be able to remain at least permanent with that family for the time being until they can be reunited with their family, if that's necessary. Everything we are doing is through that trauma-informed lens. Thank you.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you. I also wanted to look a little bit deeper into training and what training is mandatory for folks who are in charge of caring for kids and youth in care. You mentioned that trauma is voluntary, but can you classify what kind of training is mandatory for those people who are in charge of children and youth in care?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question. I will defer to ADM Remington to talk about the training that is available.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you for the question, MPP Armstrong. We are working with the sector to put in place mandatory training requirements. We actually want to hear from the sector specifically about what they think is needed as well, so we're working together to undertake this process. We will be putting forward regulatory amendments for consideration in the fall that will make these kinds of things mandatory for service providers.

It's about listening right now. We're in a conversation with the sector. We're talking about the quality care standards and what types of training would be really significant, and be supported by the sector, for the sector. We do provide training through the Ontario children's aid societies right now to a number of child welfare protection agency staff, and we're looking at scaling up our residential service providers' training as well. This is for foster parents and group care living situations where staff are working in staff model homes.

Again, I just want to remind everyone that our major strategy in child welfare redesign is to go back to the beginning and the root causes of child welfare involvement in the first place. It's about working with community partners so that we can address family situations and crisis early on to get families the help they need. It's our goal that families ought not to come in contact with child welfare. If they get the right supports at the right time in the right place in communities, we feel that we can do that.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I would definitely agree with you: Prevention and educating families so that they don't become in that situation ultimately is the best outcome for everyone. Absolutely, I agree. Unfortunately, our reality sometimes is that there are going to be situations that we can't help to prevent—and that those kids who do come in care have the best possible help into the future, the tools that they need.

My next question was about—Minister Dunlop said that the ministry is working on legislation to come in the next two to three years [*inaudible*]. I just wondered if the minister could elaborate on what children and youth in care can expect.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question, MPP Armstrong. I wanted to touch on something David had mentioned about the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies—and wanted to commend them for the incredible partner they have been with government, Nicole Bonnie and her team. In fact, to date, the association has delivered over 30 million pieces of PPE to over 1,000 organizations across the province that are providing vital services to children, youth and families. They've done incredible work and I thank them for being a great partner and the work that they are doing.

I'd like to turn it over to ADM Remington to speak further to your question.

Mr. David Remington: I apologize, MPP Armstrong, you were just cutting out and I didn't hear the question.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: No worries. Minister Dunlop had said that the ministry is working on legislation to come in about two to three years regarding the foster care system. I wondered if you could outline, or actually elaborate, on what children and youth in care can expect when it comes to the minister working on legislation.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you for the question. We are working on a number of regulatory amendments to shore up the residential service system. We're looking at training for staff and making sure there are minimum requirements for staff in the residential service sector, and we're also looking at a number of amendments that will strengthen supports for youth.

If you think about the work we're doing and the quality care standards, it really includes strengthening youth voice and making sure that the right culturally appropriate services are in place for children and youth. We don't have the right mix of supports and services in place in the residential system now. We need to build that out with the sector and better understand gaps in services, working together to shore that up, and then making sure that the residential service system has minimum requirements for staff who are working in these residential settings and minimum training for staff. Right now, we do training on restraints and stuff to make sure that people know how to properly do that when required. It's always about de-escalation and working with children and youth as much as possible to support them. There's a number of amendments that we're looking at in that space.

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I would say in the Indigenous space, as well, we're looking at amendments to customary care so that Indigenous communities can care for the children in the way that they know best. And right now, we know there are barriers in the Child, Youth and Family Services Act that prevent Indigenous communities from being able to actually fully optimize customary care in the way they would like to be able to do that. So we're working with that.

We're also looking at circles of care, and that's an Indigenous, holistic view of wrapping supports around

children, youth and families. One of the things I would just point out that we've learned from our Indigenous partners in our child welfare redesign strategy—it's heavily influenced by our learning from Indigenous partners across the board. Their world view has actually really influenced the way we want to think about child welfare in the long run for all agencies, so all 38 mainstream agencies, all 13 Indigenous agencies. It's about trying to really step back, think of strengths of families, think of the supports they need, and the amendments that we're putting in place for consideration with the CYFSA will strengthen all in that space. We are trying to fundamentally redesign the entire child welfare system.

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

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Could I ask another question quickly? And hopefully I can get—I know my time is going to run out. I just wondered, can children and youth in care expect to see an implementation of readiness-based indicators? And can they expect to have legislated [*inaudible*]? I don't know if you can briefly touch on that, ADM Remington. I'd appreciate it.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Armstrong, before we go further, your audio keeps cutting out, so if you could disable your video.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Oh, yes, I could. Just a moment, please.

Hon. Todd Smith: It's a very foggy day there in London.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Yes, I know. I apologize. It has never happened to me before.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): No problem.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I'll just quickly summarize: Can children and youth in care expect the implementation of readiness-based indicators, and can they expect legislated basic standards of care? Those are the things I wanted to wrap up with, please.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Armstrong. Before I pass it over to David to speak further, I just wanted to talk about the moratorium and the fact that the youth-led voice will be at the centre of the decisions that are made going forward in those consultations, and really hearing from the young people. I've met with Cheyanne and Conner a couple of times already. I know they are advocates in the youth-aging-out-of-care area. So I look forward to working with them and the other partners as well, to look at the readiness model and what that will mean moving forward.

If I can pass it over to ADM Remington for a few words.

Mr. David Remington: Thank you, Minister. MPP Armstrong, as the minister said, we are in the process of working with youth and first voice advocates to think about readiness-based indicators and what they would look like. We are also strengthening a number of areas around case management and plans of care and service planning for children and youth. A lot of this—

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

It's the government's turn. MPP McDonell, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Jim McDonell: Minister Smith, over the 10 years I've been in the House, the progress you've made over the last couple of years has been really amazing, when you see some of the numbers. And over the past year, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on our communities, especially our most vulnerable. I know that, in particular, children and adults with special needs have faced additional challenges due to the disruptions to their regular routines and the supports they have typically had access to.

Can you tell us about what actions the ministry is taking to make life easier for families and those with developmental disabilities?

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes, I can. Thank you, MPP McDonell, for the question, and good to see you this morning, as well.

Families have absolutely faced new challenges this year as they support their family members at home. While community-based activities and settings, in large part, are closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak, many service providers did an incredible job, quickly transitioning to virtual service delivery, where appropriate to do so, to support the continuity of care for individuals and families as a result of COVID-19.

To support families, we have temporarily expanded the list of eligible expenses for Passport and SSAH, the Special Services at Home program, and enhanced respite for the medically fragile and technologically dependent children program to allow families to use their funding for goods and services that may make it easier to stay at home during this time.

For example, families can use their funding to purchase things like technical supports so they can receive virtual services from agencies, and activities and items to support home-based recreation and fitness activities. Some of the examples of how that funding can be used are to purchase sensory items; technology; supplies to support home-based physical activity and fitness; personal protective equipment and supplies, the PPE that's necessary; essential service delivery fees; and behavioural support plans and related interventions, just to name a few.

I also wanted to note that we made it easier for people who received this funding to take advantage of changes quickly. We provided families with 25% of their 2021 funding in advance, in April and May of 2020. In response to the challenges arising from the pandemic, we also waived the deadline for families to file their claims from 2019-20.

We have also recognized the dedication and commitment of support workers in all sectors throughout the pandemic. To ensure our most vulnerable continue to receive the care they need, the Ontario government is 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. This temporary wage increase of \$3 per hour worked

on top of existing hourly wages will continue until August 23, 2021. You probably saw the announcement that was made on Friday morning by our government. What that's going to do is help stabilize, attract and retain the workforce needed to provide a high level of care during the pandemic. The temporary wage enhancement supports approximately 60,000 eligible workers in the social services sector who provide direct support services to children with special needs and adults with developmental disabilities through ministry-funded programs and services. 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 through the pandemic.

I'll now turn it over to ADM Rupert Gordon. He can expand on how these program changes are helping individuals access the supports that they need during the pandemic. Rupert?

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, MPP McDonell, for the question.

I'd like to take the opportunity to provide some further detail on the responses the ministry put in place to support individuals with disabilities and their families. The first, as the minister spoke to, are adjustments to direct funding programs to allow for admissible expenditures that would reflect the changing needs of individuals and families during COVID-19. The second is the government's investment in the temporary wage increase, starting in October of 2020, that's allowed families to receive funding for workers they hire directly through the ministry's direct funding programs.

On temporary expansion of admissible expenditures: To support those families accessing Special Services at Home and enhanced respite for medically fragile and technologically dependent children during the pandemic, as well as adults with developmental disability supported by the Passport Program, some examples of items that have been temporarily made available as eligible expenses to accommodate activities, services and supports for children and families while they physically distance at home—and this is effective April, 2020, until further notice—include these things:

Sensory items that support recipients who rely on sensory items to alleviate anxiety, stress, or support any clinical or behavioural plans.

Technology providing program participants the means and ability to stay safe, connected and occupied and engaged at home, including virtual and online learning and skill development activities: This includes things like laptops and tablets, online educational and e-learning activities and resources, video games and video game systems, webcams and microphones, media service subscriptions and platforms, e-readers, and remote monitoring devices and medical alert services, which may be supporting people in supported independent living or otherwise independently. The approval of technology supports assists in the virtual engagement of people with disabilities and connections for families, providing some relief from the caregiving requirements and alleviating some of the impacts of physical distancing.

Activities and items to support home-based recreation and fitness that would otherwise be accessed through day programs, school or their community-based programs—so supplies to support home-based hobbies and activities such as art supplies and crafts, hobby supplies, puzzles and games, books for leisure and learning, and supplies to support home-based physical activity and fitness, which could include things like indoor items and equipment like skipping ropes, yoga mats, resistance bands and so on; or fitness and sports equipment and supplies that may be used on an individual's property such as a basketball net, a Frisbee or a badminton set.

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Personal protective equipment and supplies: Intended to enable program participants and their support workers to be more safely supported at home and as required in the community, that may have been of heightened importance to children and adults who are immunocompromised. That includes obvious things like gloves, masks, gowns, cleaning supplies and, where required, goggles and face shields.

Essential service delivery fees: Families caring for people with physical or developmental disabilities, particularly families caring for members who are medically fragile, may not be able to leave their homes for groceries or pharmacy needs because of the vulnerability of their family member and because of their care requirements, so if necessary, service delivery fees for essential items like groceries and medications were an admissible expense.

Behavioural support plans and related interventions: The development of behavioural support plans and recommended interventions delivered in person or remotely or virtually and support strategies to reduce challenging behaviours and potential crisis situations were intended to assist families to more safely support their family member at home.

Let me turn briefly to the temporary wage increase. Effective back to October 1 of 2020, the government began providing a temporary targeted wage increase for eligible workers delivering publicly funded personal support services in sectors critical to our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the minister mentioned, the temporary wage enhancement has been extended into August. This includes eligible workers delivering direct support services in the social services sector, including workers hired directly by families through the ministry's direct funding programs, and provides a wage increase of \$3 an hour to approximately 60,000 eligible workers.

In children, community, and social services, direct support workers provide support to workers of all ages in a wide range of personal support services and residential settings, day programming and family homes, as well as children and youth service settings across the province. Workers may be employed full-time, part-time or casual, and work functions must involve the primary provision of personal client care to individuals with special needs, including developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, medical issues and/or behavioural challenges, assistance in daily living tasks, personal care and support, and ensuring the personal safety and welfare of individuals.

Care can be provided in residential, community and home settings for the provision of caregiver respite performed in direct proximity to the client involving physical interaction or virtually or remotely, and care includes directly assisting clients with feeding, dressing, personal hygiene, toileting, managing medication and so on, providing supports required for clients to access and participate in community activities, and observing and planning daily living routines, supervising clients and monitoring safety risks. This investment applies to eligible workers employed by or providing services purchased by families through all of: the Special Services at Home program; the Enhanced Respite for Medically Fragile and/or Technology Dependent Children; the Ontario Autism Program childhood budgets and interim one-time funding; the Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities Program; as well as the Passport Program.

Families that employ eligible direct support workers and receive funding from one or more of the children's direct funding programs to pay the workers can apply for the wage enhancement through the Transfer Payment Ontario portal and the MCCSS web application process. Passport recipients or those administering their funding on behalf of Passport recipients submit claims with supporting receipts and invoices through the existing Passport payment process for reimbursement in order to access the wage enhancement. Recipients and families don't have to submit anything in addition to the regular claim, and support workers don't have to submit their own claims. Thank you.

Mr. Jim McDonell: Well, thank you for that answer, and it's great to hear more about how you and your ministry have stepped up to provide direct supports to families and those with developmental disabilities during this difficult time.

However, we know that every family in Ontario is facing challenges of some kind as a result of the pandemic. Minister, are there any other initiatives that our families should know about that are more broadly applicable?

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes, there are. Thanks, MPP McDonell. I know you get lots of questions from folks in your part of eastern Ontario and the Cornwall region. To help children, youth and families that are facing new pressures and expenses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my ministry is providing continued and enhanced funding for a range of key programs and initiatives to ensure services continue for families, especially during this difficult time. As an example, the Ontario Student Nutrition Program helps provide healthy breakfasts, snacks and lunches to school-age children across the province so that they're ready to learn, develop healthy eating habits and feel a sense of belonging at school. This has happened even though the kids aren't in class right now.

In addition to annual ministry funding of \$27.9 million for the program to support families experiencing food insecurity during the COVID-19 period, our government invested a million dollars to support continued program delivery through the summer months last year. Since September, agencies adjusted some of the strategies they

used during the school closures in spring 2020 and over the summer to continue to support students learning in school and online. In September, we secured 10 million bucks in federal funding from the Safe Return to Class Fund to support program delivery in school and to remote learners for the remainder of the 2020-21 school year.

Another area of investment in 2020-21 to help support families through COVID was in our Infant Hearing Program. The Infant Hearing Program works with birthing hospitals and community partners to screen all newborn babies for permanent hearing loss and provides services and supports needed to develop language and literacy skills for children identified with permanent hearing loss. My ministry invested \$3.8 million in 2020-21 to make sure those newborns that may have missed opportunities to be screened as a result of the pandemic and some of the closures and restrictions were able to be screened.

The Ontario Child Benefit is also a key part of the government's plan to reduce poverty. The Ontario Child Benefit provides reliable financial support that helps low-to moderate-income families with the cost of raising children. This includes working parents, as well as those receiving social assistance. These investments are on top of the investments that Minister Lecce and the Ministry of Education made for families as well throughout the pandemic. This government is investing almost \$1.2 billion in 2021-22 for the Ontario Child Benefit, with about a million children and youth in over 500,000 families receiving the benefit annually.

I know our assistant deputy minister in this file, Jen Morris, will want to speak more about that, and she can provide further details on the impact that these investments are having and will have in the future on these families. Jen, if you're available?

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Thanks, Minister. And thank you, MPP McDonell, for the question. I'm pleased to provide additional details regarding the supports we provide for families in the programs the minister has spoken about.

During the school closures from March to June 2020, throughout last summer and during the current school year, all agencies that delivered the Student Nutrition Program continued to support the delivery of nutritious food to children and youth by working with community partners to distribute grocery gift cards, food boxes and meal kits to families. This has continued throughout the current school year, with multiple service delivery changes as a result of partial or complete remote learning models.

For the coming year, the ministry is continuing to fund Student Nutrition Ontario—this is the organization representing 14 Student Nutrition Program lead agencies—to support the development of partnerships to increase donations and preferential pricing for lead agencies to continue this alternate service delivery.

The Student Nutrition Program brings together many partners across the province. The ministry is part of a collaboration among the philanthropic sector, corporate donors, community fundraising and local volunteers who

all contribute to the delivery and the success of the program. We are continuing to work closely with the Ministries of Education and Health to explore options to continue to support program delivery in the coming school year, including for children in school and also to remote learners.

The minister also referenced the Infant Hearing Program in his remarks. Ontario's Infant Hearing Program identifies children born with permanent hearing loss through universal newborn hearing screening and provides services and supports needed to develop language and literacy skills for children with permanent hearing loss. With early intervention, most children with permanent hearing loss will develop language skills on par with their hearing peers by the time they start school. The Infant Hearing Program is delivered by 12 lead agencies across Ontario, including public health units, hospitals, community agencies and children's treatment centres.

Due to the COVID outbreak and based on the advice of public health officials, universal newborn screening was suspended during the first wave of the pandemic. As the minister noted—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I apologize for intervening, but we've come to 12 noon. The time remaining on the rotation will be available to the government at 1 p.m. We are now recessed until 1 p.m.

The committee recessed from 1200 to 1300.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good afternoon, everyone. The committee resumes. We're going to consider vote 701 of the estimates of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. There is now a total of two hours and 53 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates.

Standing order 69(a.1) allots 15 minutes to the independent member of the committee; they will have the opportunity to use this time today if they wish.

When the committee recessed this morning, the government had three minutes and 20 seconds remaining. Before I go to the government, we have a number of people who have joined us this afternoon, and I'm going to go through and ask them to confirm their identity and their location in Ontario. MPP McKenna?

Ms. Jane McKenna: [*Inaudible*] McKenna, and I'm in Burlington, Ontario. Thank you, Chair.

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

MPP Coe?

Mr. Lorne Coe: Good afternoon, Chair. I am joining the committee from my constituency office in Whitby, Ontario.

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

MPP Parsa, I have you on screen.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Good afternoon, Chair. It's Michael Parsa, and I'm at Queen's Park.

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

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Good afternoon, Chair. I'm here in beautiful Port Credit.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): And it is indeed; it's true.

And we have one person who has phoned in. If they could identify themselves and their location.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: MPP Armstrong, in Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Ah, that was our guess. Okay. Thank you very much, MPP Armstrong.

When the committee recessed this morning, the government had three minutes and 20 seconds remaining. This is back in the hands of the government. Who will be carrying this? MPP Roberts, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Perfect. Thank you. When we recessed for lunch, the minister was just talking about support throughout COVID to children and families, so, Minister, perhaps I'll turn it over to you to finish on this topic in the remaining time.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, MPP Roberts. Jennifer was speaking about the specific investments that have been made to help families during the pandemic, so Jen, if you want to pick up where you left off and introduce yourself, and tell folks about the investments that we've made to support families.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Thank you, Minister. Jennifer Morris, assistant deputy minister, children with special needs division, Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

When I left off this morning, we were just talking about the Infant Hearing Program. Due to the COVID outbreak and based on the advice of public health officials, universal newborn hearing screening was suspended during the first wave of the pandemic. As the minister noted, the ministry invested \$3.8 million in 2021 to support families who had missed those screens due to COVID-related closures to access a modified hearing check which allowed both screening and early audiological support to identify babies with permanent hearing loss. All families who had a missed screen have been invited to participate in this modified hearing check.

A foundational support to families, regardless of the special needs of their children, is the Ontario Child Benefit, which is a key part of the ministry's effort to reduce child poverty. The OCB is an income-tested funding entitlement designed to help low-to-moderate-income families with the day-to-day costs of raising children under the age of 18. This entitlement is fully integrated with the federal Canada Child Benefit and does not require an additional application by the individual family. The province pays the entire cost of the OCB.

Benefit amounts are determined based on the adjusted net family income of the family and the number of children. The current income threshold for which the maximum benefit is paid—

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

Ms. Jennifer Morris: —is \$22,303. Families with adjusted family net incomes below \$22,303 receive the maximum payment of \$1,461. Coupled with the child benefit, families with children under six years of age can receive up to a maximum of \$8,226 per child per year, and the maximum benefit and income threshold are indexed to

the Ontario consumer price index. The rate increases annually on July 1; the maximum amount for eligible families will increase to \$1,474 this July, and the income threshold will increase to \$22,504.

Child benefit programs help to reduce the number of children living in poverty, as they provide a stable and predictable monthly benefit for eligible families, regardless of a parent's employment status. For example, the OCB continues to support low-income families as they transition from social assistance to employment, ensuring that the benefit itself is not a disincentive to securing—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say that with that, your time is up. This rotation goes to the official opposition. MPP Andrew, I understand that you will be taking the floor. It is yours.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to Associate Minister Jill Dunlop and Minister Todd Smith. I appreciate your time, and everybody else who's on the call as well.

The first comment I wanted to address was about the task force. I recognize that the task force mentioned in the 2021 budget was one of the few new initiatives for women. Of course, it promised a task force to advise the government on ways to address the unique and disproportionate barriers women face during the pandemic; thank you very much for recognizing that women have been disproportionately impacted, especially BIPOC women, women with disabilities and all the groups that are disproportionately furthest away from access, resources and equity.

I just wanted to get an update on the task force, because what I recognize is that the members of the task force have still not been announced. I just want to know the timelines of this task force, to ensure that it's something supporting women now and not theoretically after the pandemic has officially ended. Thank you.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Good afternoon, MPP Andrew, and thank you for being here at committee today. That's a great question. It's something I, too, am very excited about. As you mentioned, it was announced in our recent budget that we would be forming a task force recognizing that women have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Women small business owners are overrepresented in areas such as hospitality, tourism, retail—areas that have been severely hit—and some of those areas will take a long time before they're back to 100%.

The task force is going to be announced very, very shortly, and the members announced as well, and the mandate of the task force moving forward. I can assure you that it will be very, very soon.

Ms. Jill Andrew: I appreciate that, and I do appreciate your enthusiasm. I'm also excited to see how this all rolls out. Do you have any estimate? Are we talking a few days? Are we talking weeks? Are we talking months, as to when the task force will be formed? Only because, of course, we are moving rapidly into our reopening and I just want to be able to report back to our constituents and stakeholders with an ETA.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: I can't give the specifics, but I can assure you it will be very, very shortly.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Okay. No worries about the specifics around the timing.

My other follow-up would be: Can you tell us who the task force will be comprised of and what sorts of folks will be on the task force? And for those who aren't on the task force, will there be a mechanism in place for our community to be able to share thoughts with the task force, give feedback to the task force and connect with them in other ways?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Great question, MPP Andrew, and thank you for that. I can't say specifically who is on the task force at this time—that will be part of the announcement—but I can assure you that it is a well-rounded group comprising different sectors that we looked across, ensuring that regions of the province were part of that table as well. I think you'll be very impressed with the leadership that we have at the table and the sector representation to assure that we really are hearing from voices of women across the province.

If I could ask ADM Simmons to hop on, maybe she can explain a little bit more about the task force and some of the areas that we are looking at.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you.

Ms. Barb Simmons: Good afternoon. I'm Barb Simmons. I'm the assistant deputy minister for the Office of Women's Issues. A lot of the work that the task force will gear up very soon to do, very quickly, is aimed at some of the specific challenges that women faced in the pandemic. As you pointed out, women were particularly hard hit by this pandemic. Some of that is because of the sectors where unemployment hit the longest and hardest, women being overrepresented a little bit in tourism, hospitality and accommodation industries, as you know, and then secondly, with women's disproportionate caregiver duties overall in the pandemic as well, which I know you're familiar with.

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The task force recovery is aimed at seeking advice from a wide variety of women, both with lived experience and with academic expertise and with business expertise, on the ways in which we can build on the existing economic empowerment programming that we've got in place, the current and newly enhanced initiatives in skills training, retraining and employment services, and to make sure that we're actually aiming those programs effectively at the specific services and supports women will need to enter and re-enter the labour market, to re-skill and upskill into new jobs as the economy reopens, and to be able to basically come back from that pandemic in a critical way.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you, Barbara. You've definitely laid out some of the theoretical overarching pieces. Though I didn't get specifics, I understand that those specifics might be coming.

I wanted to share a note I received from the Canadian Women's Chamber of Commerce: "In budget 2021, the province of Ontario recognized the substantial difference between economic recovery between men and women, and yet their funding and support don't go far enough to address the discrepancy in access. While the province of

Ontario tries to pass this accountability to federal levels of government, British Columbia took a different approach. In BC, we have seen the government take an intersectional approach to providing finances to small businesses, and we are waiting for a similar response from Ontario's provincial government."

I read that out because I want to understand how this particular task force is going to support our women here and what the Ontario government's financial support to that task force is going to be, or to women in general—the specific provincial dollars. I understand that you all have \$117 million, or something like that, targeted employment and training supports to assist women, racialized individuals, etc. But what I also understand is that this is federal funding as part of the workforce development agreements. So I'm just trying to understand what dollars are going to be invested by the Ontario government for our Ontarian women living here in our province? And what's happening this year? We can sort of fortune-tell to three, four, five years, but while you all are in power here in Ontario, what investments are happening in Ontario this year for women? Thank you.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question, MPP Andrew. Actually, back to your previous question, you had asked about the opportunity for constituents across the province to lend their voice to the work that's being done. The task force will be doing consultations within themselves as well, so I'd be happy to—

Ms. Jill Andrew: If I may interrupt you, Associate Minister. I think we can move on to that one since you've said that more details will be coming, and I'm hearing from what you're saying that there will be opportunities for feedback. But I am specific in wanting to know what dollars and cents have been invested by the Ontario government to support women's recovery during the pandemic this year.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Okay. Thanks for the question. Some of the programs I want to talk about that I know have impacted women small business owners are the Digital Main Street program—I'm sure you're familiar with that. That was expanded by our government last June up until this past March. More than 14,000 businesses across the province were reached by the Ontario grants program, and I can tell you that 67% of Ontario businesses who made use of that Digital Main Street program were, in fact, women-led businesses. I know I've talked with women business leaders in my community who accessed that program. These were businesses that had never had an online presence before and actually saw an increase in their profits and are excited that they have now tapped into the digital sales and will be continuing that post-COVID. So I think that's a great program for women. And 91% of those businesses have reported that they're more resilient as a result of that.

I think if I can ask ADM Simmons to jump in and give us some specifics on also the investments.

Ms. Jill Andrew: My apologies, again, Minister, but maybe we can just move on, because I'm seeing the women-specific funding that you all have marked, the

\$117 million towards targeted unemployment and training supports for women, racialized and Indigenous peoples, youth, people with disabilities. I also see, of course, the Digital Main Street program. Those are of course supporting women, and I thank you for that, but they're supporting a gamut of marginalized communities. I also see the smaller amount that's attributed to violence against First Nations, Inuit and Métis women.

I guess what I'm asking is, out of that \$117 million that's for all of those marginalized groups and the Digital Main Street program that's \$57 million but also for everyone and anyone, not necessarily for women or those who have particularly been disenfranchised even before the pandemic, can you give an actual dollar figure as to what the Ontario government has invested in women-specific programming for COVID recovery—so not old funding, not federal funding coming from Justin Trudeau or whatnot, but funding in the 2021 budget that's brand new that's for women-centred programming in Ontario? Thank you.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: I'm happy to do that, MPP Andrew. I'd like to speak more specifically to the Women's Economic Security Program. I know Barb had touched on that in her previous answer, but this program we fund at \$5 million. The Women's Economic Security Program, or WESP, as we call it here, supports the delivery of skills training and employment assistance such as apprenticeships, but it also provides the wraparound supports to help low-income women gain the knowledge, skills and experience to transition into the labour market successfully.

I've had the opportunity to visit many of the WESP centres across Ontario and see the work they are doing specifically with women. When I was first appointed to this position, I visited the YWCA in Scarborough. I know they're doing a lot of work in the skilled trades area, which I know you've heard me talk a lot about in the House, that I'm an advocate for. I think it's such a great opportunity, and I know we can all agree on that. Women are under-represented in this area, and we also have jobs that are sitting empty, ready to be filled. If government is offering the training supports there, we can transition the women into those good-paying jobs.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you, Associate Minister. Before I shift gears, Chair, can I get a time check, if you don't mind?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Sure. You have seven and a half minutes left.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Oh, okay. Wonderful.

I guess, before I move on to something else—I'm quite excited about the task force, and thank you for sharing about WESP. I think anything we can do to support women who are geared up and ready to get back, whether it's into the workplace or getting back to school or starting a new business or getting out of violence, quite frankly, is necessary. I'm not here to suggest that there's anything wrong with having WESP or having any of those programs, but I am here to highlight a few additional pieces.

With the creation of this task force, with the creation of this COVID-19 WESP program, with the acknowledgment that women have been disproportionately impacted,

I'm wondering, have you and your colleague Minister Todd Smith—and other ministers, because I know you all often say at Queen's Park that you're inter-ministerial and you work with your colleagues and whatnot across different ministries—I'm wondering about the cancelled Pay Transparency Act. I'm wondering about the government's decision, as we know, to cancel the Pay Transparency Act, the decision to roll back on minimum wage. We know that there have been recent funding cuts and a lack of action which led to the elimination of the only French-language midwifery program in the province. We know that midwives have been denied pandemic pay increases.

So I'm just wondering, are these decisions—and of course we could talk about our PSWs. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention our PSWs and unsubstantial paid sick days in Ontario or even the freezing of nurses' salaries. All of these pieces are quite tragic, and they've all been committed under your government. So I'm wondering, are you going to have courageous conversations with this task force that address the disjointed decisions that actually negate women's economic ability and negate their ability to participate in the workforce at par with their male counterparts—or male-identifying counterparts, I should say, not to have a gender binary. Thank you, Minister.

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Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question. I appreciate that. Everyone deserves equal pay for the work that they do, and it has been that way since the Pay Equity Act was passed in 1987. One way that we are working to increase the salaries of women across Ontario is by encouraging them and providing them the supports that they need to get into rewarding, high-paying jobs like those in the skilled trades.

I had the opportunity to speak with Kadie Ward, who acknowledges the fact that there is pay equity in skilled trades, looking at opportunities like how an instrument and control technician makes \$120,000 in their first year as a heavy-duty equipment technician. Actually, my brother is one and he will say the best operators are women. They're making over \$110,000, so they're amazing, rewarding careers. Work that my ministry is doing in conjunction with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development is providing the training dollars necessary to help women get into these high-paying jobs, where there is pay equity.

Unfortunately, we know women make up only 7% of skilled trade workers in Ontario and we've both agreed already that women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and have lost their jobs. There are opportunities out there for rewarding careers and encouraging women into those areas. But these aren't minimum-wage jobs; these are jobs that women can raise their family and support their family on. That's what we're looking at doing in conjunction with other ministries as well.

If I could ask ADM Simmons to join me in this—

Ms. Jill Andrew: Before you ask your colleague, Associate Minister: You spoke about pay equity, but can you

inform us as to why the Pay Transparency Act was cancelled by the government? Have you had that conversation with your colleagues in the PC caucus?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: I'm going to ask Barb to answer that question and to—

Ms. Jill Andrew: Oh, perfect.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: —further information on the question before as well.

Ms. Barb Simmons: Hello. It's ADM Barb Simmons, Office of Women's Issues. I'm afraid I don't have the answer on the Pay Transparency Act.

Ms. Jill Andrew: No worries. In that case, we can move on, because that's what the question was about; it was specific to the Pay Transparency Act.

I also wanted to take the opportunity to put on record the words from a wonderful organization that we have here in St. Paul's, Humewood House. I also want to just make sure that you know who they are. That's why I'm plugging their name. Before I plug, I also wanted to say, when you were talking about small business owners and women entrepreneurs—I want you to be familiar with the Oakwood Hardware, one of our favourite restaurants in St. Paul's. Anne Sorrenti is an amazing entrepreneur—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Just to note you have two minutes left.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you, Chair.

Anne Sorrenti is an amazing entrepreneur. She owns the Oakwood Hardware. She has been an outstanding community leader and volunteer for over 26 years here in St. Paul's, and she hasn't been able to receive one of her payments for the Ontario Small Business Support Grant, so I'm just flagging it with you. I know that Minister Fedeli has also said that he will help out, and Minister—oh, dear—Sarkaria, I believe it is. I've sent them emails. I haven't heard back from them, but I want to flag for you that we really need support for Anne at Oakwood Hardware. And there's Vegwood as well, and I could go on and on with the list of women-owned businesses that haven't gotten, in some cases, one instalment of the grant, even though they have qualified, and in other cases, others that were told they'd get their second instalment but never have.

Going back to Humewood House, Humewood House is a beautiful, beautiful establishment that supports young mothers with little ones:

“This letter is about our concern that our young parents and their children have been left out of the mental health services that transferred to the Ministry of Health. The impact of this is their mental health concerns are minimized, and some of the neediest clientele are becoming the least resourced. All of our sister mental health agencies under the auspices of the Ministry of Health received a 5% funding increase to their base this year, while our organizational needs to support infant and maternal mental health was denied. Leaving young parent services under MCCSS reduces our ability to provide for our clients' critical needs as well as their social determinants of health needs. Housing and education are important for everyone but without mental health supports in the housing/classroom,

many of our clients struggle to survive and maintain their homes and education.”

So while—

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

Ms. Jill Andrew: No problem.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We now go to the government for their rotation. MPP Barrett, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Toby Barrett: I do want to thank the minister and the staff for taking all of this time, walking through so many issues that have been raised in considerable detail. I personally find that quite useful, and will find it quite useful going forward.

I would like to get some more information, to continue the discussion with respect to this ministry's ongoing response to the pandemic, and, most specifically, ongoing measures to deal with the myriad of challenges that we see amongst those who are most vulnerable in our communities. I know last week, Minister, you and I chatted a bit about some of our contact with some people who need some help; some who ask for help, some who don't ask for help. On occasion, we still run into people—not as much as before, because of the stay-at-home orders and what have you. So I remain concerned, just because I can't keep in touch the way I did before. Further to that, clearly it looks like we're coming out of the worst of it. There is certainly, going into the next stage, so much work that needs to be done if we are to get Ontario back to a full recovery.

A considerable amount of money has been spent over the past year. I know I've made announcements and put out news releases over the past year—or more, actually—but I would like to hear a bit more. I think we've got about 20 minutes, probably less; I've got to stop talking. I'd just like to get some more detailed descriptions of what your ministry has been doing to build on the past year, and where we're going forward.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thank you, MPP Barrett, and we hope to get you out soon to some fish fries in Haldimand and Norfolk counties so you can talk to some more people out there in your beautiful part of Ontario. And we are excited about the reopening which is happening, of course, into stage 1 now, as of last weekend. People are out and about and enjoying the great outdoors, and that's great, because that's the safest place for people to gather and communicate again with each other.

We know COVID has had a tremendous impact on every individual in Ontario over the last 16 months. That's why we acted quickly to address the economic impacts of COVID restrictions and social distancing, including providing support for food banks, seniors, Indigenous communities, the newly unemployed, small businesses, and our municipal service providers as well, just to make sure they have the funding to support those who need the support. Many of these investments have been distributed by our ministry. These funds are going to continue to help those who need assistance in these troubling times.

Our ministry has been particularly focused on vulnerable communities and those at risk of poverty,

homelessness, mental health crises and domestic violence, or populations experiencing systemic inequality. Significantly, our ministry partnered with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing for a \$765-million investment to help protect the health and safety of the province's most vulnerable through the social services relief fund—the SSRF, as we call it here. Emergency shelters and food banks, charities, non-profits and emergency services that require support can access this funding to help cope with growing demands and extraordinary circumstances. The fund is administered at the local level by our municipal service managers and Indigenous partners who understand local needs and where the communities need support. So through our municipal partners and our DSSABs, the social services relief fund has been distributed across Ontario.

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In 2020-21, our ministry provided \$111 million in emergency funding for social assistance recipients. That was through a temporary emergency benefit that helped more than 250,000 Ontario Works and ODSP recipients with extra costs related to COVID, like food and cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment. That happened between March and July of last year. Social assistance recipients continue to have access to our government's discretionary benefits program to help address one-time exceptional COVID-19 costs.

Our government is also providing direct support for individuals in financial need. For individuals not receiving social assistance who are in an emergency and don't have enough money available for necessities like food and housing, there is short-term emergency assistance available for up to 48 days. Again, the name of that program is emergency assistance, for those who aren't already on social assistance.

We were able to move quickly to provide \$8 million in funding directly to Feed Ontario that allowed the production and distribution of prepackaged hampers for food banks to distribute to those in need, and provided an additional \$1 million to Ontario 211 to meet increased inquiries for referrals and non-emergency information for Ontarians seeking new supports. The folks at 211 have been very, very busy throughout the pandemic, fielding all kinds of calls, and I want to give full credit to the folks who are on the phones at 211 and hearing from people who are having difficult times finding the resources that they need. I compare them to our constituency offices that we have, only these guys are open 24/7 and available in over 100 different languages to provide the services to the people of Ontario.

The COVID pandemic has created additional pressures for caregivers and individuals with a developmental disability who don't live in congregate care settings as well. That's why the ministry has worked with the developmental services sector to develop content and online tools to help families, caregivers and individuals during these difficult times. The online content focuses on specific pandemic-related challenges and it offers ideas and links to key resources for families and caregivers.

I'm also pleased to share that this has resulted in the launch of two new initiatives to support caregivers, families and individuals. First, the collaborative communication campaign focuses on five specific pandemic-related challenges that families are facing, including social isolation, and offers ideas and links to key resources for families and caregivers. Second, there is the supporting caregivers, families and individuals initiative on the connectability.ca website. Again, that's the connectability.ca website. It was developed to provide caregivers, families and individuals access to current information or supports or resources during COVID in a way that's coordinated and accessible.

I know my deputy minister, Janet Menard, is on the line. I'll turn it over to her. She can speak about our government's efforts to support those facing a disproportionate impact of COVID-19. Janet?

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you, Minister Smith. My name is Janet Menard and I'm the deputy minister at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. I'm happy to pick up on where Minister Smith has left off and to provide some additional details.

As you're aware and our ministry, of course, was aware from the beginning days of the pandemic—we knew that women and Black and racialized communities and Indigenous peoples and vulnerable populations were likely to be disproportionately impacted through the process of the pandemic. There were a number of things we did, and I'm going to come back to one in particular that is related to a congregate care action plan. But prior to that, in the very early days, decisions were made around investments to support a number of populations within our sector. We understand, for instance, the role that child care plays in supporting the labour force participation of women, and you've heard about that, certainly, in the last few days. Ontario, as a result, implemented emergency child care at no cost to eligible parents during the province-wide shutdowns and has supported the reopening of schools and licensed child care centres with additional funding to absorb the cost of enhanced health and safety measures.

We're also continuing to invest in training programs that focus on employment, pre-employment, pre-apprenticeship and entrepreneurship specifically for women. We're also working to increase women's representation, as you've heard from Minister Dunlop, in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as science, technology, engineering and the skilled trades through awareness programs and pre-apprenticeship training programs.

While our government has undertaken important measures that will provide support and relief to those most impacted by the pandemic, a particular focus will be required to ensure that women are not left behind after COVID-19. In the spring budget, the government committed to forming a task force to ensure inclusive economic growth is achieved. The ministry is working closely with the Ministry of Finance on establishing this group that will seek to address the unique and disproportionate economic barriers women face, particularly in an economy that will look very different after COVID-19 and will be informed

by diverse voices from the private, public and the not-for-profit sectors.

When the pandemic first started, we provided \$10 million to Indigenous communities for immediate emergency assistance and \$5 million to First Nations communities, specifically through the transitional support fund. This fund provides low-income individuals and families on-reserve assistance with housing-related supports, including social assistance recipients. Also \$3.75 million has been invested to address the disproportionate impacts of COVID in Black communities through the COVID-19 Emergency Fund for Black Children, Youth and Families. These new investments are informed by consultations with community partners and will be used to provide urgent supports, such as housing needs, food security, access to technology, education, income and mental health supports.

The ministry is also ensuring school-age children have access to healthy and nutritious food while schools are closed through an additional investment of \$1 million in the Student Nutrition Program.

In December 2020, the ministry worked closely with the Ministries of Health and Municipal Affairs and Housing to develop and launch the High Priority Communities Strategy to support communities that were hardest hit and most vulnerable to COVID-19. High-priority neighbourhoods are selected due to their high COVID-19 prevalence, low testing rates and socio-demographic barriers to testing and self-isolation. This strategy provides funding to local lead agencies to work in partnership with Ontario Health, local public health units, municipalities and other community partners to deliver key interventions for the province's hardest-hit neighbourhoods. The High Priority Communities Strategy has three objectives, which are:

- offering community outreach and engagement;
- increasing access to testing and providing wrap-around services; and
- more recently, of course, ensuring that persons in these communities and neighbourhoods are vaccinated.

The ministry has engaged municipalities who deliver our Ontario Works programs, including emergency assistance. They're well positioned to assess need and navigate federal, provincial and low-income supports. These are critical partners in local networks. They're working closely with community agencies to better connect people in need with the income supports to self-isolate and reduce transmission of COVID-19.

The ministry has also flowed additional isolation emergency support funding of \$600,000 to six regions with at least one designated high-priority community, to provide emergency financial assistance to individuals facing financial hardship who are required to isolate but are not eligible for social assistance programs and other or federal income assistance. This includes those individuals with precarious status in Canada.

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Ontario's new strategy, Building a Strong Foundation for Success: Reducing Poverty in Ontario, was released in December 2020 and is focused on helping more people get

back to work and participate in the province's economic recovery from COVID-19. It recognizes Indigenous peoples, Black and racialized communities, women and youth as priority populations for current and future efforts to reduce poverty.

Before I turn things over to Karen Glass, I just wanted to touch a little bit on our congregate care action plan. Early in the pandemic, as you can appreciate, a structure was put in place to respond to the pandemic, and one of the tables that was put in place was the public safety table. Our ministry, in partnership with the office of Indigenous affairs, was responsible for leading a table focused on vulnerable populations.

The first thing we did, of course, was to look at what and who was included in that group. It was long, to be honest with you. It did exclude long-term care and retirement homes, but it was looking at everything else. It included everything from people who are homeless to people who are potentially children in residential settings to adults in the justice system through the Ministry of the Solicitor General, so there was a whole range of very diverse groups of individuals who we felt were at risk.

One common theme that prevailed when we looked at all of them was that they were in congregate living of varying types. As such, we decided that we would focus on keeping those vulnerable populations safe. We acted quickly to put in place a plan, following a very comprehensive assessment of each of the populations and the specific risk factors that could be applied to their living conditions. We put in place a plan that, in essence, focused on three areas: (1) prevention, (2) infection control, and (3) staffing, ensuring that staff within all of those settings remained stable and, of course, on the job.

At the end of the day, when we looked at those sectors, when we compiled the list, there were actually approximately—

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

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you—approximately 49,000 individuals living in a range of congregate settings, and 44,000 individuals and staff supporting them, so over 100,000 people involved in those settings.

The plan, in fact, as I said, focused on these areas: prevention, infection control if there was positivity in a setting and, of course, keeping the setting safe was key, among other things, to helping to keep staff on the job. So I would say quite proudly that we actually were very successful in achieving the goals of that action plan. We have had outbreaks, but relative to the number of locations—and they were in the hundreds, probably in excess of a thousand. Given the number of people and the number of locations, one of the key things we did was distribute PPE, and you heard David Remington talk about the millions of pieces that we provided them. In essence, we were able to keep them safe, keep infection out—a prevention, by and large—from the community, keep the infections low and keep the work environment—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say, with that, we end the rotation. We go back to the official

opposition. MPP Andrew, I assume that you will be carrying this. MPP Andrew?

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate it.

I'm going to circle back to Humewood House, because I know we got cut off there at the end. Basically, just to summarize, Humewood House is concerned about the lack of mental health supports for the infant and maternal mental health clients. They were saying that their supports were denied and that leaving young parent services under MCCSS reduces their ability to provide their clients' clinical needs as well as their social determinants of health needs. I'm hoping, Minister, that today maybe we can at least get a commitment from you to take a look at Humewood House and see what supports you are able to navigate or help them with receiving, because they definitely are concerned about how they're accessing mental health supports, and with this shift, it has negatively impacted them.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for mentioning that, MPP Andrew. I think that's really important. I am familiar with Humewood, although I haven't visited, so I would—

Ms. Jill Andrew: We should do that some time.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Actually, I was going to ask if you wanted to go together. You could introduce and, following public health measures, we could—

Ms. Jill Andrew: Of course.

Hon. Jill Dunlop:—tour and have a chat with the staff and learn some more.

I will actually pass it to ADM Remington. He can speak further about the funding between the Ministry of Health and ourselves. So I will give it to David.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you, David.

Mr. David Remington: Thanks, Minister, and thanks, MPP Andrew. Thanks for the question. Young parent resource centres actually provide such a vital service to young moms, and we so appreciate the work they do. It is in partnership with mental health as we move forward, so we don't see a system of siloed service provision. We actually see an integrated wraparound social services system that has a real integrated human services approach to it.

The work that young parent resource centres do to support young moms needs to be in tight collaboration and support with the Ministry of Health and their work in terms of mental health programming. I think one of our challenges in the past has been too many siloed programs and folks bouncing. One of the things I love about the resource centres is they actually bring together a number of services and supports for young moms, lots of times in the same building and the same supports and really networking them. So we will continue to follow up and work with the Ministry of Health, but we actually see this as a very integrated system of services—

Ms. Jill Andrew: Okay. Thank you very much, David. Again, I just want to reiterate that their sentence, a very important sentence, is: "All of our sister mental health agencies under the auspices of the Ministry of Health received a 5% funding increase to their base this year, while our"—Humewood House—"organizational needs to support infant and maternal mental health was denied." I just

want to ensure that you are aware that Humewood House certainly needs some supports.

On the note of mental health, I actually wanted to ask the Honourable Minister Todd Smith if he could chime in. He might remember that his office would have received a cc-ed letter from me back in March on the case of Arka. Arka Chakraborty was a 12-year-old who died reportedly by suicide back in 2019. I'm sure the minister is very familiar. I know that the Minister of Education has also spoken to the media and whatnot since the publication of the coroner's report, which came out recently. But nonetheless, on June 21, we are going to be recognizing the second death anniversary of Arka. Arka was a student at a Toronto District School Board school.

Without rehashing the entire case, Minister Smith, one of the recommendations from the coroner's report was very clear, and that was that there seems to be a lack of communication or a lack of collaboration between child welfare agencies and school boards.

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I'm just wondering, as the minister for MCCSS, what can you do? How can your ministry support a better integration of child welfare agencies, being aware of children who are exposed to bullying or other discriminatory harassing or violent circumstances? How can you ensure that there is better communication and therefore better teamwork, for lack of a better term, between children, welfare agencies and our school boards?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, MPP Andrew. I did receive your letter, and I appreciate your concern and advocacy on this front, though the way that we've split up the duties here at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services is Minister Dunlop is responsible for the child welfare system and the reform that's occurring there. Obviously, I as the senior minister am responsible for signing on the dotted line on many occasions, but I work very closely with Minister Dunlop and particularly her team, which is my team, and ADM Remington, who you heard from this afternoon as well.

We are working across ministries. You referenced Minister Lecce and his concerns in this area and responsibilities as well, but I would also point out that Minister Tibollo has an interest here, for sure, as the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, and there are so many of us who are working together on issues like this and ensuring, to your point, that we are collaborating and working as a team to provide the best support necessary and possible to individuals when they need it.

I will pass the baton over to Minister Dunlop, who is right beside me, and we may want to hear from ADM Remington on this one as well.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, Minister. I am going to ask ADM Remington to talk about the integration, but before we go to that, I just wanted to touch on the fact that, in the work that we were doing with child welfare redesign and the consultations around that, in the early days, there was a modernization table that was brought together, and it was comprised of those sectors that touched on child welfare—things like children's mental health, the violence

against women sector and the education sector. All of those partners were coming together to have those important conversations about how they touched on the child welfare system.

But I will ask ADM Remington to talk about the integration of the different sectors into child welfare and how we're working together.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. David Remington: Thanks for the question, MPP Andrew. Unfortunately, tragedies happen in child welfare. One of the things that we do is work closely with the coroner's office to better understand the opportunities, to really think about the intersectionalities and the partnerships and working together in how we strengthen that. We have a number of processes set up with the Ministry of Education in communities to deal with at-risk youth that get identified, and when we can support and intervene earlier, to be able to share stories. We do use a Child Protection Information Network across Ontario now—the CPIN system—which shares information between children's aids societies, but then to extend that, we need to share information when we feel that we've got youth who are at risk, and education has been highlighted in a number of coroner's inquests, as you well know. So we have partnerships where we can work with the Ministry of Education. Folks can call each other, talk to each other. We encourage information-sharing on a basis where it's information as needed to protect children and youth with the children's aid societies and the Ministry of Education and the support partners. So we're trying to—

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you, David. The operative word here is “encourage.”

It's very clear from the coroner's report that Arka was failed by the system. I'm not suggesting that he was failed by any one individual caring adult at his school, but he was certainly failed by the system in that, as I was saying, the child welfare agencies and the school board were not necessarily able to share or sharing appropriate information or collaborating in a way that could have really provided additional supports for Arka around the bullying and the systemic racism and whatnot and the stigma that he was facing at his school.

I just wanted to put this on the record as well: We know that this government, your government, has cut upwards of \$790 million to education. This is a significant cut. We also know that we have seen teachers cut. We know that we've been arguing and begging, quite frankly, for more teachers and more mental health supports. I just want to let you know, Arka's parent Durba, and also another constituent of mine, Saúl, his mother, Marcela, told me this: Our schools are in desperate need of more social workers and more student equity program advisers and child and youth workers, front-line supports. Because of these cuts, kids are managing mental health issues on their own, in many cases. Adults are doing the best they can, of course, but the services are not enough. I just wanted to flag that.

I want to know today if we can get a commitment, at least from your ministries, Associate Minister Jill Dunlop and Minister Todd Smith, that there will be no more cuts

to mental health supports in schools so that we can have a better outcome for kids like Arka and Saúl. Can we get a commitment today of that?

Hon. Todd Smith: There was a lot to unpack in that statement. We've actually—

Ms. Jill Andrew: I know. Because of time, Minister Smith, the really important part is, can we get a commitment today from you, yes or no, as to whether or not we can see an end now of mental health cuts to our schools?

Hon. Todd Smith: We have seen record investments, actually, when it comes to mental health supports in our schools. Minister Lecce has announced them. Minister Tibollo has announced them. We have worked with the federal government on \$3.8 billion worth of investments when it comes to mental health, and we believe it's incredibly important that we have those investments not just at the school setting but that we also have them at the grassroots setting on the ground. That's all outlined in our Roadmap to Wellness, which Minister Tibollo unveiled a couple of months ago—

Ms. Jill Andrew: Right. And thank you, Honourable Minister Smith, but I think we can also agree—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Just one second. MPP Andrew—

Ms. Jill Andrew: Pardon me, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Andrew and Minister, when people are able to talk back and forth fairly easily, I'm quite happy to let things run, but unfortunately, when I find I have two people speaking at once, I need to intervene. MPP Andrew, if you need me to intervene and allow you to have the floor, raise your hand and I will call whoever is speaking to account and turn the floor over to you.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Got it.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I just want to make sure that everyone can hear everyone else, that's all. With that, MPP Andrew, you have the floor.

Ms. Jill Andrew: How much time do I have, Chair?

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

Ms. Jill Andrew: Okay. Minister Todd Smith, consistently we have heard the government speak to the federal funding that you all have received. Some of that funding we know has been misplaced. I believe it was reported that the Premier had somewhat misplaced \$4.4 billion. What we're talking about here is young people's mental health and, of course, the mental health of their parents, and oftentimes it's women. We know that 80% of our sole-parent households are run by women.

I am hoping that you will remember the story of Arka; his mother was also a single parent. I'm hoping that you'll remember the story of Saúl and that you will commit to no more mental health cuts. That was the question, and I didn't get a direct answer to that, but I do hope that you will commit to no more mental health cuts, at least in your ministry today. I recognize that Minister Tibollo is not here; I get that. But I am speaking to you all as one, quite frankly, because as colleagues, you should all be working together.

On the note of Minister Tibollo as well, I must say, I was very, very thankful for him attending my EDAW, the inaugural Eating Disorders Awareness Week, round table on February 1 of this year. I was very glad to have him there and he listened to the dozens of folks we had at that table. But of course, we do still have some outstanding issues.

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I'm hoping that maybe you can share with the minister some of these questions. This comes from NIED, National Initiative for Eating Disorders, which supports many folks not only in our nation, but right here in our province and, of course, in our city. They're asking, "Who is responsible for accountability in the eating disorders, adult, in-patient, intensive, publicly funded programs?" And it's a rhetorical question, because they have then said, "There are only 20 beds in Ontario: 10 are at TGH, four at Credit Valley Hospital and six in Ottawa."

I think, Associate Minister Dunlop, you know this: Eating disorders disproportionately impact women and girls—and, of course, everybody across the gender spectrum and the race spectrum, economic spectrum. EDs do not discriminate. But how do we move forward when we've got a million-plus cases in Canada and almost 500,000 here in Ontario, but yet we only have 20 beds for in-patient care in Ontario? Have you been chatting with your friend and colleague Minister Tibollo about how you all can join forces, specifically as the women's issues associate minister, to address eating disorders and get us more beds and also get us more community-based mental health supports? Thank you.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question. Minister Tibollo and me—normally in the House he was actually my seatmate, so we had a lot of conversations about the work he was doing in mental health and how that overlapped with the work in my ministry with women's issues. And I wanted just to touch on the recent investment that Minister Tibollo and Minister Elliott announced with the \$31 million for child and youth mental health funding. So, we have seen great investments.

Another one I wanted to mention: As part of the \$194 million in pandemic-related funding for mental health and addictions services that was invested, over \$51.5 million allocated was towards a cross-sectoral approach to support vulnerable populations, which also included First Nation communities, Métis, Inuit and urban Indigenous people. So there are great investments being made in mental health—

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

MPP, you have the floor.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you. Can you speak specifically, though, to funding supports for eating disorders as the most—well, one of the most—tragic of mental health issues, with the highest mortality? I'm just wondering about that specifically, because we know we've seen cuts from this government, upwards of \$335 million of cuts, in mental health services since you all took office just a few short years ago.

Can you speak specifically to eating disorders and how that is going to translate into more beds? Twenty beds—it's ludicrous. It's absolutely ludicrous, and people are having to pay \$20,000 in a month, in some cases, for eating disorder support in private establishments. I want to know exactly what dollars have been earmarked or are being spent this year for eating disorders in Ontario. Thank you.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question. I can't speak specifically to that because that is funded through the Ministry of Health. I can tell you that I recognize that it is a concern. As you said, it predominantly affects women. And we have seen an increase in eating disorders throughout the pandemic.

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

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: So it is a concern. The minister of mental health has spoken to it several times. I appreciate that he attended the inaugural meeting with you, because I think it just shows his commitment to mental health in this province.

And you speak of cuts, but I just see investments across the board, whether it's children's mental health, supports in the Ontario Structured Psychotherapy Program for violence against women—

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

MPP Andrew, you have the floor.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you very much. I don't speak of cuts; I simply echo what I hear from my constituents and what I hear from families that are calling me desperately because there's no bed available for their daughters to get help. So I just wanted to clarify that. It's not my opinion alone; this is the opinion of many, many folks across our ridings. The investments either are not enough or they are too late or they are being balanced by hundreds of millions of dollars of cuts. Cuts in one area and a small investment in another aren't really helpful.

On the note of gender-based violence, I just wanted to ask you about this program—if I can find it; let's see here. Yes, that would be the special priority program for survivors of domestic abuse. This is a program where folks are able to essentially get housing faster. I do want to place the caveat that that list is ballooning, and the wait-list is about three years, I understand, for people rapidly trying to escape violence. We know, of course, that the supportive housing and affordable housing lists are ballooning even beyond that, to 10 or 13 years. But if I come back to the request for special priority for survivors of domestic abuse—

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

Ms. Jill Andrew: No problem. I'll come back later. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Okay. We're going to the government now.

MPP Parsa, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Thank you very much, Chair. Much appreciated. Minister Smith, Minister Dunlop and

your staff, thank you again being here. Much appreciated for answering our questions.

Minister Smith, thank you very much for pointing out the fact that through the great work that's been done throughout this pandemic, we've all had to work together to help Ontarians, especially the most vulnerable. One of the points you mentioned was the great work that Minister Lecce and his ministry have done in making sure we have 7,000 additional staff this year. In fact, there's \$1.6 billion in new COVID resources that are being provided this school year. I can tell you the funding is up by \$561 million in the GSN, for example. This year, we have 3,400 new teachers, 1,400 more custodians and hundreds of new mental health and social workers. I want to thank you very much for pointing that out.

Minister, my question to you is about supports for youth. I want to spend a little time to talk about the future of our province. We all agree that young people are going to carry the torch long after we're gone. One of the most important things we do in this Legislature, Minister, is ensuring that we're providing them with the opportunities for success in the future.

I have to say that for decades, youth from disadvantaged communities in particular have faced barriers succeeding in our society, as well as our economy. It has been very difficult for them. We know that these barriers are not new, Minister, and in many cases, you and I both know that COVID-19 has made the issue a lot worse. At a time when Ontario is facing some of the most significant challenges in recent memory, we must do everything we can to equip the next generation, our future leaders—I've heard you mention this many times all across the province in our communities—with the skills that are necessary to overcome social and economic barriers that they will face.

Minister, on numerous occasions, you've talked about the importance of supporting youth. I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit more about what actions your ministry is taking to improve the lives of youth around the province, especially our most vulnerable.

Just before you speak, Minister: I was reminded by one of my professors, who used to always say that youth may be a small percentage of the current population, but they're 100% of the future. So I'm just wondering if you can tell us a little bit more about some of the supports your ministry is going to be providing for our youth and our future leaders. Thanks, Minister.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, MPP Parsa. That's a great line, and I'm glad it stuck with you. I'll try and remember that one as I'm talking about the opportunities fund in the future, because I think it's very important synergy there.

You're right: We are committed to working with communities right across the province to address the systemic barriers. We're making significant investments with support for grassroots organizations who are delivering programs that respond to their local needs and create new opportunities for youth in their communities.

Last summer, you'll recall, I was really, really pleased to be able to join Premier Ford to announce the Premier's Council on Equality of Opportunity. This is a new

advisory group that's providing advice to our government on how we can continue to support young people to overcome social and economic barriers and achieve success. This is a great group of young people that come from right across the province in various communities and, I think, a really great cross-section of what Ontario is all about.

The council is being chaired in its first year by our advocate for community opportunities, Jamil Jivani. The council has already been hard at work with members engaging with community members, enabling them to increase their participation in government decision-making, and it's across all fronts. It's not just the decision-making within the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services; it's decision-making across government. So we have that young people's perspective on everything that we're doing across government, which is so important, because they are 100% of our future.

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Our government has taken a number of critical steps with the input of the Premier's council as well as the Community Opportunities Advocate. Minister Lecce announced new steps to address barriers to education, such as ending grade 9 streaming into applied and academic courses; eliminating discretionary suspensions for students from kindergarten to grade 3; and empowering principals to hire more teachers from diverse backgrounds. We also introduced the Student and Family Advocates Initiative to help Black children and youth achieve their educational and career goals in Ottawa, Hamilton and the greater Toronto area.

Minister Dunlop has been advancing important changes in the child welfare system, including concrete action to eliminate birth alerts. We introduced a new five-year Poverty Reduction Strategy in December 2020, and that's going to help more people get back to work and participate in the province's economic recovery from COVID-19. We've had lengthy discussions about that earlier in the committee meetings here at estimates.

Recognizing the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on Black communities, one of the first priorities for the Premier's Council on Equality of Opportunity was engaging with those communities and those young people from across Ontario on the Black Youth Action Plan. I was really pleased to be able to announce last year that our government is doubling our investment in the Black Youth Action Plan by investing an additional \$60 million over three years. This funding will renew existing Black Youth Action Plan programming. It's going to create a new economic empowerment programming stream. It's going to provide targeted supports to help Black families and communities recover from the effects of this pandemic. One of the key recommendations coming out of the council's consultations was getting us through this pandemic and ensuring there is that opportunity for these communities when this pandemic is over, and we're starting to see the signs that we're emerging from it. Let's hope that everything stays on that trajectory.

The investment is supporting a range of culturally focused programs that promote family well-being; strengthen pathways to school, post-secondary education and

careers; and reduce youth violence. The new economic empowerment stream is going to focus on helping provide the skills that young people need to overcome social and economic barriers and achieve success, and that includes completing their education, enabling training for the specific vocation that they choose and enabling them to participate in a future-oriented and talent-driven workforce.

Additionally, this new investment included \$2.25 million to help Black communities address the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19. The funding is being used to provide urgent supports to children, youth and families for such things as housing needs, food security, access to technology, education, income, health and mental health supports. The \$2.25 million is in addition to the \$1.5 million COVID-19 Emergency Fund for Black Children, Youth and Families that was announced earlier last year.

We're also investing \$13 million in grassroots projects across the province through the Youth Opportunities Fund. This fund provides grants and capacity-building supports to local, community-driven, community-serving and youth-led projects that build the skills young people need to stay engaged in school, advance their skills, build strong and healthy peer relationships, and navigate resources in their communities. Our government will continue to engage with communities and support initiatives that empower youth and their families.

I'll now ask ADM Karen Glass if she would provide some further details on the initiatives that are under way, not just in the Youth Opportunities Fund, but other initiatives as well. Karen?

Ms. Karen Glass: Thank you, Minister. It's Karen Glass, and I am the ADM for strategic policy in the children, community and social services ministry. I will start by highlighting the significant amount of engagement and consultation that has occurred as part of the government's work to inform its investments for the new \$60-million investment in the Black Youth Action Plan. The advocate for community opportunities has met with over 400 stakeholders, and that includes parents, youth, community groups, non-profits, advocates and business.

There have been several hosted engagement sessions. Some of the key examples of the engagements include:

- visiting the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre to better understand the experiences of youth, what they're experiencing in the justice system;

- discussions including some town halls with Black communities and members to discuss the barriers and challenges specifically that are being faced by Black communities;

- conversations with members of Black communities, including parents, around barriers that they're seeing in the education system;

- engagement in round tables with community members and key stakeholders around poverty reduction, which the minister mentioned, as well as information sessions on the Student and Family Advocates program.

Round table discussions with youth have been ongoing, to hear directly from youth and their experience of the impact of COVID, particularly as it relates to education,

career planning and transitioning into the labour market. Some of these were hosted in collaboration with Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment LaunchPad.

The Premier's Council on Equality of Opportunity was announced in June, and is an advisory agency comprised of 19 members, which includes a chair and a vice-chair. As the minister mentioned, the council focuses on the challenges of young people today and, as such, is looking at everything from education and skills training to employment. One of the immediate priorities was that the council was looking at strategies to support vulnerable and marginalized youth to recover from the impacts of COVID-19.

It's an intergenerational, cross-sector group that includes youth between 18 and 29 years of age, as well as adult members who have expertise from community organizations, not-for-profit businesses, education and government services, and also have lived experience on the economic and social barriers facing young people, especially those from marginalized communities. The selection really followed some diversity factors, including regions, francophone, Indigenous/First Nations, people with disabilities, gender, LGBTQ+ and persons of colour, as well as racialized people and Black people, immigrants and refugees.

There were two very significant consultations that the Premier's council hosted over this past while. One is on the Black Youth Action Plan. The PCEO, or the Premier's Council on Equality of Opportunity, including members and the chair, held nine virtual consultations with over 200 community stakeholders, including one French session that was done in the fall.

The second was, working with MCU, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, around the access to post-secondary education and employment. There were nine virtual sessions, with 71 participants across the sessions, to provide input on how the ministry can identify opportunities and be more successful at supporting youth access to PSE, as well as employment, particularly in the post-COVID recovery period. They've also provided a round of input to ministries on how programs across government can continue to support young people and overcome some of these social and economic barriers to achieve success.

The new investments in the Black Youth Action Plan are being informed by these consultations, of course, with community partners that are led by the Premier's council, as I had just mentioned. The investments will support existing culturally focused community-based supports and promote well-being, build pathways to school and post-secondary education, reduce income and employment disparities amongst Black youth and young professionals, and decrease youth violence.

There are a series of programs that are under the Black Youth Action Plan:

- the Innovative Supports for Black Parents, which is culturally relevant parenting programs and centres;

- the culturally adapted Stop Now and Plan program, which is around conflict resolution and mindfulness;

- the culturally adapted Youth Mentorship Program, which is locally tailored mentorship programs;

—the Student and Family Advocates Initiative, which is community-based and culturally relevant advocacy supports tailored to the experiences and needs of Black students and families; and then,

—of course, there are some targeted Youth Opportunities Fund grants that are specifically identified or targeted for Black communities.

The industry-led career initiative provides training and work placements for Black youth in high-growth industries like coding and IT. Then there's the Network for the Advancement of Black Communities, which is a network to build community capacity and collaboration for systemic change. In all of our consultations one of the key things we've heard from members but also from the PCEO is the need for system coordination. The Network for Advancement of Black Communities plays a really key role in that.

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The programs are delivered by more than 70 agencies across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, Ottawa and Windsor. The majority of the Black Youth Action Plan service providers are community-based and culturally focused organizations, and 70% are first time recipients of government dollars.

For example, le Regroupement Ethnoculturel des Parents Francophones de l'Ontario is helping French-speaking Black families in Ottawa navigate complex systems, in particular child welfare, mental health and supports for their children with special needs.

One of the 17 new student and family advocate host organizations, Urban Rez Solutions, is providing advocacy supports for parents, as well as skill-building and positive Black identity programs for kids and children in east Scarborough.

The OYA Media Group is a Black-owned boutique film video and multimedia production company that is helping Black youth find meaningful job opportunities in the multimedia sector. This is as part of the Industry-Led Career Initiative. In the first year of the program, 96% of the participants found employment and 86% found employment within the broader sector.

The MH100 teen program in Windsor works in partnership with the Windsor regional police and hometown athletes in the Canadian Football League and NCAA basketball to bring diverse mentors into the youth mentorship program.

The government's new investments will also support the creation of a new economic empowerment stream, as the minister has already referenced. The focus will be to provide skills that youth need to overcome their social and economic barriers to achieve success. Really, we're looking at expanding government partnerships, particularly with business and in high-growth sectors and addressing the systemic barriers to economic inclusion, and then, of course, increased labour market participation by promoting diverse and alternative career pathways, such as entrepreneurship.

The investment in the Black Youth Action Plan also includes direct support to community organizations that

have been affected by COVID-19 and ensures that they will be able to continue to assist Black children, youth and families during this very difficult period of economic disruption.

To help provide for a more equitable approach to Ontario's COVID-19 emergency response, the minister already referenced the \$2.25 million in COVID relief grants to support families, and that brings the ministry's total investment up to \$3.75 million in 2021. The money is being used to provide organizations with many things: food, connections to different parts of the community, jobs—anything basically at a local level that's being identified. With that investment, basically, Black families are able to better address the disproportionate impacts of the outbreak.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have just a little over two minutes left.

Ms. Karen Glass: Okay. I just wanted to mention that this investment also includes francophone organizations, such as l'Initiative ontarienne pour le changement, and culturally focused organizations like Black Women in Motion, the Afri-Can FoodBasket program and many more. These grants are used to address the urgent needs, as I said, of food security, access to technology, online learning etc.

The Youth Opportunities Fund provides grants and capacity-building supports for community-driven, community-serving and youth-led projects that improve the outcomes for youth facing multiple barriers. Last year, as the minister noted, there was an investment of \$13 million. That supported 43 community projects; nearly \$9 million of these dollars actually supported specific Black-led focus projects.

The granting cycle is under way and will be confirmed in the near future. There are three streams of funding. Just as a reminder: There's the youth innovations stream, the family innovations stream and the systems innovations stream. Thank you.

Mr. Michael Parsa: How much time do I have, sir?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have just over a minute left.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

Minister, certain areas require involvement of more than one ministry. When it comes to supporting youth, that's something that probably involves multiple ministries. I think of the announcement by Minister McNaughton that will support Ontario youth with 2,100 youth to be able to access training and become future tradespeople. Can you tell me a little bit about that co-ordination that goes on between your ministry and other ministries to be able to better support our youth in the future?

Hon. Todd Smith: In the few seconds that we have left, I'd be happy to, MPP Parsa. We are working collaboratively with ministries. My ministry and Minister Dunlop's have been working very, very closely with Minister McNaughton in labour, training and skills development, not just to encourage young people, but as Minister Dunlop alluded to earlier, encouraging women to get into

skilled trades and take advantage of the training tax credits that were announced in last year's budget—that \$2,000 tax credit that's available to encourage people to retrain, given the fact that we are emerging now from the pandemic and there is going to be a need to fill a lot of jobs out there in the market. A \$2,000 tax—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry, Minister. You're out of time.

With that, we go to the official opposition for their rotation. MPP Andrew?

Ms. Jill Andrew: I just wanted to flag something, and I won't spend a lot of time, because it's not my area for today. Minister Todd Smith, you had spoken about the Black Youth Action Plan. You don't have to respond per se, but I just wanted to remind you that the Waterloo region school board does not have access to the systems navigator.

I also wanted to flag that there have been concerns from my colleague the chair of the Ontario NDP Black caucus that there is this sense that folks have that, frankly, if the government doesn't think that there are enough Black people in a said community, then they do not get access to the same robust funding as some of the more urban centres. This is simply a caution or a reminder that there are racialized people everywhere, and not because they may not have the same numbers that some in the city may have that they should receive no funding. So I just wanted to flag that before I move on.

I'm going to stick with mental health a bit. I know Minister Tibollo is not here, but you all do work inter-ministerially, so you say, so I'm hoping that you can give some thought to this. And it actually does also sit with you as well, Minister Smith. In 2020, the Canadian Mental Health Association released recommendations to an effective mental health strategy that emphasized the need for investments into expansion and quality improvement of supports, especially for community-based, non-profit mental health supports.

According to the Ontario Nonprofit Network recently, they calculated that some \$680 million was needed to stabilize non-profits. This is over 10 times the amount the budget has offered to segmented initiatives, which, of course, includes the \$2 million for pandemic relief for francophone non-profits. All of that to say, what are we looking at in terms of financial funding for our community services, our community-based mental health support services, here in Ontario?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for the question. We can answer the questions here from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, from our perspective, but the mental health funding does flow through the Ministry of Health, and Minister Elliott was here at estimates for 15 hours earlier and would have been able to probably get down into some of the more granular detail that you're looking for.

But from our perspective here—and we do all work very closely together, and we've got a great cabinet and a great team there that's been assembled by the Premier to knock down a lot of the silos that were mentioned earlier

by my Deputy Minister Janet Menard, to look at a pan-government approach to making sure that dollars are distributed as effectively as possible to get those results on the ground. Minister Tibollo has been working with Minister Elliott at the Ministry of Health on investing this historic \$3.8 billion in mental health. There are many programs that impact us at the MCCSS level, where we're working alongside Minister Tibollo. His Roadmap to Wellness was unveiled—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Sorry, Minister—

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you. May I ask, Minister Smith, what funding has your ministry put forth towards community-based social services?

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Hon. Todd Smith: Well, a significant amount. Just in the pandemic alone, the social services—

Ms. Jill Andrew: What's that number? My apologies; I don't have it in front of me.

Hon. Todd Smith: It's \$765 million, so over three quarters of a billion dollars, through the Ontario Social Services Relief Fund, which has gone out to organizations and communities: 47 district service managers, municipal managers and our DSSABs, which provided that funding in northern communities. I know it was very, very well received by our partners in the municipal sector. They are the ones, as you would be aware, that are closest to the ground and closest to dealing with these not-for-profits and charitable organizations, like shelters and food banks and other organizations that are providing meals and those types of programs. So each municipality was able to divvy up that portion—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): I'm sorry, Minister. MPP Andrew has asked for the floor again. Go ahead, MPP Andrew.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you for everything that you're saying, Minister Smith. I guess I'm just trying to get the specific numbers. You did mention a very big sum of money. I don't know exactly how that breaks down to social services. Of course, you mentioned food banks, which we know have been ballooned 200% during the pandemic, not having enough to even support the folks that are in those lineups in some cases. So clearly, we know that there is always more investment that could be done in terms of social services.

On the note of gender-based violence and on the note as well of housing—and I get it; you are not the Ministers of Housing. But I'm assuming that, once again, you work together and you must have information on what your colleagues are doing. Of course we know that we need tens of thousands of supportive housing units here in Ontario, which we do not have. The 2021 Ontario budget does not earmark funds for social housing in Toronto, despite asking the province for financial supports of \$15.4 million this year and \$26.3 million annually moving forward, which means, of course, the city of Toronto will only have enough money to turn 150 of the 1,248 units into requested supportive housing.

I'm asking the question about supportive housing because, of course, when people are fleeing violent

situations, the number one foundational thing they need is safe housing, right? So I'd just like to know what are your ministries' takes, women's issues and, of course, MCCSS, because many women are fleeing with their children as well. How are you supporting women getting into place, getting into housing?

I had spoken earlier about the special priority application for survivors of domestic violence. There have been items flagged to me about that: the administrative burden of completing those forms, the lack of anonymity, the wait-list of upwards of three years. I'm wondering, how is that supporting women now? Our shelters are bursting at the seams. We don't have enough funding to shelters. What are you all doing in terms of this special priority program for survivors of domestic abuse? Is that going to be tightened up at all? Can we make the wait-list less? What can we do to help folks get into supportive housing faster? Thank you.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Andrew. That's a great question. I can tell you, whether you live Toronto—St. Paul's or you live in Simcoe North, there is a housing shortage, and that's something I've heard across the province.

I am going to ask ADM Rupert Gordon to hop in, but before we get to that, I just wanted to point out—I think you flagged it as well—that this is a program through Municipal Affairs and Housing that is led through the municipalities. However, what I would like to say about it is we've committed to increasing the combined funding for the 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. I do have some numbers for you specifically to Toronto as well, but we've increased funding for the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative by \$15 million, from \$323.7 million in 2019-20 to \$338.7 million in 2020-21.

We've also announced a range of measures to help Ontarians get through these unprecedented times during COVID. Building on the earlier investments that Minister Smith talked about with the social services relief fund, we've included additional funding under the Safe Restart Agreement to municipal service managers and Indigenous program providers.

Ms. Jill Andrew: And all of this, of course, is—is this new funding? Is this funding in collaboration with the feds? I'm just wondering. Is this new funding for this budget happening this year? Is it happening over three to five years? What is your mandate?

Hon. Todd Smith: We're working with our federal partners specifically on a budget item called the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit. Minister Dunlop will be investing some of that in violence-against-women shelters and other housing within her side of the ministry, and we have also put forward our idea to spend some of it on the developmental services sector, which is in bad need of investment, as well, after 15 long years of a lack of investment in housing for those with developmental disabilities in their community.

But I would also say that working with Minister Clark at municipal affairs and housing, he has been a great

partner in working with our ministry on the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit, which was mentioned in the budget, with some of that funding spilling over into our ministry. He has also committed to \$489 million in housing and homelessness funding in the city of Toronto alone.

Ms. Jill Andrew: And how does that money flow? When is it flowing? Is that coming next month?

Hon. Todd Smith: Well, it's—

Ms. Jill Andrew: I'm being a little sarcastic here, but I'm wanting to know what's happening in 2021.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, member, and excuse me, Minister—

Ms. Jill Andrew: Yes?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Member, you have the floor. Please go ahead. MPP Andrew, you have the floor.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you, Chair.

Minister Smith, I guess I'm just trying to understand what funding is actually being earmarked for survivors who are escaping violence in terms of housing supports for this year, for 2021, and maybe—

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Well, I'm going to ask—

Ms. Jill Andrew: Go ahead.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: I was going to ask ADM Gordon to give us some specifics, but I wanted to give you some numbers for the Toronto area. In the 2021 fiscal year, the province has allocated the city of Toronto over \$489 million in housing and homelessness funding, including over \$290 million in new funding in light of COVID. I will pass it to ADM Gordon to give the specifics.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thanks very much, Minister, and thanks, MPP Andrew, for the question. My name is Rupert Gordon. I'm assistant deputy minister in the community services division here at MCCSS.

In addition to the measures that the ministers have been talking about on the affordable housing side, through co-operation with the federal government, there are a couple of important things that this ministry is doing to complement that work, to complement the work of our municipal partners, to complement the work of our colleagues at municipal affairs and housing, who are ultimately responsible for the special priority policy.

The first one is actually on the training side, to continue to support effective implementation of that policy. That's folks on our team who are connected to and involved with the violence-against-women and anti-human-trafficking work, helping to train municipal staff to understand and appreciate the lived experience of people who have been either fleeing domestic violence or human trafficking, and supporting them with regard to sensitive and careful implementation of that policy.

The second piece—and this goes, I think, to your question about anything coming up this year and immediately forward—is that the 2021 budget included a commitment of a new \$18.5-million investment in the Transitional and Housing Support Program, so that's a supplement to an existing—

Ms. Jill Andrew: And by “commitment,” it's not happening right now, though? It's not happening this year; it's a commitment.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: It will be happening this year.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Okay.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: The details are yet to be finally announced and rolled out, but there was a funding amount associated with this year, as well as the next two, that combines to \$18.5 million.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Okay. And—

Mr. Rupert Gordon: And that is an incremental—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Deputy Minister. MPP Andrew, you have the floor.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you. What's clear is that we recognize that, of course, gender-based violence and housing are inextricably linked. In the Ontario budget, as I read it, the housing strategy does not mention any gender-based approach to their plan, so I'm wondering—I guess I'm a little concerned, quite frankly. You've said repetitively that it's the minister of mental health and addictions, or now it's the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing or whatever the case might be. My concern, though, is if you all are working together so closely, how is it possible for the housing strategy to not mention any gender-based approaches to their plans? It's a bit of a rhetorical question, but I think that there is a need for you all to really know what the left hand and what the right hand are doing, as opposed to not knowing, because that impacts women; that impacts people who are escaping violence, who are dealing with mental health, substance abuse, along with, of course, being impacted by the homelessness crisis.

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So there are two main funding options for survivors of human trafficking in Ontario seeking transitional or long-term housing. I understand these options are rent-gear-to-income housing or the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit, which I believe Minister Smith had spoken about. I just want to flag that both have excessive wait times of many, many, many years. They're extremely detailed; the administrative application process has been flagged as something that is quite onerous and, in some cases, concerning, because, apparently, they need to identify their abusive partner, which many people feel could place them in an unsafe environment. I just wanted to flag those as concerns that are coming directly from some constituents and also from some women who I had spoken with when I did my listening tour a while back, before COVID. So I wanted to flag that with regard to the supports that you're offering.

How much more time do I have, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have four minutes and 20 seconds.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Wonderful.

This comes directly from the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre. This might be helpful for you to hear, Associate Minister Jill Dunlop, along with the AG and whatnot: "We know gender-based violence has increased during the pandemic. How does the province foresee the needs of survivors of gender-based violence, given that direct services have not been sufficiently augmented with additional funding support? Given most survivors do not go to the police, how does the provincial plan to support community-based direct services work? Are there going to

be increases that come from increases of requests?" This person is asking for more funding for more requests.

Just as a caveat of that, I had done a little research, and we know that 33 out of every 1,000 sexual assault cases are reported to the police and just 29 are actually recorded as crimes. So I think it's safe to say that many folks who experience gender-based violence, sexual assault, are a bit tepid when it comes to going to the police. I'm just wondering what are the community social services and what are the shelter, sexual assault centre supports that are going directly to front-line staffers for programming that's not project-based but is more core-funding-based. What sorts of investments are you doing in those? I know that you're heavily invested in policing and investing dollars in policing to address this issue, but it appears to me that the issue of gender-based violence, of sexual assault—sometimes those who are traumatized, those who have experienced this directly, don't feel the safest going to police. What supports are you offering for them at the community level? Thank you.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Andrew. I'm happy to talk about the supports that are available, because we've seen an increase in domestic violence during the pandemic.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Two minutes left.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: That is something that I know I flagged early on for my cabinet colleagues: that in stressful times like the pandemic we would see an increase in domestic violence. Through the budget, we are investing an additional \$2.1 million over three years to expand victim and sexual assault services in underserved communities. This also expands the free legal support services for survivors of sexual violence across the province and improves collaboration across the sector to provide seamless support to victims and survivors. This is on top of the \$3.6 million that we provided last year.

We are also providing the \$18.5 million, which my colleague Minister Smith mentioned earlier, to support victims of domestic violence and survivors of human trafficking to find and maintain affordable housing.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you for your response, Associate Minister Dunlop. I do have a question about the \$2.1 million that you mentioned. This is what I've received from a constituent: "These are misplaced resources that do not take into account the lived realities of sexual assault victims. If they did, they would know that adding funding to policing isn't the move, as most survivors do not report to the police."

I'm wondering why this government, the Conservative government, would have cancelled—because the prior budgets cancelled the compensation for victims of crime, which took away a lot of those services that people would access, either as a supplement or a complement, or in exchange for the "policing option." I'm wondering why the government thought it was necessary to end the financial supports for victims.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: I think it's important to note that the \$2.1 million was—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm very sorry to say that you're out of time on this round. You can return to that question when we come to the next round.

We are now with the government. Who will be speaking? MPP Coe, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Good afternoon, Chair, and thank you. To the associate minister and minister, thank you so much for being here and for the leadership that you've demonstrated in so many areas.

One of those areas I'd like to probe now, with your help, please, is the community supports fund and the Indigenous-led initiatives fund. You both know that it is part of Ontario's Anti-Human Trafficking Strategy. I was part of a number of round tables, and some round tables you were present at. But a couple in particular stand out for me: one in Peterborough and another here in the region of Durham, particularly in Oshawa. There were two key groups who participated in those consultations: one was Victim Services of Durham Region and the other was SafeHope Home. Both of them related to us at the time that they have heard that survivors of human trafficking—and this is not something you haven't heard yourself—may experience barriers in accessing community supports and that it can sometimes re-traumatize them if supports are not trauma-informed. And there were survivors present in the consultations that I attended.

We also know that, as more people learn about and destigmatize human trafficking, more survivors and their loved ones may come forward for supports. I've heard that not only in public consultations, but I've heard it from survivors that I've engaged and their families.

Could you speak, please, to what the government is doing to increase access to specialized, community-based supports in our province? At the same time, are these supports culturally responsive? And, importantly, how has the level of supports increased since the province's previous human trafficking strategy? Thank you so much. I look forward to the response that's forthcoming.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Coe, and thank you for the opportunities I've had to tour in your riding in person and virtually as well. You are a great advocate for your riding and for the women in that area. Thank you very much.

I just wanted to get on the record from my last answer that the \$2.1 million was for rural and remote service delivery, not specifically to policing, and that we have annualized \$2 million yearly for sexual assault centres.

Thank you for the question regarding human trafficking in Ontario, because, as you and I know, we've heard at our round tables that this is a real issue, and I'm glad that the question is being asked here today. In the summer of 2019, I held round table discussions across our province, and some of these were hosted by our colleague MPP Natalia Kusendova, who has been a great advocate for human trafficking in her political role as well as her nursing career, too. We heard from those impacted by human trafficking and what they had to say. We had the privilege of hearing first-hand from survivors of human trafficking, Indigenous communities and organizations, sex work

advocates, law enforcement and front-line service providers across Ontario. We heard of the tremendous obstacles that women and young girls face leaving their traffickers, establishing a healthy life and healing from their trauma.

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Everyone that participated in these discussions shared their insights, their perspectives and their suggestions, with passion and purpose. We heard about how important it is for survivors of human trafficking to not only be consulted on program design but also help lead program design, development and implementation. We also heard about critical gaps in child and youth programming. Following these engagements, I was pleased to announce our government was annualizing \$10 million in funding for front-line, wraparound supports for survivors through the community supports fund and the Indigenous-led initiatives fund. Altogether, we are investing \$96 million over five years directly into community organizations, which can best serve victims and survivors of this horrific crime.

We also used the information we gathered from these engagements as a foundation for developing our province-wide human trafficking strategy. As you know, our strategy takes a proactive approach, with actions across government focused on four pillars.

First, we are raising awareness of the issue by launching a new province-wide marketing campaign to educate children, youth, parents and the broader public about what human trafficking is, how to recognize the signs, and where to go for help.

Secondly, we're holding offenders accountable by giving law enforcement more specialized crown prosecution support for human trafficking cases, strengthening intelligence gathering in the correctional system, and investing in police services to help coordinate anti-human trafficking investigations and expand the Ontario Provincial Police child sexual exploitation unit.

Thirdly, we are protecting victims and intervening early by investing in specialized intervention teams involving police and child protection services, incorporating human trafficking awareness into the education curriculum and establishing dedicated, licensed residences to support victims, including those under the age of 16.

Finally, we are supporting survivors by investing new funding in wraparound, community-based supports and Indigenous-led initiatives to make more services available for survivors and by enhancing victim services to assist survivors throughout the court process.

These pillars are not mutually exclusive. Front-line community-based supports transcend our efforts. As you know, our front-line community partners and Indigenous communities and organizations are raising awareness, identifying those at risk and supporting survivors, which in turn contributes to our efforts to hold offenders accountable.

Through the anti-human trafficking strategy, I am pleased to share that my ministry supports a number of front-line community-based services for persons at risk of and survivors of human trafficking. We've expanded the Youth-in-Transition Worker Program to include additional human trafficking workers dedicated to providing

enhanced human trafficking supports to youth in and leaving the care of children's aid societies. Youth-in-transition workers connect youth to services and resources in their communities, such as employment services, life skills training and housing supports.

Phasing in over the five-year strategy, the six additional workers will expand the geographical reach of human trafficking supports through the program and provide support to specific populations, such as Indigenous children and youth. That will bring us to a total of 12 dedicated anti-human trafficking youth-in-transition workers.

We have increased funding for the Indigenous Anti-Human Trafficking Liaisons Program to serve more communities and build capacity to address trafficking and support Indigenous survivors. Liaisons provide targeted, ongoing service planning and delivery supports to agencies and communities seeking to provide culturally responsive services to Indigenous survivors.

We are establishing dedicated residences to serve missing children who have been sexually exploited, including those under the age of 16. The first residence opened in May 2021, and we are working to fund up to three new licensed residences to provide specialized programming, providing access to in-house supports to respond to the complex trauma experienced by children and youth who are trafficked.

Building off the existing \$3 million in funding for the Indigenous-led initiatives fund, we are increasing community-focused anti-human trafficking services and supports designed for and by Indigenous people by investing up to \$4 million per year in new funding. This increased funding will better meet the demand for dedicated services and enable front-line service providers to reach targeted and underserved groups, including children and youth, as well as Inuit and 2SLGBTQ+ survivors.

Finally, we are increasing the Anti-Human Trafficking Community Supports Fund to support community-based programming for survivors and individuals at risk of being trafficked by providing an additional \$6 million per year in new funding. This increased funding will allow for new child-specific programming, improved ability to respond to service pressures and more supports in northern, rural and francophone communities. Overall, these services will build a more comprehensive network of supports across the province, so more victims and survivors of human trafficking in Ontario have access to the help they need.

Before inviting my deputy minister to provide more details on two of the key components of our front-line supports, the Anti-Human Trafficking Community Supports Fund and the Indigenous-led initiatives fund, I would like a moment to recognize all our service partners across the province for working together with us to fight this crime, support victims and survivors, and keep children and youth safe. Fighting human trafficking, as you know, requires every single person in every single sector. It also requires trauma-informed care and support for the victims and survivors of this crime, so they can heal. I am proud to partner with these organizations as they make a real difference in the lives of so many who are impacted by this horrific crime.

I'll now pass it over to the deputy minister.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: Thank you very much, Minister Dunlop. I am Marie-Lison Fougère. I am the deputy minister responsible for women's issues, and I'm very pleased to share with you more details on what represents about a third of the total investment through the anti-human trafficking strategy.

As the minister indicated, we heard through engagement that front-line, community-based services are critical for supporting those at risk of being trafficked and survivors, while at the same time holding offenders accountable. Our strategy is to take a balanced approach with funding primarily dedicated towards supporting survivors; protecting victims and vulnerable, at-risk populations; as well as providing supports for early intervention and awareness raising.

Through the community supports fund, we are providing funding to community-based anti-human-trafficking organizations to deliver programs and services for victims and survivors of human trafficking. These services include emergency and transitional housing, trauma-informed counselling and supports for healing and rehabilitation, support for mental health and addictions treatment, and help towards connecting with employment and job training services.

The Indigenous-led initiatives fund also provides funding to community-based, anti-human trafficking services and supports, but it is focused on programs designed for and by First Nations, Métis, Inuit and urban Indigenous organizations and communities. The programs supported by this funding include 24/7 crisis help, counselling, cultural programming, addictions treatment, leadership development and other services.

As part of the new strategy, the ministry is providing an additional \$46 million over five years to both of these funds. This brings our total investment in front-line, community-based supports for these funds up to \$96 million over the five-year strategy, so that more victims and survivors have access to the supports they need.

As the minister shared, we heard through our engagement that we need more survivor-centred services and targeted supports for children and youth who have been or are at risk of being sexually exploited. These concerns were echoed by our Human Trafficking Lived Experience Roundtable, which I might add is a first in Canada. This is why, through these funds, we are investing in more projects which provide support for survivor-led Indigenous-specific and specialized child and youth anti-human-trafficking programs. The funding also means that we are able to increase supports targeted to other vulnerable populations, make more French-language supports available and bring services to additional regions of the province.

Before I ask the assistant deputy minister to share more details on the programming available through the community supports fund and the Indigenous-led initiatives fund, I want to share a quote. I think it's important to hear a voice from the ground. It's a quote from the director of one of the newly funded agencies, the Algoma Family

Services: “Algoma Family Services is extremely grateful to have been awarded the Anti-Human Trafficking Community Supports Fund.... This funding will allow us to collaborate with our community partners in our efforts to provide outreach and counselling to our most vulnerable children and youth, who are at risk of or are experiencing sexual exploitation.” This is a quote from Sandie Leith, director of services at Algoma Family Services.

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Finally, I would like to echo the minister’s remarks and pay tribute to those working on the front lines to protect those at risk and to support survivors. Thank you to all of them as we work together to build a more comprehensive network of anti-human trafficking services across Ontario so more victims have access to the help they need on the ground.

So, without further ado, I’d like to turn it over to ADM Rupert Gordon, who will provide further details on the programming. Thank you.

Mr. Rupert Gordon: Thank you, Deputy, and thank you, MPP Coe, for the question. As awareness of human trafficking grows, it is essential to grow anti-human trafficking services and supports designed for and by Indigenous people, and community-based programs to support survivors and individuals at risk of being trafficked. These are the critical front-line supports that help survivors so that they can heal and rebuild their lives, and provide support to those at risk to stop trafficking before it can even occur.

In June 2020, we launched a competitive call for proposals with program guidelines designed to address the key service gaps that survivors of human trafficking, Indigenous communities and organizations, law enforcement, and front-line service providers identified as part of our engagements. In total, we received 100 eligible applications for the community supports fund and 45 for the Indigenous-led initiatives fund.

We conducted a comprehensive review and evaluation by staff with anti-human trafficking and other relevant expertise from six government ministries and 20 separate branches, I believe—MAG, indigenous affairs, education, northern development and mines, MCCSS and solicitor general—covering sectors such as residential services, developmental services, education, Indigenous health and wellness, mining, and newcomers and immigration. Projects with the strongest evaluations that addressed the funding priorities and met the criteria were selected for funding, resulting in 27 new anti-human-trafficking-funded projects in our province.

While the types of services are many and I can’t speak to them all, I would like to highlight a few to give you an example of the innovative programming this funding is supporting.

The funding is enabling the creation of a youth response team at the Ontario Native Women’s Association to provide early intervention, street-based outreach, immediate response and referrals in 10 locations across the province, including Niagara, Ottawa, Thunder Bay and Toronto.

The Roberts/Smart Centre in Ottawa is now able to offer programs for children aged 12 to 18 that provide

mental health supports, residential services, life skills training and mentorship.

We are funding a survivor-led peer mentoring and day program for children and youth at BridgeNorth in Newmarket, which provides supports for early intervention through stabilization, transition and reintegration.

Boost Child and Youth Advocacy Centre is able to provide wraparound services for children and youth aged 11 to 18, including psycho-education and specialized trauma services and development of coping skills through this funding.

We’re also increasing French-language services, such as psychotherapy support referrals and assistance, accessing resources, as well as outreach and prevention for children and youth at Centre de santé communautaire Hamilton/Niagara.

Timmins and Area Women in Crisis created a mobile team which will travel to five remote and 11 rural First Nation communities in the region, providing culturally appropriate and survivor-led—

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

Mr. Rupert Gordon: —thank you, Chair—in preferred languages for vulnerable and underserved Indigenous communities.

The municipality of Peel is providing an integrated services hub to support individuals at risk, engaged in and transitioning out of sex trafficking.

SickKids in Toronto is offering a range of clinical services for children and youth who have been sex-trafficked, through their Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect Program.

And Tungasuvvingat Inuit is now providing early prevention and outreach for Inuit youth, aged 13 and up, as well as culturally based programming, therapeutic practices and help accessing housing and counselling.

These are just a few of the 27 new services we’re proud to be supporting across the province. Together, the 58 projects now funded through the Anti-Human Trafficking Community Supports Fund and the Anti-Human Trafficking Indigenous-led Initiatives Fund, a commitment of \$96 million over five years, will increase the availability of survivor-led programming and Indigenous-specific services, and provide critical supports to help and protect sexually exploited children and youth, responding to key needs identified by front-line service agencies and survivors. They will help to create a network of supports so that when a survivor is ready to reach out and seek help, supports are there to respond to them and to help them heal. These services and supports are available across our province, from Kenora to Kingston and Windsor to Toronto.

We also know these supports are having an impact. In 2019-20 alone, over 5,000 individuals accessed these critical supports provided through the Anti-Human Trafficking Community Supports Fund and the Anti-Human Trafficking Indigenous-Led Initiatives Fund. These are essential and beneficial across our communities. Whether it be mobile counselling in remote, rural First Nations communities, survivor-led peer mentorship in Newmarket, French-language psychotherapy support in Niagara,

healing and wellness supports for Indigenous children and youth transitioning out of care—

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

I want to note, to both the government and the opposition, that the remaining time is apportioned equally. It will be split as follows: 17 minutes and 30 seconds to the official opposition, and 17 minutes and 30 seconds to the government. You should know that if an independent member shows up, they will have an opportunity to ask questions. If they do not show up, then the time that would have been allocated to them will be divided between the government and the opposition, which would be seven minutes and 30 seconds each.

With that said, we'll go now to the official opposition for 17 minutes and 30 seconds. MPP Armstrong, the floor is yours.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I'm going to start my questions around youth justice centres for the next round. The majority of youth who spend time in detention centres are waiting for a bail hearing or pending trial, and the majority of these youth are in poverty, come from poverty backgrounds, and are racialized, specifically young men who are Black and Indigenous. Will these youth be kept in pretrial detention at local adult facilities or transported to distant youth facilities? That's the question I have for the minister or the ADM, please.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks very much. I actually didn't hear the last part of your question, MPP Armstrong, if you could repeat that.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Yes, will do. Will these youth be kept in pretrial detention at local adult facilities or transported to a distant youth facility?

Hon. Todd Smith: Okay. I'm not exactly sure I follow where you're headed with that question. Perhaps my assistant deputy minister, David Mitchell, has a better understanding of where you're going with that. David, are you there?

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I can elaborate a little bit, if that helps.

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: There have been some youth detention centres that were closed very quickly, without notice, and so we're just inquiring: If there is a youth awaiting a pretrial, are they going to be held at a detention centre at a local facility, or are they going to be transported to a distant youth facility if there isn't one in their community? Because many of them have been closed very rapidly.

1510

Hon. Todd Smith: Okay. Thank you very much for the question. You're talking about the closures of the facilities that occurred back in March and early May. Before we get into your exact question, maybe I should set the stage a little bit, because I didn't understand exactly what your question was surrounding. I'd just like to remind the members of the committee who may have forgotten that our youth justice facilities across Ontario were significantly underused.

Last year, there were five facilities that had zero youth in them for the majority of the year, so no young people were being detained in those facilities, and there were another 13 that had only one young person in for the major part of the year. A lot of these facilities were fully staffed but there were no young people in there. I think this actually is a very positive story in that it sort of emboldens the fact that we were on the right track with our focus on prevention and education programs that's led to an 81% reduction of youth admitted to custody in Ontario since 2004-05. That's 8,500 fewer youth who are being detained in custody, and I think that's very successful.

What it means as well is that we're providing supports in the communities. I think perhaps this speaks to the nature of the question you're asking, MPP Armstrong. We're providing supports for those individuals closer to home and closer to where they live.

If we could maybe bring in ADM David Mitchell right now to pick up on your question. David, are you there?

Mr. David Mitchell: Yes, I am. Thank you, Minister. It's David Mitchell, assistant deputy minister, youth justice services. With respect to the [*inaudible*], what I can tell you is that detention youth, which are youth—the equivalent would be those on remand awaiting trial. They are brought to the courts within the jurisdiction where they actually commit the alleged offences. The reality is that they may not be in their home community. For instance, we have young people that live in Toronto who have committed offences in Thunder Bay and are in custody in Thunder Bay.

What I can tell you is that there are no legal provisions for a young person to be taken into an adult custody facility. The young person would be taken to a youth justice facility. What is happening now is, I can tell you, that the majority of court appearances for bail-related or first appearance prior to trial are taking place via video so that there is no transport back and forth to the courts. The majority of those hearings or appearances are now via video.

Hon. Todd Smith: I would add too, just so that everybody on the committee understands, that as part of the closure of these empty facilities, or almost-empty facilities, across the province, we did ensure that every region of the province still had facilities available in them so that young people could have youth justice facilities as close to home as possible for them.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Okay. Thank you very much. I thought I heard Minister Smith say 13 will close, or did I hear 26? I wasn't sure.

Hon. Todd Smith: No, I said there were 13 facilities that had only one young person in the facility for the majority of last year and there were five others that had zero youth in them. All in all, there were 26 facilities across the province that were closed.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Okay. Thank you. My other question, then, would be—I can only tell you that before I entered this politician role, I went to Loyalist College—Mr. Smith knows that—and I graduated to the Ministry of Correctional Services. I have experience working with youth in detention as well as working with people on full probation previous to entering my insurance career.

One of my locations that I worked at was the King Street Detention youth centre. I spoke to workers there and it was quite upsetting, I have to say, that the workers felt they were given no notification. They were literally just told the day they walked in that everything was closed. They were concerned not only for, obviously, their jobs but the children as well, because many of the children who go to these local facilities live in the community. They have family, community and their friends, and that's where their ties are. They were also very concerned that the children in that facility—and I'm speaking about the King Street Detention Centre. I'm sure many others that were closed felt that same way.

I wanted to ask the minister or the ADM, if I could, how long had the ministry known that these 26 youth justice centres were going to be closed? Why were many of these facilities, the workers and the youth only given a day's notice? I'll leave it at that, those two parts: How long had you planned this closure, because I can't imagine it was only a spur-of-the-moment decision that you went in and moved workers out and these children to different locations without any planning or any indication of how to do that and when to do that; and why weren't the facilities, the workers and the youth given more time to adjust to this situation?

Hon. Todd Smith: There's a very good reason for that. Before I have David expand on why the closures took place the way they did, what I would say is, we have been working on this plan for quite some time. As a matter of fact, since the very day that I set foot in this office almost two years ago, we've been working on this plan.

I would add that many in the sector knew that there needed to be changes and modernization in the sector as the result of Auditor General's reports dating back to 2012. The AG's report in 2012 and then another one in 2014 indicated that the government really needed to address the significant underutilization in the justice facilities for the reasons that I mentioned earlier. So many of our young people that previously would have been housed in these youth justice facilities are now receiving the supports they need in the community.

I think it's really important to note that the previous Liberal government did absolutely nothing on this file to address this situation in spite of the fact it was highlighted by the Auditor General in 2012 and 2014. By making sure that we moved on this, we're now able to reinvest the savings that we've had by ensuring that the higher utilization, if you want to put it that way, in our youth justice facilities will be in a better position to provide youth that are in conflict with the law and needing to be held in secure or open custody facilities the support they need close to home.

But maybe, ADM Mitchell, if you want to pick up on why we went about it the way we went about it, to ensure the safety of the kids for one, but also to ensure that their programming would be able to continue in the new youth justice facility they were being transferred to later that day.

David, do you want to take it from there? I don't know if there's any way we can mute MPP Armstrong's phone. It's just very loud—

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Oh.

Hon. Todd Smith: That's okay.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Hang on. I'm going to try to—

Hon. Todd Smith: David, if you want to introduce yourself and then pick up on why we did that the way we did it.

Mr. David Mitchell: Thank you, Minister. David Mitchell, ADM for youth justice in the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

With respect to the closure process, this is not the first time that the youth justice division and in fact the ministry has reduced the number of facilities that house justice-involved young people. Our experience has taught us that when we give sufficient notice or when we give any type of notice to a facility with young people in it, it creates operational issues with respect to the ability of the staff to concentrate, from the perspective that there will be job loss that's envisioned. So we have operational disruptions, such as sick time and other things that increase based on that, and an inability of the folks to concentrate on the young people based on the fact they're thinking about their future.

The next piece of it, as the minister did indicate, is so that there is not a disruption in their programs in that we are able to immediately reconnect them to the types of programs that they are already participating in at the facility.

1520

Lastly is community safety. Unfortunately, the reality of the situation is that they are justice-involved, and the transportation of those individuals from one secure site to another generally has security considerations that are attached to it. Once again, this is not the first time; this is about the third time in the 10-year-plus history of youth justice that we've had to reduce our footprint based on the positive investments and the focus on upfront and upstream investments that prevent young people from coming into the system in the first place. We have learned that the best way to do it is on the day, making the arrangements on the receiving end, not on the departures end, with respect to those young people and the ability to transfer them in the safest and least disruptive way possible.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you. I guess there's no comforting answer for that, because you've got your explanation on one end—I hear you—and on the other end, I was just speaking to workers about how the children would be [*inaudible*] of where they're supposed to be and live. I understand that in the north, MPP Sol Mamakwa was very concerned about that as well.

One of the justice centres that was closed was Syl Apps, a mental health facility for youth in the justice system. The ministry funded 24 beds, but licensed 40 through the Syl Apps youth justice program. This facility was selected for closure because, according to the ministry reps, what we heard was that the utilization rate was 53% of its specific capacity. According to Cathy Paul, president and CEO of Kinark Child and Family Services, this is an error. She says that there's a wait-list for access to Syl Apps and that by no means was it underutilized.

Can the minister confirm whether the situation around utilization calculation was based on funded capacity or licensed beds?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, MPP Armstrong, for the question. Yes, one of the facilities that was closed was the Syl Apps facility, which is in Oakville, and Kinark operates there.

With respect to that secure-custody program, this program began at a time when the custody and detention admissions were almost three times higher than what they are today. Since then, admissions have declined significantly, 81% over 15 years, and that means the ministry can provide mental health supports for youth, including those with complex needs, closer to home, so youth don't have to be transferred farther away from their community to receive support. No longer do they actually have to go to Oakville to receive support there.

Our government was pleased back in February to announce an investment of \$10.5 million to expand the mental health Secure Treatment Program for some of the province's most—

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

Hon. Todd Smith:—vulnerable children and youth at Syl Apps and also at another facility in Ottawa. Keeping in mind that these youths are all justice-engaged youth, we want to ensure that they have access to secure treatment programs based on their identified needs and they have treatment plans that are responsive to their unique needs in their communities.

In addition to the clinical services and supports across the youth justice residential service system, including psychologists and psychiatrists, social workers, nurses and other mental health workers—these are all trained professionals that are available—we also made an investment this year alone to fund over \$2.5 million in services, which includes assessments, counselling and clinical treatment for young people in the YJ sector, so that they can receive the supports that they need no matter where they're housed, be it at Syl Apps or one of our other youth justice facilities that we have operating in the province.

I don't know if that specifically answers your question, but the other thing to keep in mind is there have been no young people at Syl Apps since September of last year, as an operational review was under way at that facility in Oakville. No young people were moved from Syl Apps as a result of the closure. They had been moved prior, to facilities elsewhere across southern Ontario, in large part.

I think that answers your questions.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, Minister, we're out of time on this rotation. Before we go to the government's 17 minutes and 30 seconds, we have new MPPs who have joined. I need them to confirm their identities and the fact they're in Ontario. I have MPP Monteith-Farrell.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Good afternoon, everyone, and good afternoon, Chair. MPP Judith Monteith-Farrell. I am here in Toronto, Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excellent. I have MPP Michael Mantha. MPP Mantha?

Unusually shy for MPP Mantha. I'll try him again later.

With that, we have the government with a 17-minute-and-30-second round. MPP Roberts, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Thanks so much, Chair. It's nice to be approaching our final rounds here after a long couple of days. Ministers, again, thank you so much for being with us. We're going to try and fit in two of us on two different topics into this round. I'm hoping to dive a little bit more into OAP services in the north, which we spoke a little bit about last week but got cut off on. And then I know my colleague MPP McKenna would like to talk to Minister Dunlop a bit about women's economic empowerment.

We'll start first on OAP services in the north. When we cut off this discussion last week, we had spoken about the doubling of the OAP budget to \$600 million. We talked about the tremendous work of the Ontario autism panel in designing a program that would include those four pillars: the early years support; the foundational services; the urgent response services; and then core services, all of which are going to be phenomenal game changers for the many families with children with autism right across the province.

But the one part that I want to dive into is some of these capacity issues. We know that there has been a systemic issue in delivering OAP services in some of our remote northern communities. Minister, both you and I had a chance to tour some of those northern communities and hear directly from families about some of the challenges that they're having accessing services. That's really been front and centre as one of the pieces that I know you'd like to see solved as we design this new OAP. That's why we included northern members on the Implementation Working Group to help ensure that this new program is going to meet the needs of all of the regions of our province.

Minister, I wondered if you could elaborate a little bit more on some of the work that's being done to ensure that we can deliver this amazing, world-class Ontario Autism Program in northern Ontario, and talk about some of the steps that have been taken already. Thanks, Minister.

Hon. Todd Smith: Sure. Thanks, MPP Roberts. Back in the summer of 2019, which seems like a long time ago, I did embark on a tour across northern Ontario. We started in Kenora. I met with families in Kenora. I made a pit stop in Thunder Bay and met with the folks from CCR, who provide autism services and other supports for children with special needs across the north. At their headquarters in Thunder Bay, I had a great meeting with parents and heard directly from them. We zipped down to Sault Ste. Marie and I heard from families there, and then over to Sudbury where we had a town hall meeting at Laurentian University with families there. Also that summer, I was able to meet with the folks at Hands in North Bay and talk about some of the services that they're providing in the north. There are unique challenges, as you mentioned, certainly, when it comes to northern Ontario, and not just in delivering autism programs but all programs and health care as well.

Capacity in northern Ontario and across the province is absolutely a focus as we roll out this new Ontario Autism Program. One of our first steps was to seek expert advice. As I mentioned, back in 2019, the Ontario autism panel was hard at work, the OAP Advisory Panel. They produced a number of recommendations related to workforce capacity, with a focus on underserved communities. Of course, northern, rural and remote communities are included in that.

1530

The OAP Implementation Working Group—and I'm looking forward to speaking with them again on Thursday—have also been tasked with providing capacity-building advice as we work through the program design and implementation for the OAP. This includes advice from a special subgroup of members from northern and First Nations communities, as recommended by the advisory panel in that summer of 2019.

We also took time to collect data on the workforce, to better understand the existing capacity in the north. In September 2020, we launched the Special Needs Workforce Survey, which collected information on behavioural clinicians, occupational therapists and speech-language pathologists. As our next step, we've begun to implement a targeted plan to build workforce and system capacity in Ontario. This includes providing targeted supports in the north, including funding for three northern capacity-building pilots delivered by northern agencies.

Maybe this is a good time to turn it over to Jennifer. ADM Morris has done a lot of work on the autism program, and she can expand on the next steps we're taking to increase capacity throughout the north. Jennifer?

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, MPP Roberts, for the question. With respect to the Special Needs Workforce Survey, I can tell you that we learned that Ontario has a large and growing workforce for special needs services, so that was very encouraging. A total of just under 2,300 clinicians participated in the survey. The clinicians who participated reported high levels of experience and showed a really strong level of engagement and commitment to their work, not surprisingly. Many clinicians also reported that they can provide services in French and have received some form of Indigenous cultural competency training.

The survey results also suggest that there's a good foundation from which to build on in northern Ontario. It's not to say that there aren't workforce capacity issues that we will be working to address, but as a starting point, there was a high proportion of survey participants in the north relative to the region's overall population share, and 32% of these clinicians indicated that they have capacity to serve more clients. Capacity varies across providers of core services in the north, with about 45% of providers of behavioural services reporting capacity to serve more clients, while 25% of providers of speech and language therapy and occupational therapy reported capacity to serve more clients.

As the minister mentioned, as our next step, we've begun to implement a targeted plan to build workforce and

system capacity across Ontario, in particular in our northern, rural and remote areas. The plan is aligned with many of the recommendations of the OAP advisory panel and also the work done over the past year by the Implementation Working Group. Both of those panels have told us that there is no one solution, so our plan will include both short-term measures that have an immediate impact and longer-term measures to support the future growth and transformation of the system.

This year, we are supporting existing agencies and their subcontracted agencies as we transition to the new needs-based Ontario Autism Program. We're also actively considering additional steps to support private agencies who are scaling up to serve more children in the core clinical services stream of the new program.

To support overall agency planning and sector development, Empowered Kids Ontario, which is the association representing children's rehabilitation service providers, is providing training, tools and other resources for service providers to build their capacity and their readiness for the new OAP service delivery model. We're also committed to providing targeted supports in the north and will continue to provide funding for three northern capacity-building pilots delivered by northern agencies. Through these pilot projects, agencies have established a service provider partnership model to make it easier for families to access services through better coordination and collaboration amongst providers, as well as a virtual service delivery solution and increased outreach to underserved communities.

We're also continuing to look at ways to better support Indigenous families. In 2020, the ministry offered Indigenous cultural competency training to over 600 Ontario Autism Program service providers across the province. The ministry is looking at expanding this training to a broader group of clinicians and providers in the coming year.

Finally, we're putting in place structures to support capacity-building for years to come. Our future OAP independent intake organization will have a mandate to promote quality improvement and capacity-building initiatives within each of five regional service networks, including one in the north. This includes building workforce capacity and cultural competency with a focus on underserved, rural and remote communities.

Through the independent intake organization, we will help to ensure that ongoing workforce and system planning and localized capacity-building are permanent features in the needs-based Ontario Autism Program, so that all families can access the services they need. Thank you.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thank you very much, Jennifer. I just wanted to add as well that since we are talking about services in the north, we're all very excited about the fact that we've been able to launch core services and the new needs-based program. I wanted to point out that with the 600 families who have currently accepted invitations, there were 53 invitations that went out to families in northern Ontario, which is proportionate to the geography and population of the province of Ontario—maybe not the geography but certainly the population of the province of Ontario.

I know there's been some communication about that, so I just wanted to set the record straight that there were 53 invitations that were sent out to families. I believe at least 41 have accepted the invitation to participate in core services.

Thanks, Jennifer and your team, for all you're doing there.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Chair, I'll pass it over to MPP McKenna now. I believe she has another question.

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

Ms. Jane McKenna: I wanted to just mention a couple of things. I'm doing my Canada flag here today. Michelle just came in with her four wee ones and her father to pick up the sign. She wanted to thank both ministers right here today, because she said the pandemic pay while she is a nurse was very helpful, but the emergency child care was over the top. She is a single mom. She does recognize that women are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19: 68% of net income loss is in women, which is very unfortunate.

I want to just quickly say, on what Minister Smith was saying when he was talking to MPP Armstrong about the previous minister who was in with the previous government, their inability and unwillingness to do what they needed to do, which was correct—I just want to say this, and I've said this probably four times today: When you come in as a government with the highest subsovereign debt in the world, you'd think, well, gee, health care, education, infrastructure and social services should be in a great place considering we have the highest subsovereign debt—and we aren't. We were in silos in this ministry, and it's heartbreaking to see that.

But what I do want to say is, I appreciate all of you as ministers. You all work together. You're out of your silos. You actually extend a hand with each other.

Just quickly to Minister Dunlop: I look at the "Ontario Helps Women and Youth Train and Find Good Jobs." I look at what you've done—June 11, the "Ontario Training Indigenous Workers and Women in Nuclear Industry Trades." I look at the "Ontario Taking Action to Combat Violence Against Indigenous Women and Girls" on May 27. I want to thank you very much, but maybe you could just quickly, in the short time we have, say what the government is doing to ensure women are being supported, especially now as we stretch open the economy in Ontario? Thanks so much, both of you, for being on this panel.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you so much, MPP McKenna. It was such a pleasure to be with you last year and MPP Skelly when we did the skilled trades announcement. That wasn't the first time that three women have led a skilled trades announcement. So thank you for the advocacy you've been doing in that area and the support you provide to your son and the amazing stories you have to tell about the rewarding career he has.

In the little bit of time we have left, I'll talk about—I mentioned this morning as well that in budget 2021, Minister Bethlenfalvy really expressed the need to do more and his commitment as well as the commitment of

our Premier and government to not only support women but to ensure they're a key part of the recovery and our economy going forward.

We know that women continue to be under-represented in many sectors that are critical to the province's economic growth, such as science, technology and the skilled trades. We all know that these are skilled, high-paying jobs that offer opportunities for long-term security. That's why we are working with the partner ministries, such as yours, to make sure that women and girls are aware of the opportunities in these sectors that help them succeed in their studies and careers. It includes the work with the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development on providing all Ontarians with job training opportunities.

1540

Through budget 2021, we are providing over \$117 million to assist women, racialized individuals, Indigenous peoples, youth and people with disabilities, who are facing the highest rate of unemployment during the pandemic. It also means working with the Minister of Education to get more affordable child care across Ontario, because our government knows that child care is critical to restarting the economy as more parents return to work, so that women do not have to choose between their children and their career.

You touched on Michelle talking about the emergency child care and how beneficial that has been. We are also expanding the CARE tax credit to give moms and dads that flexibility and choice of child care that they want to use. This will help women who have taken on additional child care responsibilities during the pandemic.

We are also expanding the CARE tax credit to give moms and dads that flexibility, and we reaffirmed our commitment to building 30,000 child care spaces in Ontario. We have approved and announced more than 20,800 new spaces and are on track to approve up to 9,200 more by 2023-24, enabling us to reach our goal of 30,000 new spaces.

We're continuing to invest in programs that focus on employment and pre-employment, pre-apprenticeship and entrepreneurship specifically for women. My ministry funds 17 projects that provide employment, pre-employment, pre-apprenticeship and entrepreneurship training for women who are low-income earners. These projects will equip women with the skills, knowledge and experience to increase their economic security. Of these 17 projects, seven provide the pre-apprenticeship training programs specifically for low-income women.

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

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, Chair.

They include things like carpentry, welding, industrial mechanics, millwrighting and fashion technology—jobs that we know are out there waiting for women to fill the positions, for the paycheque.

Through the Investing in Women's Futures Program, our government also supports 23 women's centres across Ontario that provide a wide range of services, such as employment assistance, counselling and service navigation support, to help women who experience multiple

barriers to participate more fully in the economy and society. Over 25,000 women were served through my ministry's funded violence prevention and economic empowerment programs in 2019-20.

I know that my deputy and ADM probably would have had lots more to say, but I can also let you know that, over the last year, I have co-hosted stakeholder round tables on various issues relating to supporting women's full economic participation in the context of the COVID recovery. The feedback from these round tables has been used to inform policy development and the work of the Ontario Jobs and Recovery Committee. I know many of my colleagues have been hosting round tables and heard very similar comments from women across the province.

But even before COVID-19, this government was focused on advancing women's economic opportunities. This was a major priority for our government. The task force is now even more urgent. I mentioned earlier that I'm very excited about the task force—it will be announced shortly: the members of the task force and the mandate moving forward.

In addition to these initiatives that I've spoken about, I've had the opportunity to participate in many round tables and hear the unique needs of various women from communities across Ontario. These women coming together provide input on how we can better support women's full economic participation as well as ways that we can identify to stimulate economic growth to create jobs and make life more affordable for women and their families in Ontario. This includes things—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You're out of time, I'm afraid.

We now go to the last round, seven minutes and 30 seconds each, starting with the official opposition.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Once again, thank you, Associate Minister and Minister, for your comments today. This question comes from Lana, one of our constituents: "Why is this government pursuing a modernization of OW that does not include a raising of social assistance rates when we know the current rates are very inadequate in supporting the safety and well-being of recipients?" Clearly, it's a question on the very, very low rates of ODSP and OW. Thank you.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks very much, Lana, I believe—

Ms. Jill Andrew: Jana, actually. Sorry about that.

Hon. Todd Smith: Jana? Okay. Well, thanks, Jana. I know there have been questions about this previously during our appearance at estimates, our 15 long hours at estimates, taking questions. I appreciate all the members of the official opposition who have joined us to pose these questions to us over the last three days.

Our plan really does focus on people, specifically ensuring that we're providing them with a whole range of services to respond to their unique needs, so that they can move towards employment and independence. Specifically—and I believe you did say Ontario Works—Ontario Works is supposed to be a temporary landing spot, and then you are supposed to be getting the supports that

you need at Ontario Works to get you back into employment as quickly as possible. Sadly, that hasn't been the case, and only 1% of our caseload on Ontario Works is actually returning to gainful employment. Of those who do, four out of five are actually returning in a very short period of time, and they're spending up to 48 months, I believe is now the average, on Ontario Works.

Through our renewal strategy that we've launched, we're going to have a new intake model so that eligible individuals can access social assistance more quickly, and it's going to be the province that's responsible for that, but it's going to be—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister, I'm sorry to interrupt. MPP Andrew?

Ms. Jill Andrew: Going again back to Jana's question with regards to the rate of OW, I guess I will then just ask my question more bluntly: Is this government planning, within your term, to increase the OW and ODSP rates?

Hon. Todd Smith: We have increased the OW and ODSP rates by 1.5%. That was an \$80-million investment, which is an annual investment. So it's an \$80-million investment, but we're also—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister, I apologize. MPP Andrew?

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you for stating that you all have done that. May I ask if you feel that that is enough? Because, again, whether or not it's Jana or Steve or Liza or anyone else who contacts me from St. Paul's, there's always an issue with regard to the lower access that they have because of the income that they're getting from OW and ODSP. My concern is, when are we going to see substantive rates that people can actually live on where OW and ODSP are concerned?

Hon. Todd Smith: We're focusing right now on re-vamping the system to ensure that we can get those individuals who are at Ontario Works specifically an opportunity to get their lives stabilized, and it's going to be the municipalities that are responsible for that life stabilization piece, supporting clients to get back up on their feet. Working with the Ministry of Labour, Training, and Skills Development, we feel that many questions about employment services transformation—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I apologize, Minister, for interrupting you, but MPP Andrew has the floor. MPP Andrew?

Ms. Jill Andrew: Again, Minister, without the explanatory, I'm just asking directly: Do you think what the Ford government offers to folks who are OW or ODSP is something that someone can live on? And when I say "live on," I don't mean for a hundred years, but I mean do you think this is substantive for folks who are struggling to pay their rent or buy food on OW and ODSP?

Hon. Todd Smith: This is why we're focusing on ensuring that there are the life stabilization pieces that are part of the program as well. Our municipal partners are the ones that are delivering that and they're the ones that are excited about this program, because the current statistics with Ontario Works are not sufficient for them either. They know this needs to be changed and they know it

needs to work better, so whether it's housing, child care, mental health supports—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I apologize, Minister, for interrupting you. MPP Andrew?

Ms. Jill Andrew: I apologize too; it doesn't feel good to interrupt, but at the same time, we are out of time on the clock and I'm not getting the answers. Yes? No? Will the rates go up? Have they gone up enough? I'm not getting the answers I'm looking for, so I will move on to the next thing.

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

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you, Chair. This question is with regard to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and I just wanted to get a sense from your ministries of what you're doing specific to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. What funding, what supports are you supporting these communities with in light of the pandemic to help them recover through the pandemic? Can you speak specifically to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community?

1550

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks very much, MPP Andrew. We've assembled a very diverse group that is informing the Premier and our government: the Premier's Council on Equality of Opportunity that was assembled last year. I was pleased to announce that all of the members come from very diverse parts of Ontario, including the LGBTQ—yes? Go ahead.

Ms. Jill Andrew: I'm aware of that table. I was asking specifically about the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, not "diverse" as the umbrella term; I just want to know what funding has come from the Ontario government to support 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, not necessarily women, not necessarily Black communities in this particular case. You've spoken ad nauseam to that community. Some of the facts are there; some are not. I'm speaking directly to 2SLGBTQIA+ communities in this case—community program-based services.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that question. I'll jump in and take part of that. We recently announced \$7 million for mental health supports for post-secondary students, which also includes 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. And the announcement that we recently made, the province's response to the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, our report which is focusing on the safety and security of Indigenous women, children, and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, that's been—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I apologize, but you're out of time on that rotation.

We go to the last rotation for the government, seven minutes and 30 seconds. MPP Pettapiece, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: I know we've all been looking forward to this last question, and I'm sure I share the same thoughts as what both ministers do: It's been 15 hours but how time has flown by. I know we all wish that we had

three or four more hours to continue on with this conversation. Anyway, I would like to ask the minister about the human social services transfer of payments.

Minister, we've already spent some time discussing our government's digital-first approach and how we can leverage it to be more efficient with taxpayer dollars while also improving services. You've mentioned MyBenefits, the online portal for social assistance recipients which allows them to easily complete tasks such as income reporting and finding resources or community caseworkers. However, I know this is just a single example and that there is a great deal more work to do.

Can you share with us some details on the work you're doing to make life easier not just for individual clients in a single system within your ministry but for all those impacted by your ministry's work?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thank you, MPP Pettapiece. We'll get you out there on the back porch soon.

I've been really lucky over the last two years to build incredible relationships, really, with leaders of community agencies and service providers right across the province. Some of that was in person; some of that, unfortunately, over the last 16 months in particular, was virtually. All of these agencies have played a key role in our response to COVID-19 and continue to work to ensure that we're delivering high-quality supports for all of the individuals that we're serving in all of these various departments and that we're responsible for. That's why our government has launched the transfer payment initiative. It's a key priority in the Ontario Onwards Action Plan.

This initiative is aimed at helping non-profits, municipalities and other service providers focus more time on delivering programs and services that matter to the people of Ontario by simplifying how they receive government funding. This includes focusing on making improvements to the human and social services system through the human and social services transfer payment initiative, the HSSTP. Through this initiative, we're establishing a common outcomes framework across programs, simplifying and standardizing transfer payment arrangements and consolidating different processes onto a single IT platform, Transfer Payment Ontario, or TPON, as it's known.

To ensure we have the widest impact, to help reduce burden for service providers and to help strengthen the province's understanding of the collective impact of programs on Ontarians, we're working with 10 partner ministries, including municipal affairs and housing; health; labour, training and skills development; education; francophone affairs; seniors and accessibility; Solicitor General; heritage, sport, culture and tourism industries.

The vision here is to create an efficient, effective and accountable human and social services system, providing Ontarians with the right services at the right time by reducing and simplifying administrative tasks performed by ministry staff and transfer payment recipients, allowing them to spend less time on administrative activities and more time on delivering value-added services to Ontarians—in other words, getting rid of the red tape and duplication and just allowing them to serve the people

they're working with and provide them the services they need—standardizing processes and access to information and best practices, allowing ministry staff to break down silos, connect across programs delivering similar services and improve connections between ministries and agencies.

Improvement efforts by ministry have included a simplified contracting process which resulted in approximately a 60% reduction in the number of contracts. So 60% fewer contracts are now required. That reduces the average number of contracts per transfer payment recipient. It went from three down to one. Reporting requirements were also reduced by 50%, so cut in half. This type of change from a complex system of multiple technology platforms to a single centralized technology system, Transfer Payment Ontario, or TPON, will free up time for agencies to focus on services for people and reduce unnecessary complexity and variation.

Before I hand it over to my deputy minister, Janet Menard, to bring us home here, I just want to take the opportunity to thank everybody that's participated in the committee, all MPPs, but also all of our ADMs, our directors, our staff on the ministry side and the political staff that have worked so hard throughout the past 16 months, in particular during the pandemic. It has been a very trying time. People have worked incredible hours to get the supports out to the individuals across the province of Ontario that they need—I'm telling you, all night on many, many occasions, to get the documents that are needed to Cabinet Office, to get to the cabinet meetings, to get the changes that are necessary. It's been a real team effort.

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

Hon. Todd Smith: I'll hand it over to my deputy minister, Janet Menard, who has worked extremely hard with her colleagues to show us exactly how the transfer payment recipients and government operations are working more efficiently now. Janet?

Ms. Janet Menard: Thank you, Minister. As the minister noted, I have been heavily involved in this work, and I'm really excited about the opportunity it presents. It does involve, as the minister said, 10 ministries. We're working closely together to accomplish the alignment of our transfer payment relationships with hundreds of organizations across Ontario.

Ten ministries are involved, and they actually represent 80 programs which are in the scope of the program. They also represent \$8.9 billion of funding that flows through transfer payments to the organizations we are working with to align all of the work associated with the initiative, and that includes municipalities, who are our largest partners in this space.

Preliminary work on this project began in 2017, and it included stakeholder engagements and jurisdictional scans because we wanted to know what was happening in other jurisdictions, but we also took a really close look at the state of human and social services relationships in Ontario to examine the best practices in Ontario, but also against other jurisdictions.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, I'm sorry to say, we're out of time and we need to go to voting. This

concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. Standing order 69(b) requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates.

Before I do that, though, there are two MPPs who need to confirm their identity and location in Ontario.

MPP Smith, if you would confirm your identity and the fact that you're located in Ontario.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you, Chair. I am MPP Dave Smith, and I am in beautiful God's country, Peterborough.

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

MPP Mantha, can you confirm your identity and location in Ontario?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes, it is MPP Michael Mantha. I am in Ontario, and I am in Elliot Lake.

1600

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excellent. Okay.

I think all of you are familiar with the process. I will ask if you're ready to vote. I will call for hands up for support and then hands up for opposition. With that, we will note whether votes are carried or not. Are the members ready to vote? I believe you are.

Shall vote 701, ministry administration program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

Shall vote 702, children and adult services program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

Shall vote 703, poverty reduction strategy program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

Shall vote 704, children, community and social services capital program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

Shall the 2021-22 estimates of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2021-22 estimates of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services to the House? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

Now, we were going to recess until 4 p.m., but it is 4 p.m. I'm just going to check with the Clerk.

I just want to thank the minister, the associate minister and their staff for the work they've done—it's a long process—and my colleagues as well for your attention and, frankly, your courtesy. In a very few minutes, we move on to the next ministry. Minister and Associate Minister, enjoy the evening.

MINISTRY OF ENERGY, NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT AND MINES

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to those who are joining us. I just want to say for deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers,

staff, when you are called on to speak, if you would give your name and your title each time so that we accurately record in Hansard who we have.

The committee is about to begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines for a total of 10 hours. Are there any questions from members before we start? There are none.

I am now required to call vote 2201, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 30 minutes from the Minister of Energy, Northern Development and Mines, followed by a statement of up to 30 minutes by the official opposition. Then the minister will have a further 30 minutes for a reply. The remaining time will be apportioned equally among the two parties, with 15 minutes allotted to the independent member of the committee.

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you, Chair. I echo your sentiments with respect to the incredible technology support required for us from all across this vast province to be participating in this today. My feed is coming from Kenora on Treaty 3 lands where today I had an extraordinary opportunity to make an announcement with respect to Indian residential school burial sites. So it's been quite a day, but I realize the important work of this committee has to continue as well.

I want to thank colleagues from my own caucus as well as those members from the opposition parties for taking up this important role. In addition, I also want to thank my extraordinary team, my minister's office and the ministry staff, who have worked around the clock over the past couple of weeks, making sure that we have available for all of us the right information for us to talk about, for the next 10 hours, the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines. Our time will be shared between myself and my colleague the Associate Minister of Energy, Bill Walker, who will have some remarks for the committee shortly.

My ministry is responsible for the province's energy, mining and mineral, and northern development sectors, with a regional component for the ministry of northern Ontario. We carry out our mandate in three ways: First, we develop electricity, natural gas and oil policies that maintain a safe, reliable and affordable energy supply across Ontario to power our economy. We advance economic development in northern Ontario through collaborative partnerships and solutions that reflect the unique needs of northerners, often manifesting itself through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, which I hope I'll have an opportunity to speak about later. We support a strong and sustainable mining and mineral sector, and administer Ontario's Mining Act for the protection of public health and safety and the environment, but, as importantly, for the promotion and development of the extraordinary mining opportunities that we have all across northern Ontario.

Let me just walk you through a current landscape here. It has been over a year since the COVID-19 pandemic hit our province hard. While our energy and mining sectors

have weathered the storm better than most sectors, northern Ontario has faced its own, in some instances, unique and significant challenges.

Today our province, like the rest of the world, is battling a third wave of the pandemic. The good news is that as more people get vaccinated and rapid testing becomes more widely available, there's hope that a return to normal is within our reach. While the situation continues to evolve, one thing remains the same: Our government's steadfast commitment to protecting people's health, safety and our economy is paramount.

As announced in the recent budget, our government believes the key to Ontario's economic recovery is getting the province growing again. Growth is what will create jobs, provide revenues to support critical public services, and ensure a sustainable fiscal position. Today I'm excited to highlight our recent achievements and the actions we are taking to spur growth and unleash activities in the north and in our mining sector.

Let's talk about mining as an economic driving force. First, allow me to share some facts about Ontario's mining industry. We are a world-class mining jurisdiction, colleagues, and we are among the top 10 jurisdictions in the world for mineral exploration spending. We are one of Canada's top mineral producers, generating around \$10.7 billion worth of minerals in 2019. That accounts for 22% of the country's total mineral production value.

Mining is a significant economic driver for all of Ontario. From Bay Street to the vast and beautiful territory of northern Ontario, where mining activity occurs, it supports 26,000 direct jobs and approximately 45,000 indirect jobs associated with mineral processing, mining supply and services. Around two thirds of the direct mining jobs are located in northern Ontario. Our mining sector also has one of the highest proportions of Indigenous workers of all industries, at 11% and growing.

Ontario's mining supply and services cluster alone employs 40,000 people and generates more than \$10 billion a year in revenue, but we've only scratched the surface of our mining sector's immense potential. I'm proud that our government is creating real and meaningful opportunities for unprecedented growth in our mining sector, most recently with investments in early exploration.

I'd like to talk a little bit about the Ontario Junior Exploration Program. We know that early exploration leads to the discovery of new mineral deposits and that junior exploration companies play a pivotal role in this phase. Junior exploration companies rely on private investors for often high-risk venture-capital financing to fund these exploration activities. Discoveries by junior companies can lead to future mining construction projects by larger firms, and so the success of junior exploration is paramount to the future of Ontario's mining sector.

As announced in this year's budget, junior exploration companies will soon be able to apply for funding to cover a portion of their projected costs through the new Ontario Junior Exploration Program, or OJEP for short. Once this program is up and running, colleagues, eligible junior exploration companies will be able to get up to \$200,000 in

funding per mineral exploration project. By covering eligible costs, OJEP reduces risk for private investors, boosting Ontario's appeal as jurisdiction of choice for their investment dollars. I'm proud of the \$5 million over two years that we are dedicating to this program. OJEP will be an important driver of economic recovery, growth and job creation in our mining sector by attracting investment in mineral development, expanding our pipeline of projects and improving Ontario's global competitiveness in exploration and, for that matter, the mining sector.

1610

Let me talk about critical minerals. I know MPPs at this committee here today of all political stripes are excited about the opportunity for critical minerals. Even with the current global economic slowdown, Ontario's mining sector is well positioned to take advantage of the global interest in critical minerals, but there is no universal definition of "critical minerals." Critical minerals are generally understood to be resources with highly specialized industrial, technological and strategic applications that have few viable substitutes. Governments and industrial sectors around the world realize the importance of critical minerals to their economies and know that they can be found right here in Ontario, in quantity and in quality.

New technologies in hydro sectors that rely on critical minerals include but are not limited to information and communications technology, electronics, computers, energy, aerospace and defence, health and life sciences, and transportation. The demand for reliable, sustainable and responsibly sourced critical minerals will grow as more countries transition to green economies and governments accelerate the adoption of new technologies and renewable energy. That's Ontario's opportunity. We have an abundance of critical minerals, along with a competitive business climate, innovation and talent, as well as a safe workforce and a commitment to working with Indigenous peoples, businesses and communities for this exciting opportunity.

We have what it takes to be a leader in electric vehicle and battery manufacturing: a top global producer and supplier of the refined critical minerals required for advanced manufacturing and technology, including but not limited to nickel, copper, lithium, graphite, cobalt and platinum-group elements.

We especially want to take advantage of opportunities here in North America, because Ontario provides not only a great source of critical minerals, but also numerous other advantages that form what I like to call Ontario's value proposition. It stands out, colleagues. We are close to the manufacturing centres where these products will be used. We have a highly skilled workforce and established supply chains. We have leading-edge, modern mining research and development going on in northern Ontario, and because of our relentless commitment to cutting red tape, we have a more competitive business environment than ever before.

This past March, we announced that Ontario is developing its first-ever critical minerals strategy to help generate investment and increase our province's competitiveness in the global market. This strategy will create jobs

and opportunities in the mining sector and support Ontario's transition to a low-carbon economy here at home and for the benefit of countries around the world. Local and global markets, including industries in northern Ontario, are looking for reliable, responsibly sourced critical minerals. I heard it loud and clear last year at PDAC, when the US undersecretary of commerce sat down exclusively with Ontario's jurisdiction and said, "Let's talk about critical minerals." We're ready to capitalize on that growing market demand. By developing the strategy, we'll strengthen Ontario's position as one of North America's premier jurisdictions for responsibly sourced minerals.

To form our critical mineral strategy, our government released a discussion paper for public consultation on the Environmental Registry of Ontario. A consultation with industrial and Indigenous communities and businesses will help guide the development of the strategy, which is targeted for release this coming fall. We've got an ambitious vision for critical minerals, one where we can generate investment and increase our competitiveness in global markets while supporting the transition to a cleaner, more sustainable global economy. I'm proud that we're well on our way of realizing that vision.

I mentioned the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp., so I'll switch gears and talk about the broader business climate and the opportunity in northern Ontario.

One of my ministry's mandates is economic development in northern Ontario. We lead and coordinate government programs aimed at strengthening the northern Ontario economy, building strong northern communities and creating job opportunities in the north. We have a diversity of community sizes and spaces in between us. It's through a network of offices and strategic program and policy development that we ensure northerners have access to government programs and services and a say in government decisions that are affecting the north.

We also work closely with the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade to attract new investors into northern Ontario and help northern businesses explore Canadian and international businesses opportunities. Some might say we're truly blessed to have another minister lead the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade from northern Ontario.

Nowhere is the business of economic development more evident in my ministry than in the work that the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp., or NOHFC for short, does. You see, when it comes to building a stronger, more competitive northern economy, the NOHFC remains one of our government's key tools, and I'm proud of the government's commitment to the north.

In February, we launched a new and improved NOHFC program with a focus on culture, talent, business development and community infrastructure, with a particular emphasis on reconciling the disparity between some of our larger city centres and some of our very small communities, including and especially Indigenous communities. Everywhere I go, at least for the recent past, virtually, and now as we seek to move around safely in northern Ontario, it's all the rage. In fact, I was just talking to one of the

senior bureaucrats working out of this Kenora office, where I'm talking to you from today, talking about the uptake from small communities and Indigenous communities across northern Ontario. We took every opportunity to engage with northern communities, municipal leaders, Indigenous partners, not-for-profits and businesses to seek feedback on how we can modernize the NOHFC programs.

We heard from people who wanted NOHFC programs to be open to more businesses and workers so that the unique needs of northern Ontario communities are met. Four new programs target existing and emerging markets, support more projects in small rural communities, address the skilled labour shortage and make it easier for more people and businesses to apply. Applications are now open for the Community Enhancement Program, the Cultural Supports Program, the Invest North Program and the People and Talent Program. Don't you just love the rebranding in these names? Don't they just speak about the power and opportunity that we have as northern Ontarians from small to large communities to make a difference, not just in our own communities but in the economy of Ontario? Several streams within the new programs are open to municipalities and Indigenous communities, not-for-profit organizations and local services boards located across northern Ontario. Alongside these programs, an additional \$50 million over the next two years will be allocated to the NOHFC to support investments in infrastructure, culture, economic development and training.

I know that I can count on all northern Ontario MPPs, even the ones from the opposition parties, to stand with us today and in the Legislature to support these important investments because it's through these changes that our government will continue building strong and resilient communities while supporting an environment where businesses can thrive, grow and create new jobs.

Colleagues, I want to talk about another program that was borne from the harsh realities of COVID. When I mentioned that there were specific nuances and challenges to northern Ontario, we called it the Northern Ontario Recovery Program. It was launched in September 2020. We set a pause on the existing program so that we could overhaul it, as I just mentioned, and took swift action to respond to the challenges of the COVID pandemic and the impact it was having on businesses across northern Ontario. Funded through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, this short-term program helped northern businesses adapt to operations to meet new public health guidelines, changing public health guidelines, and protect their employees and customers from the spread of the virus—as well, to hopefully create legacy opportunities for changes in some of their infrastructure that would be around long after the pandemic was over. Grants supported the purchase of personal protective equipment, safety installations and other essential measures. We approved more than \$26 million in NORP grants for approximately 1,400 businesses all across northern Ontario—multiple sectors, including tourism, food service and retail. We provided timely COVID-19 assistance to align with the govern-

ment's ongoing commitment to support northern communities, boost regional economic development and improve quality of life for northerners. As a step in the right direction, NORP is helpful to rebuild consumer confidence and foster real economic recovery in our local communities.

1620

We have a long road ahead of us, colleagues, but just as our northern resilience has carried us through the past year, we will persevere with that same spirit.

I'm looking forward to travelling the north safely in the not-too-distant future to celebrate NORP announcements.

I'll now hand things over to my colleague to begin discussing our activities on the energy side, specifically in the area of natural gas and conservation.

Bill, I'll turn it over to you.

Hon. Bill Walker: Thank you very much, Minister Rickford.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair. Good afternoon, everyone. I want to thank the committee members for the opportunity to speak today. I also want to thank PA Dave Smith, Deputy Rhodes and all teams in the ministry.

Mr. Chair, I'm pleased to talk about two aspects of the ministry's work on energy: natural gas expansion, and our evolving energy conservation programs. I look forward, of course, throughout this time, to answering any questions people may have.

We [*inaudible*] heating, especially during this time of economic instability brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Natural gas is the most common heating source in Ontario. It is also more affordable and less carbon-intensive than other sources like heating oil. However, thousands of Ontarians don't have access to reliable and affordable heating, primarily those living in rural, remote and Indigenous communities. In addition, many communities cannot afford the upfront costs of providing access to natural gas on their own.

That's why we've taken action and introduced the natural gas expansion program to expand natural gas access to families and businesses throughout rural and northern Ontario. We launched the program in 2019 with phase 1, which is well under way, with construction ongoing or completed for six projects. Phase 1 projects are forecast to connect 9,000 customers over the next 10 years in rural, northern and Indigenous communities in Ontario.

We have since launched the second phase of the project. Phase 2 will continue to expand natural gas to more communities, improve economic development, and save customers in rural, northern and Indigenous communities in Ontario between \$200 and \$1,500 per year, and up to 30% for businesses.

Demand for phase 2 funding was overwhelming. The Ontario Energy Board received a total of 210 project submissions from all corners of Ontario, a significant uptake and one that far exceeded the \$130 million in available funding. It really showed me how much interest there is in Ontario to expand access to natural gas.

Due in part to the enormous response to the program, we increased the program's budget from \$130 million to \$234 million. The funding increase made it possible to

fund more projects that would not have been financially viable otherwise. But it was still far short of the total demand for funds.

In determining which projects to move forward with at this stage, our top priority was to distribute available funding as objectively and as broadly as possible across Ontario. All projects were reviewed in a fair and consistent manner that took regionality into consideration. After careful consideration from our ministry and partner ministries, I'm pleased to say that 28 projects were selected. I was proud to make this announcement with Premier Ford only last week. These 28 projects will serve customers in 43 communities across Ontario that would not otherwise be able to access natural gas. We anticipate that phase 2 will lead to 8,750 new customers being able to access natural gas. This is great news for those households, because, as I said earlier, they will save between \$250 and \$1,500 annually, or an average of \$500 per year by being able to switch to natural gas from costlier fuel sources, and again, to reiterate, up to 30% savings for businesses.

I'd also like to mention that two of the projects connect on-reserve communities. These projects highlight our government's commitment to connect on-reserve and Indigenous communities to affordable heating. Another aspect of phase 2 is that we are supporting two economic development projects that help spur economic and job growth in the communities hosting them. I think it's also important to acknowledge that people have asked us if connecting more customers to natural gas will lead to an increase in greenhouse gas emissions. The answer is that, overall, there is projected to be a modest decrease in emissions across the whole program as a result of many customers switching from higher GHG-emitting fuels, such as propane and heating oil.

I'd also like to speak about conservation and demand management. We are committed to help Ontarians manage their energy costs. As part of this commitment, we have introduced a new four-year electricity conservation and demand management framework, CDM, on January 1, 2021, that applied immediately after the previous interim framework ended on December 31, 2020. The 2021-24 CDM framework will provide energy-efficiency opportunities to help Ontario businesses and industries increase competitiveness and help lower energy costs, including for institutional and commercial customers located in on-reserve First Nations communities. It will also feature increased competitive procurements and calls for proposals in order to improve cost-effectiveness and solicit customer-driven solutions to ensure best value for ratepayers.

ENDM also directed the IESO to launch a new Energy Affordability Program, EAP, under the 2021-24 CDM framework. The EAP replaces two previous programs for low-income and income-eligible customers—the home assistance program and the Affordability Fund, respectively—streamlining and simplifying access to energy savings measures for those in need. The new EAP helps income-eligible households manage their energy costs by providing in-home energy assessments and electricity-saving

measures and upgrades at no cost. The new EAP is available province-wide, including on First Nation reserves. The First Nations Conservation Program is designed to assist on-reserve First Nation communities by providing home energy-efficiency assessments and energy-savings measures at no cost.

During the term of the new conservation framework, IESO intends to relaunch programs in the fall of 2021 to start under the previous interim framework which had been postponed since March 2020 due to community closures in response to COVID-19. There are also business electricity conservation programs delivered by the IESO that provide financial incentives to help businesses reduce their electricity use and manage costs through energy audits, retrofits and process and system improvement. Natural gas conservation programs delivered by Enbridge Gas provide residential, business, industrial and First Nations customers with incentives that are tailored to the unique needs of different customer segments to help reduce natural gas usage. Some examples of these incentives include home audits and retrofit rebates for residential customers and space and water heating retrofits for business customers.

The Ontario Energy Board has recently started an adjudicative process to consider an application from Enbridge Gas for multi-year natural gas conservation programming beyond 2021. The OEB has set an expectation that this programming should help customers manage their energy bills, contribute to meeting Ontario's greenhouse gas reduction goals and create opportunities to defer and/or avoid infrastructure projects.

Last October, we also proposed that natural gas and electricity utilities be required to implement Green Button Connect My Data and Download My Data to provide residential and business consumers with their energy consumption data in a common format. This will allow Ontarians to access their usage electronically and connect with apps that can advise them on how to lower their energy bills. We believe that giving consumers access to real-time energy consumption data will help them identify and take immediate, simple steps to reduce their energy usage. This can include immediate actions, such as lowering their temperature settings when they aren't at home. This data can also help consumers find and opt for longer-term energy-efficiency solutions such as upgrading windows and heating equipment.

Twice in the past year, we updated our product and appliance efficiency regulations to further harmonize our efficiency standards with other leading jurisdictions. These updates will save consumers money, reduce red tape for businesses and reduce energy use in Ontario.

I'd also like to mention that tracking the energy performance of buildings is a key tool to improve their energy efficiency. The ministry administers two building energy reporting regulations that are targeted at public and private sector buildings. These regulations help Ontario's building owners save money by tracking usage, identifying energy and water efficiency opportunities and comparing energy and water usage to similar buildings.

1630

Our government also provides funding to Ontario municipalities to help develop municipal energy plans, which help communities improve energy efficiency and reduce energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions.

With that, I look forward to the chance to discuss these further with you. Thank you.

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

Hon. Greg Rickford: Okay. Thank you, then, Mr. Chair. If you'll permit me, I would like to talk about our COVID electricity rate relief, which is well documented. We acted swiftly and efficiently in response to the crisis with immediate electricity rate relief measures because we knew how important it was for those spending more time at home to use the electricity they needed without fear of being charged. This included investing \$484 million to provide emergency rate relief to residential, farm and small business electricity consumers, working with the Ontario Energy Board to extend the disconnection ban, and introducing customer choice, which provided electricity customers with the option to switch to time-of-use pricing.

In addition, we focused on the economic opportunity related to large commercial and industrial electricity consumers by deferring portions of the global adjustment from April to June 2020, increased flexibility for large consumers to qualify for the industrial conservation initiative, and introduced relief from the phenomenon known as "chasing the peak," relieving ICI participants of the need to shut down to reduce their electricity demand during peak hours, when the province of Ontario needed them the most. Moving forward, obviously removing the global adjustment portion of the cost of their electricity has proven to be a significant development and increased dramatically the economic fortunes of electricity-intensive industries.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Okay, thank you. With that, we will go to the official opposition. Who will be asking questions? MPP Monteith-Farrell, the floor is yours.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Good afternoon. Thank you to the minister and associate minister for your presentations. I look forward to hearing more. I'd also like to thank the ministerial staff for preparing. I know it's a lot of work to do the work of getting prepared for who knows what questions we'll ask. I always come away well informed. Thank you for your work. I would also like to thank the members of the Ontario public service who work in the ministries, because I know often their work is not as appreciated, and I think they're worth a thank you.

I was so pleased when I was going to be working and being able to discuss this ministry because like you, Minister, I have a deep commitment to making the lives of people in northern Ontario the best they can be. I am fortunate that all my three children have come back to the north and have found jobs and are thriving, but many of my friends and neighbours are not so lucky, and their children had to leave to find work. Many families would

love to be reunited, and if opportunities are there, we can grow northern Ontario.

I have spent almost my whole life living in northern Ontario and enjoying the land and all it has to offer. I exclude black flies in that; I don't really like those. But everything else about northern Ontario I really like. I know it's possible to do development in northern Ontario in a sustainable way and that it is so important not to ever let our guards down so we don't go back to the toxic waste sites like we see at Steep Rock at Atikokan, one that generations will have to deal with. Those lessons learned from unmonitored development need to be front of mind as we move forward.

At this point in time, this ministry that is so important—I would like to talk about the energy requirements. Energy requirements are so tied to the climate crisis, and so the work of this ministry on energy is so important. How we manage that requires careful and thoughtful approaches where new ideas and innovations are so exciting.

Our dependence on energy gets greater and greater, and having affordable access is essential for participation in our society. As you know, we may disagree, Minister, but we in our party believe that electricity should be publicly managed and distributed.

Mining is so vitally important in our economy in Ontario and especially in northern Ontario. The numbers of economic benefits to Ontario and to Canada are really staggering and impacts in all our communities across the north are very significant. As the minister pointed out, the mining strategy is a good step forward to providing a level of stability that the industry wants, and it is so important for creating good-paying jobs. The products of mining are in use in almost every aspect of modern lives, and the raw materials found here in Ontario are important for the development of green, new technologies. We share that vision.

Northern development and forging a new path forward with Indigenous communities will make our province a just and equitable place. I know an exciting announcement was made today, but we need their voices, Indigenous voices, at the table as equal partners to ensure that we create and share our vision for our futures.

Rather than spend my short time I have with you just talking at you, I'd like to delve into starting to ask some questions. I think it's appropriate that we have this as a first question, because across northern Ontario, this is always a hot topic, and that is the Ring of Fire. Could the minister outline what progress has been made in the development of the Ring of Fire?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you, Judith, for that question. I can assure you that if you lived out on Lake of the Woods, you wouldn't be as preoccupied with black flies, but they're a problem if you decide to venture into the shade of the forest somewhere around 9 o'clock this time of year. But other than that, we don't have much of a problem.

Thank you for your question with the pre-emptive comments around the importance of energy and energy infrastructure. As you know, I moved quickly as a minister to

ensure that the east-west tie, an important piece of energy infrastructure out in your neck of the woods being done almost exclusively by a talented Indigenous workforce, was set into motion.

Straightening out the Ontario Energy Board's priorities, of course, is counterintuitive because they are supposed to be an arm's-length regulator, but we couldn't help but see the opportunity here and make sure that that infrastructure project went ahead. And I know if you've talked to Chief Peter Collins, he will tell you how important that project was to get started and how it's been.

On the Ring of Fire—and I'm not sure, Mr. Chair, how many minutes I actually have here. It will guide my response in some respects.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Well, I'll just say that the opposition has 30 minutes in total. There are 24 minutes left in this round. I know that when MPP Monteith-Farrell decides that she has heard what she needs to hear, she will put up her hand, and we will move on.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Listen, with respect to the Ring of Fire, there are a couple of key things to know about. First of all, we signed a historic agreement with the two communities Webequie and Marten Falls, as being the lead proponents of the northern link road, Judith, if I may call you that. That work is well under way now.

In addition, we invested more than \$35 million into the Matawa broadband program, a much-needed infusion, but it's important for me to recognize it, because one of the approaches I've taken and our government is committed to moving forward is really understanding what government is supposed to do when it comes to major mining projects. I think my own assessment in my previous political career federally and in the time between the federal and provincial political jobs I've had—it has become very important to me that government should focus on doing what it can do best. That is pulling the levers related to health, social and economic objectives, creating a corridor to prosperity for a variety of important reasons, not necessarily just because there's a world-class mining opportunity there. I know that's important to you as somebody who is heavily involved in health. You see the opportunity for many of those isolated communities to have road access. This will benefit them for important health reasons. You know that I was a nurse working up in many of those communities back in the day.

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The economic benefits related to setting up legacy infrastructure: Actually building a road roughly the length of the corridor between Toronto and Montreal will create jobs, but in those communities, most importantly, creating the kind of infrastructure to support moms and dads for child care, for recreational activities, for training centres—this has all been money that has been identified through our commitment to the Ring of Fire.

Also, Judith—and I could talk much more about it, but I don't want you to cut me off—it's something a little bit closer to home for you in Thunder Bay, and that's the extraordinary opportunity in the Greenstone Gold belt and

them becoming the epicentre, down along the Trans-Canada Highway there, to be a platform for various kinds of training and infrastructure and capacity development to actually build the corridor.

Then, the last piece of update I'd like to give you is, of course, the federal government's imposition of the impact assessment. I think it's important for all colleagues to know that while, at first glance, we had serious problems with this being imposed on our province—and I expressed that concern to the minister. Since then, we've been able to negotiate with the federal government the contours to an impact assessment that's supported by Noront and is of far more comfort to Indigenous communities moving forward, so that the specific activity of mining can be focused on the impact assessment, and, Judith, we can move ahead with other important pieces of infrastructure that actually access the communities most proximal to the Ring of Fire. Thank you.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you, Minister. I was able to attend one of the first meetings with the federal government around the impact assessment, and it was fascinating to see the process and the level of engagement that they were looking at.

We know this consultation has been going on a long time, but, recently, there were some Matawa communities that were unhappy and felt that they were not as eager to have the road. I'm wondering if there's any progress in that direction.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, there has been. Frankly, the communities that are the lead proponents on the environmental assessment for road access have every right to create that opportunity for their communities, and I'm pretty sure, Judith, that you don't dispute that. The nice thing about the preliminary central location of the corridor, which I have called the "corridor to prosperity," is that it gives those communities an opportunity to hook up to that corridor from a fairly reasonable distance. The baseline from Aroland First Nation parallel to Marten Falls, and then the component north, have the opportunity to create new access and new economic opportunities for Eabametoong, for Neskantaga, obviously for Webequie and for our friends up in Kasabonika, who have at least a winter road spur accessing themselves to Webequie, who would obviously be very proximal to the very end, if you will, of what we would call the "corridor to prosperity" into the epicentre of the Ring of Fire.

I have created an open and extended invitation to speak with any and all Indigenous leaders with respect to their interests in this project, and it's my firm belief that through the impact assessment and the ongoing opportunity for them to participate in the environmental assessments related, potentially, to spurs into their communities, that if they so desire to have road access, they will. I can't serve the interests of every single leadership and how sometimes leadership views this differently as elections happen, but I can only speak to Watay Power, for example, if you look at the extraordinary project and our government's commitment there, to the tune of a couple of billion dollars. These are communities that are looking for a corridor for electrification,

for transportation of goods, an ability to have an alternative from diesel fuel and an ability, frankly, to get in and out of their communities safely. Winter roads remind us that many of these communities still want to move, whether it's visiting people in other communities or getting to the south. That's what we're trying to provide.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: The other piece that is recent news—having had discussions with Noront fairly recently—what was announced, with the hostile takeover that was being planned by Wyloo. I'm wondering if there are any concerns, as minister, or any discussions going on with those companies or with regard to that takeover. Would it change the culture? I know the culture of Noront has been in that game for a while now and has been very engaged with a lot of different players in the community and trying to move forward in a respectful way. Now we have a different player, potentially, in that mix, and so people are concerned about that. Any comment on that?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for the question, Judith. First and foremost, this does involve matters that touch on Ontario securities. Therefore, I have not spoken to anybody corporately from Noront with respect to this. I was briefed that there has been or is in process a potential change in ownership. Frankly, I've also heard some very positive things: that the company involved is attracted to this investment because they have expertise working with Indigenous communities in another part of the world, and this may create as much of an opportunity as it does issues.

Again, regardless, our government is committed to setting the foundation for legacy infrastructure in the areas of health, social and economic development—and to the extent that mining operations and/or their ownerships, whatever composition they might be, put the best interests of our municipalities and our First Nations communities first and foremost. If they don't, they won't be able to proceed—simple as that.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have almost 15 minutes left.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Oh, lots of time.

Mining operations in northern Ontario are bringing labourers and miners from across the country to Ontario, and we saw that being somewhat problematic during COVID-19. It made it difficult. Mining companies did an extraordinary job. I know I was in discussions with them during outbreaks, and they were on it. They were the first with rapid testing. They were supportive of isolation centres for their workers. They kept everyone in the community—me and others involved—really informed about what they were doing. It was really exceptional work they did during the pandemic.

We in northern Ontario, I know we are looking at these jobs that—we are bringing in people. What are we doing—and I know you spoke a bit about training and development, so I suppose that's what this question is about—to recruit and train more northern Ontario people to work in mining and in the industry? Labour is something that the

industry is always talking about. They're telling us that they need more trained people. Can you comment on that?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Absolutely. I've been working very closely with Minister McNaughton, my colleague in skilled jobs and labour. We've done a couple of important pieces, Judith.

I'd like to start, first and foremost, with what I felt was a very, very good policy option in NOHFC, and that is that we created an actual stream of funding for Indigenous interns in skilled trades and jobs and business development. What that means in the simplest of terms is that we're helping Indigenous people who may not have completed their education, who are at different stages of post-secondary education, pivot to an internship experience, get them real job exposure in the natural resource sector in particular, and hopefully mobilize that workforce.

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I mentioned the east-west tie, but those workers—that project comes to an end, like all major infrastructure projects. We will now have 200 to 300 Indigenous workers mobilized for future energy infrastructure. You mentioned, and we talked about, the corridor to prosperity, but the Matawa communities are not included in the Watay Power project, as I'm sure you probably know. So there's going to be lots of work.

The fact of the matter is—and I agree with you 1,000%, Judith—we have a labour shortage. I've got Domtar just down the road, who are looking for skilled trades. That's why when I was the federal minister and carried over into the provincial ministry—we're making sure that SLAAMB out of Sioux Lookout reconciles the skills and trades that Indigenous people have been building for decades and decades. When I was a young nurse working up in those communities, they were building telephone and communication infrastructure, building homes, building schools, but never getting the Red Seal certificates for it. So we're streamlining our efforts to make sure that their hours in are reconciled, so that they can get their Red Seal certificate, join a good union and be guaranteed to have work in the skilled trades across our different sectors.

In the meantime, unfortunately, as you point out, we continue to have to have migrant workers from other parts of the province, the country and potentially the world over, but there couldn't be a more important priority for us to focus on, moving forward. We see the Indigenous workforce as one of the key opportunities local to us, but we are also making sure that our investments in community colleges and trade schools are increased so that we can see a skilled labour force from northern Ontario working in northern Ontario.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: We've been doing that work for some time, and in discussions with the industry, they're wanting further on-the-job training. You talked about internships; what kind of financial investment have we done into those internships and assisting companies in taking on these folks? Because it is a very specialized kind of skills bracket or skills bundle that you are required—that's something industry said, that they would like to be

training very industry-specific people, so what is the financial commitment from the government?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I spoke earlier, moments ago, about the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund and allocating resources, Judith, to the Indigenous Internship Program, and then having another internship program. Giving you a specific amount of money wouldn't do it justice, because with respect to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, it's driven by applications. So our real work on the ground is inspiring and motivating the people who work for northern development and mines to get out there, work with businesses, work with Indigenous businesses and Indigenous communities and their leadership to drive an application to increase the amount. I love our friends in some of the big cities across northern Ontario, Judith, but mobilizing those workforces in those smaller communities has been a significant challenge, and that's what we're focusing on.

The other important part is investing in innovation and technology. Through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, we focus and make it a top priority in ensuring not only that we are the destination for new technology and innovations, but that that attracts a local labour force to those technologies and they're the first ones to know and learn about it. And so it's small, Judith, and it needs to get bigger.

But I can tell you that we have some young people across northern Ontario operating some of the most advanced technologies in forestry and mining out there, trained here—because don't forget, it's not all about colleges and universities; many mining companies have institutional certificates and achievements that they use to advance their workforce. So knowing that and having the programs that they and/or individuals can apply to for things like internship programs, we think, gets us out of the confines of a strict amount of money which may not be enough, but rather leaves it open for the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund and the amazing work that the board does to simply approve applications on their merits and mobilize the talented workforce that's born and raised or comes to northern Ontario for the opportunity to work.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: The other piece on the labour force is attracting new citizens, families to northern Ontario, because if we're having people work in northern Ontario and in Ontario but then they take their paycheques and all their investment to cities and towns outside of Ontario, that's really not the ideal situation.

Those mining towns used to have—like, Atikokan was built on the families of Steep Rock, and they created a community. I'm wondering, is there any movement? I know many municipalities are struggling with this population piece and how we maintain and attract people to live where they work, or at least close by.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Oh, yes. Judith, as you're speaking, I'm thinking of Phil Vinet. I don't know if you ever had a chance to meet Phil Vinet, but the mayor of Red Lake used to say, "You know, we're in the midst of a gold boom. Someone should tell me about it." What he meant is that our communities are still negatively impacted, ironically, about some major developments, because the fact of the

matter is—and I'm thinking of Pickle Lake up there, what we used to call Placer Dome and Red Lake—many of the mining sites built out a residence for their people to stay.

I remember campaigning in Red Lake after building a beautiful airport there and trying to tell people on the doorstep what a great idea it was. He said, "We don't need an airport, Rickford. We need tennis courts. We need places for kids to do different recreational sports besides hockey." Some non-traditional ethnic communities moving into our smaller towns, while they received a warm welcome, didn't necessarily have access to the kinds of things they like to do in their spare time or to support their everyday lives.

That's why the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, Judith, was fundamentally transformed. It took a look at the things that were working for places like Thunder Bay, the jewel of Lake Superior, but also for those little towns that some people don't know about that are doing great things in the resource sector. You mentioned Atikokan, but we've got a lot of stuff stretching all the way out to Rainy River. I know you've driven out there and admired the gateway to the Prairies and some of the farming capacity we have.

These are all things that the new-look Northern Ontario Heritage Fund is going to be focused on, Judith, and you're going to see very quickly, if you haven't already, some very targeted investments in fixing the foundations of a hundred-year-old curling rink and new roofs on ice rinks, things that sometimes the larger federal and provincial infrastructure programs never get a chance to address. I think those are game changers for those communities and attract families to move there, born out of necessity not just for the community but for those families, and make it a friendly, culturally appropriate, great place to live.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Chair, I just—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, you have almost four minutes left.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Oh, okay. Great.

No discussion about mines or northern development would be complete, but we know that the economic development corporation in Thunder Bay did a mining readiness strategy for Thunder Bay. One of the areas they emphasized was the need for roads. Roads are a critical piece to be ready to get mines up and running, moving forward and getting their product in and out. I know that your ministry—but also maybe other ministries, I know—has a little piece of that roads piece in there. So I'm wondering—I don't know if four minutes is enough, but I'd just like to know what the progress has been on the roads aspect of assuring that mining has that access they need to develop.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Judith, I'll try my hardest to use up that remaining precious four minutes.

But you're absolutely right. I mentioned the corridor to prosperity. People were talking about the Ring of Fire and the mining site, but what most folks south of us don't realize is that that requires a significant legacy infrastructure investment called a road or a corridor that can deliver alternative, cleaner forms of fuel, technology bundles, and a safe road, and that applies, obviously, for smaller roadways and including railway—

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

Hon. Greg Rickford: —to different—I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. Two minutes?

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The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Two minutes, yes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I get really excited about this stuff, so thank you for—

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: We can continue it on our next round.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes, for sure, because do you know what, Judith? Here's what we know, and one of the things that we're working on—I'll be in a position to announce in the not-too-distant future—is the wear and tear on the existing roads in the resource sectors you know and our friends in Thunder Bay and Sudbury know. That heavy machinery being trucked up or moving up and down—that breaks our roads down far more quickly, so when we came into government, we realized quickly that those culverts that we take for granted sometimes and the state of many of our bridges needed repair. That's what we've been focusing on. We have an amazing Minister of Transportation who has been up north, understands the priority, frankly, in focusing on continuing twinning of the highway for safer transportation and a more robust prospect for heavier forms of transport to move across our region.

Those are the priorities that we're working on right now, but I know you're talking about some of those smaller roads—like when you move off of Highway 11 or 17 into some of the smaller communities, including your beloved Atikokan—which require and deserve good road surfaces to travel on not just for ordinary work but for the increased demands that the resource sector places on them. That's what we've been focusing on.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you, Minister.

I think I need to have a stopwatch. I'm going to start setting a timer so I don't have to bother the Chair every five minutes.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Well, I don't think you need worry. You're now at the end of your rotation.

We go back to the government. You have 30 minutes to respond, Minister.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Okay. I'm new to provincial committees, so does that mean I go back to speaking or does the government put questions to me?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): No, it is not time for government questions, although if you decided you wanted to have one of your MPPs—no, it is a reply on your part to the questions that have been posed by the opposition.

Hon. Greg Rickford: All right. Well, I've appreciated them so far, Mr. Chair. Maybe what I'll do is just walk through some other pieces that we're working on for the benefit of making everyone aware of the work we're doing but to facilitate and support further questions, which I'm happy to answer.

Let me talk about broadband expansion. The COVID-19 pandemic underlined the critical need for access to reliable

broadband for Ontario families, businesses and individuals to be able to work from home and learn online, connect with family and friends and access vital services.

I thought I had the state-of-the-art technology, folks. I just signed up to Tbaytel, Judith, for their new service, and yesterday my little girl Poppy got kicked off of her online learning class no less than 15 times. We got so frustrated, of course, that we had to abandon that particular session. Some of those things may be out of our control, but we've heard loud and clear from Indigenous communities, especially our small and remote Indigenous communities and many municipalities that have felt isolated, that working from home, learning online and connecting with family and friends wasn't just a vital service but it wasn't working as well as it should have. As many as 700,000 households and businesses in Ontario still lacked access to adequate broadband speeds or have no Internet connection at all.

I can tell you, out here in northwestern Ontario, including out in the far-reaching parts of your riding down by Atikokan, Judith, that we're committed to and have already announced a number of key broadband projects, because now more than ever as the province recovers from the pandemic, we need an Ontario-made plan to help build infrastructure faster, strengthen our communities and lay the foundation for growth, renewal and long-term economic recovery.

One of the reasons, back last fall, that we put a bit of a pause on the NOHFC wasn't just to renew it and pivot to NORP, but it was also designed to take stock of where we are at with broadband connectivity across northern Ontario. I became concerned that with some of the applications to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, while on the front end they looked like a great opportunity to increase broadband capacity in a given community, we were building out our broadband infrastructure by, as I like to say, ad hockery. That's unacceptable.

There are companies working up in our region, large national-scale companies, who want to bring technology. There's nothing more disheartening than driving along our highways up in northern Ontario and seeing a sign that talks about communication capacity from the north and for the north, but looking at your phone and seeing no bars. I think as northerners, we can all appreciate that. I'm just checking my screen for some smiles from some of the northern MPPs. I see I got a nod of approval from Judith at least. I think Mantha is hiding here today. I'm not sure; I don't see his face. But anyway, we've talked about that, us as colleagues, putting partisanship aside and realizing that this is an absolutely essential piece.

That's why we recently passed the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021. It's legislation that will provide the tools to help reduce barriers to Internet and telecommunication service providers associated with attaching broadband wireline to hydro utility poles. It also helps to provide for timely access to hydro utility poles and municipal rights-of-way to install broadband on municipal land.

Our government believes that all Ontarians deserve access to reliable high-speed broadband and equal opportunity to engage in our ever-growing digital economy and lifestyle. “Get with the times and get with computers” is one of my most famous sayings. I take a lot of heat for it. Some people say I’m a bit geeky when I say it. But I say it because, rather unfortunately, even though they may have the best computer out there, not everybody has the broadband capacity to serve that piece of technology.

We can’t do it alone. We have to have a partner in the federal government, and we’re working with them right now on the next series or phase of broadband expansion to ensure that projects consider the expansive area of our isolated and remote northern communities—some communities that are out in the middle of Lake of the Woods, for example, and various other parts that make them very remote and very challenging. We want a flexible and dynamic opportunity. Starlink is now starting to work in communities in and around Lake of the Woods and farther to the north of us, like Pikangikum, and we continue to support that.

Another thing I’d like to talk about is the COVID-19 response. I’m proud of the action our government took in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to address the financial pressures that many Ontario families and businesses were facing. One of the purposes of my responsibilities and my colleague Minister Walker and my parliamentary assistant, Dave Smith, was to recommend and advance various forms of relief programs, particularly with respect to electricity. I mentioned them in my previous remarks, but we acted swiftly and efficiently to respond to the crisis with immediate electricity rate relief measures because we knew how important it was for those spending more time at home to use the electricity they needed without fear of being charged for higher bills.

In response to the COVID outbreak, we rolled out a number of measures to help families and businesses across northern Ontario weather the storm. They included investing \$484 million to provide emergency rate relief to residential, farm and small business electricity consumers through the suspension of time-of-use pricing in Ontario and temporarily introducing a flat rate 24 hours a day.

We worked with utilities and the Ontario Energy Board to extend the disconnection ban so the people of Ontario were not cut off from electricity or natural gas in the depths and throes of the COVID-19 pandemic. And we introduced customer choice to provide electricity customers with the option to switch from time-of-use pricing to a tiered rate pricing plan so the customers could choose a billing system that best suits their household and their lifestyle.

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We took action to assist commercial and industrial electricity consumers with temporary relief on their electricity bills to help jump-start the economy. We did that by deferring a portion of the global adjustment for the period from April to June 2020, and we increased flexibility for large consumers to qualify for the Industrial Conservation Initiative. We introduced an ICI peak hiatus to relieve our

ICI participants of the need to reduce electricity demand during peak hours. This became absurd when we got to COVID. Can you imagine those companies down there in Toronto, so close to where the Chair lives, who produce great jobs for his constituents, having to shut down in the summer while all their factory does is produce essential products to serve the pandemic? Unacceptable. That’s why people like Mr. Irving were able to make sure he wasn’t going to have to shut down this summer, or any other summer moving forward, because of the peak hiatus. It’s also why we enabled the IESO to extend the in-service deadlines for energy efficiency projects contracted under a legacy conservation framework that have experienced delays caused by COVID-19. This has helped provide stability for participants in those businesses involved in the supply chain vendor and contractor community that support the implementation of these commercial projects.

I’d like to talk as well about the COVID-19 Energy Assistance Program. Our ministry has ensured that there is further support for those Ontarians hardest hit by the economic fallout of the pandemic. Some households and small businesses have had a hard time paying bills. We know that from the uptake of the program that we created for the purposes of the pandemic. We provisioned it, and together with the Ontario Energy Board and local distribution companies, we introduced the COVID-19 Energy Assistance Program, or CEAP, initially investing a \$9-million investment to provide families struggling to pay their electricity bills with a one-time payment to help with electricity and natural gas bill debt. In addition, we initially invested \$8 million to create the COVID-19 Energy Assistance Program for Small Business, CEAP-SB, helping small businesses and charitable organizations catch up on their energy bills during the pandemic. As a result, these two programs have provided emergency support to over 60,000 residential and small business customers struggling with energy bills.

Colleagues, I think you’ll all agree that this is the right thing to do. As there continues to be a need for this assistance, we recently invested an additional \$23 million to CEAP to support Ontario households, small businesses and registered charities.

Let me talk a little bit about the COVID-19 energy rebate. The COVID-19 energy cost rebate program was launched in November 2020 to provide eligible businesses with 100% of reported energy costs with respect to the periods where they were required to close or significantly restrict services as a result of the provincial public health measures. As of May 25, the grant has provided over \$95 million in financial support to more than 27,000 unique applications.

I’d like to pivot to another important innovation we made in the electricity pricing, and that was the renewable cost shift. Our government is doing everything in our power to support Ontario’s economic recovery. We’re committed to finding solutions that not only assist Ontarians in getting through the pandemic but also that help to encourage future growth, competitiveness and prosperity. Even before the pandemic, we heard from industrial and commercial

operators across the province about the relationship between energy prices and their ability to be competitive—in many instances, globally competitive. In fact, it was the difference between them deciding to stay here in Ontario or moving somewhere else.

That's why, as of January 1, 2021, the government shifted a portion of non-hydro renewable energy contract costs including wind, solar and bioenergy, so that they're no longer being paid by electricity consumers or ratepayers. By removing these costs, we are delivering significant on-going savings to Ontario's industrial and commercial customers. This initiative is reducing costs by around 15% for industrial and commercial electricity consumers, with the benefit varying depending on consumption patterns, and for large energy-intensive operations, this represents a significant reduction in monthly costs. I've heard loud and clear from mining and forestry operations, for example, across northern Ontario who say that this investment is the difference from them, for example, moving off of diesel fuel for their energy supply to going, in the case of the Borden mine operations, to complete electrification. I think all colleagues here today on all sides of the Legislature share their enthusiasm for a value proposition in our energy sector like that.

I'd next like to talk about OEB modernization. This was a key early initiative that we wasted no time in addressing. We need a modern, independent, arm's-length regulator—one that can respond to the challenges of energy infrastructure on a moment's notice, that can understand that our LDCs, or local distribution companies, from time to time have new technology requirements protecting from cyber security impacts, replacing telephone poles and lines and various other kinds of infrastructure. They need to be an effective regulator that has the trust of Ontario's energy sector. So one of our first orders of business was to modernize the OEB. After extensive consultations and stakeholder feedback and advice from the OEB modernization panel, a new governance structure for the OEB was put in place last fall. The new governance structure has:

- a board of directors led by a chair to provide overall oversight of the organization and ensure appropriate interaction with government;

- a CEO role separate from the chair and accountable to the board of directors for the efficient and effective management of the OEB;

- a chief commissioner role accountable to the CEO, who will be responsible for ensuring the efficiency, timelines and dependability of the regulatory process as well as the assignment of cases;

- commissioners who will be responsible for hearing cases and carrying out the OEB's adjudicative function.

This new governance structure strengthens the independence of the OEB's decision-making and improves the accountability within the organization. We expect this will allow the OEB and stakeholders to work together to reduce regulatory burden and make adjudicative processes more efficient. With strong female leadership, we are looking to the provincial regulator to operate in a more transparent

and effective manner as we emerge from the current pandemic and strive to jump-start our economy.

The OEB is now in a better position than it has ever been on its path to modernization. The board itself is populated from people from across this province, including north-western Ontario. Since the government reform last fall, the OEB is working on building a strong relationship with stakeholders, making a wide range of operation changes to improve the performance outcomes, reducing the regulatory burden, and increasing transparency and efficiency in its adjudicative processes.

We've made sure, colleagues, that the OEB has all of the tools not just to be modern but to be arm's length. As I said to our new incoming CEO, I hope we don't have to talk much at all. The legislation is in place. The mandate for OEB modernization letter was given to the new CEO, and I'm proud to say that she and her extraordinary team have been able to move forward in a positive way. Already we are hearing from major local distribution companies, including Toronto Hydro and various other organizations that make applications to the OEB, about how much faster, more effective and more efficient their decision-making is, and about their commitment to ensuring the safety of the people of Ontario when it comes to energy and energy infrastructure.

Let me talk a little bit about nuclear energy and small modular reactors. Supporting all Ontarians through these unprecedented times continues to be our government's top priority. While our primary focus remains protecting the health and well-being of our citizens, we're also committed to fuelling our provincial economy's recovery and to moving ahead with our priorities for Ontario's energy system. With nuclear power as the backbone of our electricity system providing green energy, we're proud of the world-class nuclear sector in Ontario and the cutting-edge technologies and innovations that are emerging from it. Today, our nuclear refurbishment programs at Darlington and Bruce nuclear are enabling Ontario's nuclear supply chain to retool, expand its capabilities and bolster its leading position in the global nuclear industry. It's creating a strong foundation to pursue further innovation technologies like small modular reactors.

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But, colleagues, think of this: Whether it's refurbishment, decommissioning, medical isotopes or small modular reactors, which I'll expound on more, Ontario is now not just the benchmark for clean energy provided for the province of Ontario, but for a whole bunch of new technologies and new capacities. The world is coming to visit and asking if Ontario can chart the course forward for them in these key areas.

On SMRs, we couldn't be more excited. These are smaller than conventional nuclear reactors. They're nimble. They can be built to scale and operate independently or be linked to multiple units, depending on the required amount of power. That's what makes them versatile and potential game changers for the energy industry.

In 2019, Ontario, Saskatchewan and New Brunswick agreed to collaborate. Why wouldn't we? Saskatchewan

has an incredible desire to get off coal-fire-powered energy and supplies many of the natural resources that go into making nuclear power. New Brunswick is already well advanced with its reactors, and of course Ontario, it goes without saying, supplies 66% of Ontario's energy supply from nuclear energy.

Recently, the Premiers from our three provinces said, "Hey, who else wants to get on board and take advantage of this extraordinary opportunity?" And so, three provinces and the utilities—Ontario Power Generation, Bruce Power, New Brunswick Power and SaskPower—partnered to release a feasibility study report for SMR development and deployment in their respective provinces. That caught the attention of Alberta, who joined the SMR fold last month and agreed to collaborate with Ontario, New Brunswick and Saskatchewan, demonstrating that even non-nuclear jurisdictions are increasingly recognizing the potential of this innovative technology. There have been inquiries from other provinces and territories in these technologies, and we're looking forward to hosting forums to celebrate and promote SMR technology.

We have a plan to deploy SMRs in Canada and create an opportunity for the world by identifying three streams of project proposals for consideration by the MOU provinces. It's anticipated that all three streams will create employment and economic growth benefits for Canada and create opportunities to export technology and expertise to address global issues like climate change and energy security.

In conclusion, Mr. Chair, I don't know how much longer I have to speak, but to conclude—

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

Hon. Greg Rickford: The past year and a half has been amongst the most challenging times our province has experienced, but I'm proud of the work my ministry is doing to stimulate growth and opportunities in all regions of Ontario; to protect the status of Ontario as a top-tier destination for the automotive manufacturing sector as a whole, for mining and for forestry; and to promote reliable and affordable energy for Ontario businesses.

That concludes my remarks, Mr. Chair. Do I at this point take questions from government caucus? Can I turn it over to my counterpart, Minister Bill Walker, for some additional comments? He's often at a loss for words, but I'll urge him to perhaps chime in.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Minister, you ask fair questions. This half-hour is the government's response to the opposition's statements and questions that happened. There are eight minutes remaining. If Minister Walker wants to take that time to expand upon what you've said or explore other areas, that's his right. At the end of that eight minutes, we go to the first rotation, with the opposition asking questions.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you.

Hon. Bill Walker: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister Rickford. I also want to certainly jump into that void and fill some time, and just share some of the good news that we've done in regard to everything

since we took office, and certainly with COVID. One of the other ones that I think was—we made a commitment with the Hydro One board of directors, and we've renewed that. We put new leadership in place, and that is working well.

I really want to turn now to focus a little bit on the other piece of particularly the nuclear sector, which has provided all of the sterilization in the nuclear. We lead the world in sterilization with our isotopes at both OPG and at Bruce Power. We have a number of different opportunities there, and we will continue to expand that. I truly believe that, like the SMRs, it's going to allow Canadians and Ontarians to continue to be leaders in those two sectors. We're going to be able to expand the ability, and I'm just so proud of how much we've produced to sterilize. I don't have the numbers right off the top of my head, but they're staggering numbers in regard to the number of gloves that were sterilized and the utensils that have been sterilized and all of those important things.

We could not do that if we didn't say "thank you so much" to all the front-line workers, to all of those people who showed up in this pandemic every single day to ensure that you had that reliable power source, whether it would be in nuclear or hydro or all of the versions of our energy sector. But I just want to again, on behalf of Minister Rickford, all of our colleagues and certainly the Premier, thank every single person in the energy sector, northern development and the mining sector as well, for doing what they did to ensure the lights were on and the power was there.

Minister Rickford did a fabulous job of sharing all of those great things that we were able to commit to, to keep the lights on throughout this whole process, to ensure that people, in the worst pandemic that any of us hopefully will ever see—let's hope it's the only one we will ever see—to ensure that we actually were able to do that and continue to always put the health and safety of the people of Ontario first and foremost in everything we did.

I just know that in that whole sector, there's huge opportunity. I'm a big, big champion in regard to the isotope sector and those jobs and that supply chain that we are going to be able to continue to leverage and expand, providing good, solid-paying jobs, in a very clean sector. Again, the hydroelectric sector is always there: reliable, low-cost, clean forms of energy.

And I can't say enough for all of those people who, day in and day out, while all of us were going through a very uncertain situation, ensured—and as Minister Rickford said, being able to lower those rates, to make sure that those people that were home from work, those people that were home on a learning perspective, had the energy they needed. The costs—they didn't have added anxiety and stress wondering what was going to happen. To allow them to have that rate relief and also the flexibility to change if they so chose, once they found that—we went as far as, again, making sure that there were disconnection bans. We extended those a number of times when we needed to, when the pandemic continued to move and

evolve due to new variants or new challenges that were faced.

I just want to assure Ontarians again that cabinet continues, at every opportunity, to always readdress. We worked, of course, with Dr. David Williams and the Ontario health table at every step of the way, in concert with them at every step. In energy's perspective, as soon as something else changed, credit to the administration and the team in all of the ministries, but especially Deputy Rhodes and his team, to ensure that we were two steps ahead and being ready to say, "Okay, what do we need to do here? What can we do to flex here?"—providing that rate relief, providing the energy assistance program to businesses.

Again, a lot of our small businesses continue to struggle, because we've had to make that very challenging decision to ensure that we stopped mobility, to stop the spread of that virus so that we don't have things like what is happening in the UK, where everybody started to open up and they were ready to go full-bore and now they have had to throttle back. So again, we made those decisions at every step: things like energy assistance, being able to help those small businesses get through with that type of thing, and property taxes being forgiven or at least deferred during this time frame—those energy rebate grants being able to help, certainly.

Minister Rickford did a great job of talking about the off-peak pricing and how we did that, how we helped the industrial, and I'm going to talk there. In a small, rural riding like Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound, the people running the grocery stores, the people running those small, little manufacturing facilities—long before I ever became a minister or got into government, into power, they were coming to me, saying, "We don't know how we're going to continue to survive, how we're going to continue to be sustainable in the future." They were quite excited when we were able to do this in the middle of the pandemic, to give them that rate relief and ensure that that was there.

I just can't say enough how we stepped up at that time, gave them the ability, and now we're going to be competitive with our electricity rates and energy rates. Again, that is going to have a game-changing effect. We had 350,000 manufacturing jobs leave our province. A big piece, when you went out and talked to the community, was those exorbitant energy rates from the last administration that, again, we inherited. We had to take energy, thought and strategy to address those. I think we've done an admirable job of looking at those, actually taking action, making it more affordable for families and businesses. And now, as a result of some of those actions, we are the most competitive, or getting back to being the most—

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

Hon. Bill Walker: Thank you, Mr. Chair—especially addressing those states that are in direct competition in our friends to the south. So again, we've done a lot of those things; that global adjustment, we've addressed. I think, in

a short two-and-a-half to three years, we've made considerable changes that have given people, again, the trust and the confidence in a government that stepped into something that had been virtually destroyed by the Liberal government over 15 years. We went from some of the lowest rates to the highest rates in our province, and we've got those back under control. We've got those back to a place where businesses are coming back to Ontario; they're coming back to say, "We are open for business. You are open for business, and we want to be part of that."

In our next section, I'm going to talk fairly extensively in regard to our natural gas expansion of phase 2, because that, again, for many, many communities—43 new communities are going to get natural gas, which is going to lower the average cost of energy for a family, between \$250 and \$1,500 per year, and lowering up to 30% rates for businesses. It's going to be a game changer.

Judith, you didn't ask me a direct question, but I'll go back to you in the north. There are a lot of places across northern, rural and our Indigenous communities, that this is going to be a game changer for, 43 more communities on top of phase 1, which we did—9,000 people in the first forum and first phase and about 8,750 in our second phase.

I am proud to work with Minister Rickford, PA Smith, Deputy Rhodes and the whole energy team. Again, that dependability, that affordability, the flexibility and, most importantly, people having trust and confidence in a government that realizes just how significant energy and electricity is, how important it is, to every single aspect of our life, what role energy plays—I'm proud to be part of that team, part of that leadership, and I will go into the next election knowing that we made a huge difference and—

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

Hon. Bill Walker: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): The first rotation goes to the official opposition. MPP Monteith-Farrell, I assume it's you.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Yes, it is. It's me. Thank you.

I listened intently to the minister and the associate minister. The associate minister, I really need you to slow down a bit when you speak, because you have a lot to say and often—even in the House, I wanted to signal you and send you a note, because I find sometimes it's too much. There's a lot there, and I don't know if that's the strategy, but I'd really like to hear what you have to say. Thank you.

I just want to go back to the transportation piece and the roads piece, because roads in northern Ontario are very important. We know that if we are going to develop the mining industry, we need to have that kind of commitment, so I'd like to drill down a bit on that. What is the investment we have presently in the ministry for that road development?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I think I'm on mute here.

Judith, we work very closely in coordination with the Minister of Transportation on this. Our allocations for northern development with respect to northern roads: Obviously, a great deal of it is spent on existing roadways and

their upgrades, including the supporting infrastructure. I mentioned culverts earlier. We feel well positioned from northern development to do that, but the ministry itself is not equipped to deal with the larger-scale projects. That's why we defer and work so closely with the minister of transport on coordinating and complementing the work they do on their major highways.

For example, I mentioned the twinning of the highway at various segments of northern Ontario, and I sure hope that that continues to progress. I know it's something that's very important out your way as well. We're looking forward to work commencing finally, after more than decade, to the tune of tens of millions of dollars. It's extraordinary. The previous government hit a snag with the bridge repairs that they didn't expect, out near Thunder Bay-Nipigon, but, again, those are roadways that we couldn't possibly serve within my ministry. Obviously, the northern roads connecting Indigenous communities during the winter use a portion of our financial allocations.

There have been some structural changes within my ministry and the Ministry of Transportation, particularly, around rail and bus. As you well know, the infrastructure that we're looking at putting in has to support the kind of transportation networks that northern Ontario needs, and that's why I felt it was more responsible to transfer some of the authorities, for example, around Ontario Northland transportation and some of the short-line railroads, over to the Ministry of Transportation. They have a larger allocation to draw from, a bigger-picture view.

It helps us over at northern development and mines to focus on the kinds of allocations and financial commitments to specific roads—mines, roads that service mining and forestry operations, as opposed to the bigger business of our larger corridors that we currently have and the ones that we hope to build in the future, like, as I mentioned, the corridor to prosperity.

You know as well, Judith, from following the Greenstone Gold developments out there, that, should that project advance, we're actually going to have to move a portion of the Trans-Canada Highway in an effort to make that mine.

So these are not the kinds of resources that the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines, as it's known corporately, feel are in our best interests to manage, and that's why those allocations are more appropriately and more responsibly reflected across a couple of different ministries, but most importantly, the ministry of transport.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: The other piece of infrastructure—and you touched on it somewhat, but it is something of concern. We have a large number of exploration of potential mines and mines that are in development, and the piece that we're often missing or that is of concern—sometimes folks are concerned that we will have insufficient energy sources for the development of those mines, that what we have existing isn't enough. I'm wondering if you have a comment on that.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Do you mean in terms of the energy supply, Judith? I'm not sure I completely understood.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Well, in the electrical supply, for those people that are—they've said that they don't know if our present capacity in northern Ontario is sufficient.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes. Wow—just cut me off, Judith, when you feel like it's appropriate, but I've got a ton to say on this, reaching far back into my federal days when I was minister responsible for FedNor. At the time, the province of Ontario and its partners, the crown corporations and then at the time the newly public Hydro One—there were challenges getting to some of our smaller northern communities. The kV capacity of certain lines wasn't there. At the time, we moved very quickly to ensure that natural gas was an alternative supply to these communities. That's why—and I'll turn it over to my associate minister shortly, to expound a little bit more on how important it was to create alternative sources of energy—this was a game changer, when Union Gas was able to expand from Ear Falls up to Red Lake.

Did you know, Judith, that Goldcorp at the time funded every resident of Red Lake to convert their furnaces to natural gas from oil? Just think of the environmental benefits of that and the cost benefits. They committed to doing that so that they could bring natural gas into that area. So that's one of the opportunities. Of course, you're well versed in the important contributions that Atikokan—bringing it closer to home—makes in the biofuel energy capacity and markets. There may be other options, although we've worked closely recently to keep some of them in northern Ontario sustainable, and as well as our hydroelectricity demands.

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Back in the day, we tried as a federal government to partner with the provincial government to create energy infrastructure that would cross provincial borders. That didn't go anywhere, and I won't use any more of your precious time in answering a question, but I think we missed a little bit of an opportunity to get affordable electricity from some of our neighbouring jurisdictions at a point in time when they needed it the most.

Minister Walker, maybe you can talk a little bit more about the natural gas expansion and the importance of energy alternatives, especially for northern communities.

Hon. Bill Walker: I'd be happy to, Minister Rickford.

Judith, I appreciate your guidance and your suggestion. It's just actually the natural energy, as they say, that I bring to the thing. Many people call me "Energizer Billy," and it's pretty hard to throttle me back when I get excited and I'm passionate about the great things that our government is doing, particularly for all Ontarians.

Minister, you opened the door perfectly. We are just overwhelmed, frankly, by the response, the demand that is out there.

Judith, you're going to have people, as I'm going to have to answer to people—we couldn't fund every single project that was given to us. We went out to the communities and put a very objective and fulsome program together, put it out to people: 210 applications; \$2.6 billion in requests and demand came in. We had \$130 million and

ended up increasing that to \$234 million, so we're able to fund 43 communities, which [*inaudible*] of projects to go beyond there.

But to Minister Rickford's—there are some great areas. Two First Nations were able to be funded, Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte first and Red Rock First Nation in the north, which is fabulous for MPP Gravelle and, of course, MPP Kramp and the Mohawks—a number of areas across the province that we're going to be funding. What we did is we left it with the OEB to really go out and take a look at those and put them through a very objective third-party process, to look at it from a profitability index to make sure that it was done on a regional basis so, again, it wasn't just a cluster.

We certainly had a lot of areas from the past where a lot of urban areas were done, and most people, frankly, in those urban areas probably didn't even realize. I had people saying, "We didn't even realize that every community didn't have natural gas, because we've always had it." It's just one of those things that we take for granted. But as you would certainly know, and many of the people that you serve and Greg serves in northern Ontario know, that's not even a reality. But we're changing that. We're going to give that game-changing ability to 43 communities across our great province. We're going to ensure that many of those people are going to have lower bills, \$250 to \$1,500 per year in savings, which then means, frankly, that they have more choice and ability to put their money where they are. But just think about this: They may go back and say, "I'm going to upgrade my windows. I'm going to upgrade my doors to a more conservation-minded framework." We're going to be able to do that. We're going to be able to do things to help our kids learn even more about it. I think that's game-changing.

They're up to a 30% reduction in costs for your businesses who, again, are the people that, in our small towns, are the employers. We don't have the great 20,000-person factories, and you don't either, so this is going to allow them to remain competitive, which then, again, allows them to provide the goods and services to the people of all of our great small, rural First Nations communities that are out there and deserve that.

I'm very, very excited. I certainly am going to continue to promote this wherever I can. We're going to go across the province. We're going to get projects going as absolutely quickly as we can, and there are going to be opportunities, again, for those communities as well to work with us and have those chats, to say, "How do we do this as effectively, as affordably and as quickly as we possibly can?"

I'm hopeful that that has helped give you some insight into what we're doing. It was just a week ago we announced, again, in 43 communities, 28 projects that are going to provide good jobs, that are going to provide some economic viability and get people back rolling again. Again, it's going to give those businesses that hope that, "Hey, I can be competitive," including with all of our energy-reducing affordability measures that Minister

Rickford so eloquently shared with us and elaborated on [*inaudible*] our businesses, our communities.

And let's not forget the other thing that often gets overlooked: The other real impacts to those actions that Minister Rickford talked about are those things like your curling club, who, again, are going to have lower costs; our hospitals; colleges; our schools—all big consumers of energy. Every action we've taken is going to actually help all of them as well. If they're not paying as much for their energy costs, then they have more to put back into whether it be computers or tablets. They're going to be able to put it into programs for their employees to make them even more competitive, more safe and more healthy.

I always try to make sure people understand that when we're making these decisions, it's all about people. It's all about the benefits and the values they're going to be receiving. Whether directly or indirectly, they're going to get the costs of goods and services to a community like you serve and many of your colleagues in the north and Minister Rickford. This just lowers the cost across the board because we're able to take control and provide not only stability but an affordable energy sector that people can count on and rely on. I hope that helps.

I'll turn it back to you, Judith, for another question.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you, Associate Minister. A place near and dear to my heart, the biomass electrical generating plant in Atikokan, was brought up, and I would be very remiss if I did not ask whether or not we are going to renew that contract and ensure that that plant stays open. It does provide an important safety net for many parts in southern Ontario, but also the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry is looking at a biomass strategy, so they're reaching out.

I know Mayor Brown has probably asked you all this question maybe many times, and you would make my day if there was a commitment that that plant will carry on and have their contract extended.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Judith, I think that's an important question, and it's one that I've grappled with enormously as we endeavour to clean out and clean up the electricity system, which we all acknowledge here today, I think almost without exception, was a complete disaster when we came to power. It was a question on the ballot box. But once you delve into the minutiae, of course, you realize there were contracts in wind and solar that made our system very expensive and, frankly, some of the biomass projects we purchased at a much higher rate than we'd like if we were to truly get to the lowest possible price per kilowatt hour.

The difference, Judith, to bring this home to Atikokan and to bring this home to Kapuskasing and communities surrounding them, is that the value proposition is not limited just to the price of electricity. It's actually essential to a healthy functioning forestry sector, right? Because much of the biomass is derived from economic activities in the forest sector. Slash and various other by-product can be used to create energy, and that's been helpful in your own city. Obviously you know that Thunder Bay and

Resolute—the work they’re doing there is enhanced magnificently by the ability to supply the grid with electricity.

We know, for example, in Dryden, just to bring this a little closer to home, of investments we made when I was in the federal government to help major pulp mills use a lot of their residual liquors as sources of energy. Now the Dryden Mill is 112% energy self-sustainable, and that 12% is now going onto the grid. It doesn’t just represent a fair and smart energy policy, but it also helps to keep our sustainable forestry activity as an economic function but also to ensure that by-product does not go to waste. As you know, as forests are sustainably and responsibly developed, there are by-products. Why not use that? So even if the cost is a little higher than we’d like, we always take a look at, “What’s the price per kilowatt for nuclear? What’s the price per kilowatt for hydroelectricity? What’s the price per kilowatt for wind and solar, and how does it work into our supply mix and as a cost function?”

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One of the unique features, as I said earlier, about bio-energy, particularly in wood pellets and slash and pulp—

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

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you, Mr. Chair—is that we’re actually there to support forestry workers. I think that’s a hell of a proposition, and I’ve heard loud and clear from mayors across northern Ontario that the biomass strategy that we’re moving ahead with respects and understands that it’s an important part of small northern Ontario towns—and, in fairness, your big city; we call you city slickers, out there in Thunder Bay—to keep those forestry operations alive and well.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: And so is that a yes? Because that operation and the biomass power plant that is there had a fire that was quite outstanding in the last week. But they are on tenterhooks and really would like to see a concrete commitment.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, Judith, I’m prepared to make a commitment to a biomass strategy that helps to support what’s going on in Atikokan. There’s precedent to support this. We’ve done this kind of work in Hearst, and we’re taking a look at Atikokan. There are a couple of new forestry operators that have proposed—a little farther southwest of you, down in Fort Frances, in my neck of the woods—that are looking at the potential for biomass, again, to create a responsible and vibrant forest sector.

I look at these on a project-to-project basis, but if precedent is any indication, I remain committed to our forestry towns in northern Ontario and the important work that they do to support forestry workers in their substantial and substantive work. That means being committed to a biomass strategy, which is still a work in progress. It also involves other ministries—

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

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

Mr. Toby Barrett: Good afternoon, everybody, and thank you, Minister Rickford, for your presentations on

the north. I guess I would like to dial back to the beginning of this session, and I know we’ll all be itching to ask Associate Minister Walker some questions, as well.

As you present your in-depth knowledge of northern Ontario—and I’d like to comment on that a bit—my question, really, would relate, once I get to it, to just what your ministry does for the north and for the economy in the north and the people who are served by that economy. But I found your descriptions of the work that you and your staff are doing in the north very interesting, and I say that as a southerner. I’m down on Lake Erie. Oftentimes in the north you’re dealing with black bears; we deal with possums—I’d sometimes rather deal with black bears on occasion—although I understand now they eat ticks, which is a good thing.

Interjection.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Sorry?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Some of us eat bear, Toby, and I can hardly wait for you to come up to my parts. I’ve got some in my freezer right now, and I make a bear bolognese that’s to die for.

Mr. Toby Barrett: There you go.

Hon. Greg Rickford: So I’m hopeful you’ll come back and visit us.

Sorry, Mr. Chair, for interrupting.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Well, thank you. I haven’t been in your neck of the woods for probably two years, but I also have some bear in my freezer in my apartment in Toronto, so maybe I’ll bring it with me.

Hon. Greg Rickford: If they’re that close to your home, they belong in your freezer.

Mr. Toby Barrett: We used to have black bears down here in the south, up until maybe a hundred years ago.

But as a southerner, I have an interest. I get up north every winter. I have done so, certainly, for the last 25 years, although not last winter, regretfully. The virus has changed everything. And once I do get in the north—oftentimes I’m on the finance committee or another committee, for example, and we fight to head west to your Kenora area—I like getting down to Rainy River and Fort Frances and Emo; the farm country in Emo, you have an agricultural research station down that way. And of course, beyond the pockets of farmland—and certainly Judith would be aware of the Slate River Valley. I get in there a few times as well and swing by Peggy Brekveld’s farm; I think I mentioned that a few days ago.

But an awful lot of rock, an awful lot of forest cover, of course; I don’t know whether it would be second only to the Brazilian rainforest. I’ve spent time down there and I worked down there, and the people talk about the rainforest so much. Maybe we don’t talk enough about our boreal forest and what we have up here. And I mentioned the rock; I mean, our rock, thanks to the glaciers, has been covered in clay and sand, but to see that Canadian Shield north of Lake Huron, and even north of Lake Huron in Manitoulin—I spent time in one of the largest limestone quarries that you’ll find anywhere, served by the Great Lakes. The limestone deposits there—and I have a number

of mining towns in my riding, believe it or not, primarily gypsum and certainly lots of—I can see a limestone quarry from my farm here.

So many of us in Ontario don't know the north, and we should know the north. There are 800,000 people living up there. You've got a bit of elbow room; I'm told something like 800,000 square kilometres.

Minister, you made mention of city slickers. I've always found, in my work with people from the north and my career before I was elected, most people that I deal with from the north, they live in a town—they live in a city or they live in a town. It's somewhat different maybe than rural southern Ontario where many of us do live right out in the sticks.

Leading up to the importance of your ministry for the economy, of course this is something that—I was programmed in elementary school to understand the importance of primary industry, whether it's mining, forestry, farming, steel—of course, there's a steel industry in the north—petrochemical and pipelines. And of course we would have to mention hunting and fishing tourism on the incredible number of lakes across this part of the province.

But my interest and my question, and maybe you'll get to answer it tomorrow; we have 20 minutes, but I've used up some of that time. I'm very interested and I would hope maybe, for the purposes of this committee, we could get a bit of a description of the various roles and functions of the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines and the support that you and your staff provide for northern Ontario's economy—which is so important to the rest of the province—and, of course, the support for the mining sector. Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that commentary and those questions, Toby. Perhaps I'll take an opportunity to make a few comments, starting on your learned understanding of how big northern Ontario is.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Minister—

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes, sir?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Sorry to interrupt you, but that's all the time we have available today.

The committee is now adjourned until June 16, 2021, at 9 a.m. See you all tomorrow morning.

The committee adjourned at 1800.

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