

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

Official Report of Debates (Hansard)

JP-18

Journal des débats (Hansard)

JP-18

Standing Committee on Justice Policy

Estimates

Ministry of the Solicitor General
Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery

Protection from Coerced Debts Incurred in relation to Human Trafficking Act, 2023

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Thursday 14 September 2023

Comité permanent de la justice

Budget des dépenses

Ministère du Solliciteur général
Ministère des Services au public et aux entreprises

Loi de 2023 sur la protection contre les dettes contractées sous la contrainte dans un contexte de traite de personnes

1^{re} session
43^e législature

Jeudi 14 septembre 2023

Chair: Goldie Ghamari
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Présidente : Goldie Ghamari
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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



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

ISSN 1710-9442

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE POLICY

COMITÉ PERMANENT DE LA JUSTICE

Thursday 14 September 2023

Jeudi 14 septembre 2023

The committee met at 0900 in committee room 2.

ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF THE SOLICITOR GENERAL

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Good morning, everyone. [*Inaudible*] consideration of the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of the Solicitor General for a total of two hours. Are there any questions from members before we start?

I'm now required to call vote 2601, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Solicitor General. Minister, the floor is yours.

L'hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Bonjour—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Sorry. Before you begin, I just wanted to ask anyone who is speaking, both committee members and presenters, to bring the microphone close to you and close to your mouth, so it's easier to hear.

Thank you, Minister. You may begin.

L'hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Bonjour, madame la Présidente du comité.

Ontario, the place we call home, has seen increases in violent crimes, repeat offences and complex cases that can often be exacerbated by mental health and substance abuse. That is why this government is focused on improving policing and making this province safer.

As Ontario's Solicitor General, it is my duty to ensure the advancement of our ambitious modernization agenda, which focuses on a new policing framework that is adaptive to the 21st century. I mean investing in new technologies to fight crime and streamline the justice sector, making improvements to the adult correctional system, strengthening firefighter training and responding to recent trends in criminal activity that impact many Ontarians.

This presentation is divided into five segments:

- (1) bringing the Community Safety and Policing Act, 2019, the CSPA, into force;
- (2) modernizing of policing services;
- (3) modernizing of correctional services;
- (4) firefighter certification and training; and
- (5) responding to trends in criminal activity.

Bringing the Community Safety and Policing Act, 2019, into force: The Police Services Act, Ontario's keystone policing legislation, has not been significantly overhauled in almost 35 years. This government passed the CSPA, the

Community Safety and Policing Act, 2019. Once enforced, the CSPA will be the main legislative platform for police modernization in Ontario. For the first time in Canadian history, we will introduce an inspectorate of policing. The inspectorate will help improve public safety performance through a robust system of advising, monitoring, inspecting and investigating.

I'd also like to speak about the recently passed Strengthening Safety and Modernizing Justice Act, 2023. It includes critical and operationally important amendments necessary to bring the CSPA into force. This act also made updates to other community safety and justice legislation related to the ministry's role in animal welfare, death investigations and fire safety.

Modernization of policing services: Fresh thinking and new technologies are eliminating out-of-date practices and making our government more efficient and better positioned to deliver best-in-class service. Through the use of innovation, we can create a modern and responsive justice system for the people of Ontario. For our heroes who police our communities, one of the real frustrations is how administrative work is taking more time out of being in the community, preventing and investigating crime. Our data shows that the estimated time spent on administrative tasks, including evidence management and report-writing, can make up 40% of an officer's daily workload. For many police officers, that means more time spent doing excessive paperwork and other administrative duties, and less time responding to calls for service and investigations. Our investments in technology are changing that.

One of the prime examples of modernizing is Next Generation 9-1-1, or NG9-1-1. It represents the single-largest leap in emergency telecommunications since the 911 system was brought into Canada—it's hard to believe—in 1972. The difference between life and death in an emergency situation can be measured in seconds. Once it is fully operational, NG9-1-1 will make it easier to provide additional details about emergency situations, such as precise location, information and additional data from the scene of an accident. The new digital system will give emergency operators and dispatchers the ability to identify the location of calls, including mobile devices, using GPS coordinates, all resulting in a faster, safer and more informed emergency response.

The Ministry of the Solicitor General is supporting the transformation in Ontario to meet the federally mandated deadline of March 4, 2025. The ministry is working with

the 911 telecommunications sector, including policing partners and fire services, to support all emergency communications responses to migrate to NG9-1-1. This includes investing \$208 million over three years—2022 to 2023 as well as 2024 to 2025—to help support the transition to NG9-1-1 through technology and infrastructure upgrades, including cyber security and training.

The Ontario government has also invested approximately \$40 million in one-time funding in automated licence plate recognition technology or what we call ALPR. An ALPR system can read thousands of licence plates per minute, allowing officers to process more information on licence plates. It also has the capability of capturing vehicles of interest such as Amber Alerts, drivers with a suspended licence, invalid plates and stolen vehicles. The use of this technology is at the discretion of individual police services.

First Nations policing: We recognize the leadership role that First Nations have in policing and supporting public safety and well-being within their communities. We are ensuring that First Nations receive sustainable, equitable and culturally responsible policing. It is especially a priority of mine to continue collaborating with Indigenous police.

Our government is investing over \$16.7 million this year for First Nations policing through our grant programs, and \$69.9 million through the First Nations and Inuit Policing Program. Among other matters, this funding will support officers' complements and address priority areas for First Nations, including gun and gang violence, sexual violence and harassment, human trafficking, mental health and addictions, and hate-motivated crimes.

I'd like to talk about the modernization of correctional services. There are more than 9,000 inmates in our correctional facilities at any given moment and approximately 38,000 individuals under community supervision. The ministry's role is to safely house and rehabilitate inmates, and we have an opportunity to help reduce the chance that inmates will return to the justice system after their current term of custody. Probation and parole offices are on the front lines of protecting communities and supporting the safe and successful reintegration of individuals into the community once their court-ordered sentence has been served.

We've added community reintegration officers to directly support the transition of individuals in custody returning to their community. These officers are specialized probation and parole officers and are essential to helping individuals safely re-enter the community and contribute to a reduction in recidivism.

To improve outcomes for individuals while maintaining public safety, the ministry has implemented global positioning system, or GPS, monitoring. This is for individuals with intermittent sentences who are granted a temporary absence permit, as well as those who have court-ordered monitoring conditions attached to a conditional service, parole or bail.

I'd like to talk about rebuilding corrections infrastructure. Many parts of Ontario's correctional infrastructure

are now seeking improvement because they need more space to provide alternatives to conditions of segregation. We are expanding mental health supports, including beds for female inmates experiencing or living with severe mental illness, improving services and programs to provide inmates with new skills and opportunities upon release, and most importantly, we are contributing to a reduction of risk of reoffending in a society that our officers put their lives on the front line for and to keep us safe. But a modern correctional system can't be built on the back of aging facilities lacking support. This is why we are taking the initiative to rebuild and proactively assign our vision from the bottom up.

In northern Ontario, ground has been broken and the concrete has already started to be poured for a \$1.2-billion state-of-the-art complex in Thunder Bay that will alleviate capacity pressures and ensure those in custody have greater access to programs and supports. This brand new 345-bed multi-purpose facility will create valuable added space for programming and expanded services for inmates experiencing or living with severe mental illness. The complex will provide a healthy environment for staff and those in custody, with innovative design features such as an abundance of natural light, communal gathering spaces, a greenhouse and a secure yard. There will also be dedicated Indigenous cultural spaces, indoors and outdoors, such as smudging spaces, a sweat lodge and a teaching lodge.

0910

As part of infrastructure renewal in the northern region, the ministry has also completed two modular expansion projects at the Thunder Bay Correctional Centre and the Kenora Jail to help alleviate and address the obstacles of overcrowding. These expanded spaces have increased access to literacy programs, skills development and technology programming to support safe community reintegration. The Thunder Bay modular expansion will be incorporated into the new correctional complex when it opens in 2026.

We are building and modernizing correctional services in eastern Ontario to address overcrowding, deliver improved educational and cultural programs for inmates, and better respond to the mental health needs of those in our custody. The centrepiece of this transformation will be the construction of a new Eastern Ontario Correctional Complex. This complex will be built as a pathway for rehabilitation. It will feature modern design elements, risk-classified housing as an alternative to segregation, and contemporary programming capabilities.

The eastern region strategy marked the first time an Ontario government has taken a holistic approach to address the adult correctional service needs of a region. We're moving forward with replacing the Brockville Jail, which opened in 1842 and is Ontario's oldest, with a new correctional complex on the grounds of the St. Lawrence Valley Correctional and Treatment Centre. The St. Lawrence Valley Correctional and Treatment Centre will be expanded, with a dedicated unit for female inmates. The centre already partners with the Royal Ottawa hospital, one of Canada's

foremost mental centres, to deliver secure treatment and rehabilitative programs for male inmates with severe mental health issues.

We will also expand the Quinte Detention Centre to provide significantly more space for inmate programming and recreational facilities. The expansion will also include a dedicated female living space with single-occupancy housing, each with access to a recreation yard.

These capital projects build on the ministry's strategy to invest more than \$500 million to enhance adult correctional institutions, including hiring additional correctional officers and medical and other wellness support staff, and upgrading aging facilities. By taking this approach, together we are reducing risk and improving safety for our correctional staff, expanding services and programming for inmates, increasing capacity to provide medical and mental health supports, and helping transition offenders when returning to their communities as contributing members of society.

I'd like to talk about firefighting certification and training. By the end of August 2023, our province experienced over 73 fire-related fatalities. Every fire-related death is a tragedy beyond words, more so because most of the fire fatalities are preventable. The Office of the Fire Marshal has been central in helping to educate communities about fire safety by working hand in glove with local fire departments to deliver effective fire safety campaigns. And as announced last week, we are purchasing 17 fire trucks and firefighting equipment to enhance fire safety and better protect communities in northern Ontario.

Firefighting is a profession where many lives may be at stake and training is of the essence. The ministry's mandatory certification regulation for firefighters across the province came into force on July 1, 2022. A mandatory certification standard is something the Ontario coroner's office has recommended several times over the past decade. Our regulation protects the safety of both firefighters and the public, and ensures a consistent high standard for training which is delivered across the province. Ontario's 437 fire services have been given four years from the time the regulation came into force to achieve the certification for most of the fire protection standards and six years for technical rescue disciplines. Together with the Ontario Fire Marshal and the Ontario Fire College, we have been working to transform firefighter training across Ontario.

The result is a training regime that is more accessible, attainable and scalable to meet the needs of the fire service. This, in part, is made possible by the Ontario Fire Marshal's two mobile live fire training units that simulate some of the most intense situations that firefighters confront every day, including flames and extreme heat. We are also purchasing two additional mobile live fire training units to help deliver high-quality, hands-on training directly to fire services.

Just last year, we visited 46 fire halls and regional training centres which trained approximately 3,000 firefighters. In 2023, it is projected that the mobile units will travel upwards to 47 locations and train more than 4,000 firefighters. The mobile live fire training units have

brought enhanced training to a fire hall's front door and can support regional approaches to training when departments look for opportunities to train together.

I'd like to talk about responding to trends in criminal activity. The final segment of these remarks is to respond to concerning trends in criminal activity. There are actions needed to address immediate criminal activities that pose risks to our communities. Our government is consistently investing in community safety and policing grants that bring communities on board with provincial priorities and tackling gun and gangs, human trafficking and intimate partner violence while developing local solutions to prevent local crime.

Innovative grant funding plays a significant role in helping to prevent criminal activities in communities and to support community safety. Over the next three years, the Ministry of the Solicitor General is investing over \$745 million through grant programs to help local police services acquire new technologies, expand local mental health supports, enhance crime prevention awareness in schools and enhance bail compliance.

Ontarians look to the government to strengthen the safety of their communities during times of uncertainty, and we are taking on tough issues, including auto theft, bail reform, gun violence and illegal firearms. We are working with other jurisdictions across Canada to draw attention to these issues and call on the federal government to do more.

Last year, auto thefts increased 14% across the province. I personally am deeply concerned by the increase in violent car thefts, especially when the tools for stealing a vehicle are not a reprogrammed fob or hotwiring but by the barrel of a gun. The ministry is investing approximately \$51 million over three years on measures to identify, disrupt and dismantle organized crime networks participating in auto theft, including an organized crime towing and auto theft team led by the OPP, the Ontario Provincial Police, that will work closely with municipal and First Nations police services. This is something we are all doing to ensure the success of tackling this issue.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Bail is a right that is awarded by the court. It balances the presumption of innocence of an accused person with strong restrictions intended to safeguard the public. Sadly, on too many occasions, it has not worked out this way. We're all too familiar with the consequences. Some \$112 million will be spent over the next three years to provide resources to policing partners by putting real-time data on bail recipients in the hands of law enforcement and expand the OPP's repeat offender parole enforcement—or ROPE—squad.

There's a lot of work ahead, but I can confidently say we have the support and the strategy to get it done. The ministry has the leadership and teams in place with the vision to modernize and transform. We are building for today and preparing for tomorrow.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you very much, Minister.

0920

We will now begin questions and answers in rotation of 20 minutes for the official opposition members of the

committee, 10 minutes for the independent member of the committee and 20 minutes for the government members of the committee for the remainder of the allotted time. As always, please wait to be recognized by myself before speaking, and all questions and comments will need to go through the Chair.

For the deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers and staff: When you are called on to speak for the first time, please state your name and your title for Hansard.

I will start with the official opposition. Who would like to begin? MPP Wong-Tam.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you, Minister, for your presentation. I'm really pleased to hear that you ended your presentation just touching upon bail reform. I'm going to give you a chance to actually elaborate on that.

We have seen in Ontario a rise of violent crimes by repeat offenders. I've heard from police divisions, specifically the ones I work with in my local communities, how frustrating it is for them to catch the criminals, process them, and somehow they're released on the street, sometimes within hours and oftentimes within a day.

So, Minister, there is a significant concern from all communities—not just those in Toronto or the GTA, but right across Ontario—on what we're going to do to keep our communities safe. During our bail reform hearings earlier this year, police chiefs and officers told us that they were not resourced to conduct bail monitoring; that oftentimes these dangerous repeat offenders were being released on the street, just as I've noted in my remarks. This means that people with known criminal records are back out with very little monitoring, including those who have actually been wielding weapons, including gun-related charges.

Minister, you've just cited that you've invested some money. It's going to spread over three years. Well, what can you do to support our communities today? Communities are looking for relief immediately.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Well, thank you very kindly for the question. I really have to go back to what we did in the Ontario Legislature when we had a motion, which was approved without objection, calling on the federal government that they need to move forward now and make meaningful bail reform a reality.

I look to our Premier, the leader of our government, who coalesced every provincial Premier and territorial leader to call on the government to bring forward a piece of legislation. The federal government brought forward Bill C-48. As the House of Commons and the Senate return in the coming weeks, they should move expeditiously to pass it.

What does this mean? It means that situations like we had with young Gabriel, who was viciously killed at the Keele subway station by a repeat and violent offender—and we look to December 27, 2022, when we lost OPP Officer Grzegorz Pierzchala, who was killed near Cayuga, Ontario. Situations like this would not necessarily happen, and certainly not happen as frequently as they have. So what we have done by making the announcement is acknowledging that the \$112 million will provide unprecedented support to the OPP and other municipal services to

deploy the technology and the personnel they need to ensure that we don't have these violent and repeat offenders on our street.

I want to also mention—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Minister, sorry; just because we're going to be running out of time very quickly and I really want to get to an answer from you with respect to public accountability: Communities are literally crying for support, and even the police officers who have been doing their good work of catching and apprehending those offenders successfully—they're back out on the street.

So we need to know, from your ministry: What is the short-term, immediate solution on making sure that we don't have people who have been charged with sexual assault, people who have been charged with drunk driving, people who have been charged with domestic violence back out on the street? This is a chronic problem in communities across Ontario, including, of course, the GTA. What is going to happen immediately?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Well, again, I want to thank you very kindly for your question. A response to that is looking to the rollout of the bail-compliance dashboard, which will be released quite shortly. This is a new province-wide bail-monitoring system that will allow police services to monitor high-risk offenders with the most accurate data possible.

We'll do anything we can to keep our communities safe. I believe these measures are an example that we're giving our partners, our municipal partners and our OPP the resources and tools they need to reduce violent crime.

So specifically to answer your question, the bail dashboard is a good response to ensuring that all municipal services, that the OPP have real-time data. We're making excellent progress in seeing this rolled out, and it's going to be rolled out soon.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: But the bail dashboard, as I understand it, originated from a project that began in the Toronto Police Service along with some other police association partnerships. My understanding is that it's not going to be rolled out province-wide and it's not going to be sustained with funding as of yet. So I'd like to see that definitely invested in. I think that we all recognize that that was a very successful pilot project, but my understanding is that it's still very much in incubation. You mentioned that it's going to be rolled out quickly, and I don't think it is, not from the information I've gathered.

I want to just bring to your attention, Minister, that there's been a 29% increase in violent incidents in the province, amounting to roughly more than 1,060 more incidents in 2021 compared to 2017. This is a 22% increase in the GTA alone, where we've seen more than 240 incidents in that same period. This is all about keeping our community safe. I'm going to have to come back to the bail conversation, Minister, because the officers I've spoken to, the community members I've spoken to, the crown attorneys I've spoken to, the trial lawyers and criminal lawyers I've spoken to have all highlighted a significant failure in the judicial system, one where we see repeat offenders, violent repeat offenders, coming into our com-

munities, riding the TTC, riding the subways, walking into our parks—they are released from the court system.

Minister, we know that survivors, their families—the ones that you've just noted in your opening remarks—deserve justice and they deserve to be safe. So this issue is one of the most pressing issues, along with housing, that I've heard from my community members and community members across Ontario. What can happen immediately to support them?

L'hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Rien pour moi, en tant que solliciteur général, n'est plus important que la sécurité de notre province.

There is nothing more important to me and our government than the safety of our province. So what does this mean? I want to go back to the bail dashboard, because this was a project originally incubated by Toronto Police Service and Durham police service—two great services in Ontario, I might add. We are absolutely moving this forward. I get regular updates on it, and I will take it back to the ministry in the fullness of time to ensure that we understand the timelines that will be rolled out.

In fact, I'd like to call upon our Deputy Solicitor General for public safety to perhaps talk about the timeline to roll out the bail dashboard.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you, Minister. Thank you for the question. My name is Mario Di Tommaso; I'm the deputy minister at the Ministry of the Solicitor General.

The intent is to roll out the bail dashboard throughout the entire province of Ontario. We have taken some phenomenal work done by Durham region and Toronto Police Service, and we will be scaling up to make this dashboard available to every police service, including the OPP, in the province of Ontario. We are working on security features, because the vision is to expand this bail dashboard to include other key elements, such as the Sex Offender Registry, to be available for all police services. It is a work in progress. It is very technical. It is very complex. But I anticipate that within the next six months or so, this bail dashboard will be rolled out to every police service in Ontario.

With regard to your other comment about bail reform, it is a complex issue, and people have the right to bail according to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and so we are working with the federal government to make sure that they roll out Bill C-48 in a timely manner, because we have advocated strongly—along with our provincial counterparts—to make sure that we have the necessary legislation to keep violent repeat serious offenders in custody.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you very much, Deputy Minister. I really appreciate the answer. I think what I want to drive to in this particular committee hearing is the fact that communities are looking for responses and they need them, of course, immediately.

I'm going to move on just for a quick minute regarding the challenges that we're seeing in the court system. We've heard, as recently reported in the news, that there's been some violent offenders who have actually been released back on the street, largely because cases have been thrown

out. With respect to policing resources, since we're on the matter of policing and courts: Police officers have got to do the investigations. They've got to apprehend the individuals. We've got crown attorneys who then have to prepare the witnesses. You've got the complainants' time, and then, of course, very expensive trial lawyers. All of those individuals, as well as court reporters, court workers and the justices who preside over the cases are all sitting there waiting for their day in court.

0930

And what we're seeing, and it's been reported, is that people who have been charged with sexual assault have been released on the street, where their case has been tossed out. We heard and saw reported that a drunk driver was put back on the street, with no consequences for their actions, and of course the challenge for the grieving families, for whom justice was not seen.

There are so many different challenges here that are clearly laid out and oftentimes it's reported in the media that there's a sense of frustration in the public, that more needs to be done, and we're seeing that courtrooms are actually sitting empty and human resources that should be finite are being wasted with no deliverable outcome.

Minister, how would you respond to the people of Ontario, especially the families and the victims and the survivors who are looking for that justice today?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Through you, Madam Chair, I've said this all across Ontario. I was just in Thunder Bay last week with the member from Etobicoke–Lakeshore, our parliamentary assistant. And I say this all the time: There's never been a government in my generation that's more concerned about public safety. But we're not just talking, we're acting.

That's why, in specific regard to the question that you asked, the federal government has to make changes to bail reform now. They introduced Bill C-48, and it's sitting—they have to get it done and they have to get it passed because, no matter what, we have to keep these violent and repeat offenders off our streets. This is absolutely critical, whether we are looking at strengthening, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, the resources to the OPP and to municipal services.

I want to also say that one of the major investments that our government announced this past year was removing the tuition at the Ontario Police College for new cadets entering it. And why is this important? Because we have seen, just in the last number of months, an unprecedented surge in interest of people that want to come to the Ontario Police College, to go to their local communities and to keep their communities safe. That's what Ontarians want. They want to feel safe in their own homes and communities.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you, Minister.

Earlier this year, this committee specifically heard from police chiefs, as well as associations and criminal justice experts. We also tabled a report back to the House and this report has several recommendations to the federal government, as you know—and you've cited the recommendations that have gone to the federal government. But there

are some responsibilities that sit exactly at Queen's Park, where the provincial government can take action on today.

Some of these actions have not been acted on, and this report has now been tabled since April, which include:

- strengthening bail releases, including sureties;
- ensuring that the Ministry of the Attorney General provides policies, guidelines and directives on bail, including the continuation or expansion of the pilot projects;
- making sure that the crown prosecutors actually can be able to conduct bail hearings in a timely fashion in circumstances where public safety demands it;
- making sure that more resources are aimed at training justices of the peace to ensure a comprehensive understanding of bail provisions; and
- considering establishing a group of specialized crown prosecutors for violent offences associated with firearms or other weapons similar to the current guns and gangs bail team.

These are real, tangible recommendations that came from the committee. These are recommendations that I believe everyone in this committee supports strongly, based on the fact that it was unanimously adopted and supported, and that we can act upon today and this government can act upon today.

Just starting with the very last recommendation, when will we see a specialized group of crown prosecutors that are going to address the violent offences associated with firearms and other weapons? This is a very immediate thing and it could be done today.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Again, through you, Madam Chair, we think it's absolutely essential that the repeat and violent offenders are off our streets. We have a fundamental right to feel safe in our own homes and communities.

I'll ask our Deputy Solicitor General to comment further.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you for your question. We do have specialized firearms bail teams right now within the Ministry of the Attorney General. The issue with regard to crown attorneys and bail resides primarily with the Ministry of the Attorney General.

Just yesterday, I attended a meeting with the Chief Justice of Ontario and all of the stakeholders within the province of Ontario with regard to this very issue, and so there is alignment. We are talking to all of our stakeholders to improve the justice sector at the provincial level. But the main issue remains with Bill C-48 and giving the provinces the ability to enforce relevant federal bail reform.

So we are moving forward. There is an existing specialized team that deals exclusively with firearm and bail—that is in place currently—and we are seeking to expand that program as well.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: When will that expansion take place?

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: That would be a question for the Ministry of the Attorney General.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Okay, we'll bring that back to the Ministry of the Attorney General.

Coming back to challenges that we've seen in the courts, I think this is all part and parcel—because of the resources that are used to apprehend the violent offenders, put them

through the process and then they're back on the street. This is the catch-and-release that has been described by every division I have worked with.

I know that there's a level of frustration in our community that really hasn't been properly addressed, and as of late, we have seen that justices are refusing to even sit in courthouses that they deem to be unsafe—courthouses such as the one in Milton and Burlington where the justices have said they can't sit there because of mould, because of potato bugs and, perhaps, just because of poor quality of air. I don't think that anyone should be working in those buildings, especially under those hazardous conditions, and certainly not public employees working in a publicly accessible building where the public are invited to participate in the judicial system.

So we need to see investments, not just in the capital infrastructure of the courthouses, but we need to see adequate investments to make sure that they're properly staffed. Right now, in a Toronto courthouse, especially on Armoury Street, as you know, we've seen the lights close and we've seen the challenges there.

So we need to understand the resources used to apprehend those individuals, especially policing resources, because I know you talked about policing and supporting the police officers, but those police officers need support as they're trying to keep those individuals off the street, and I can't stress that enough.

When will be able to see funds that will be delivered to ensure that those failing buildings are going to be brought up to standard or adequately replaced, as suggested, which was a plan that was in place and approved by the previous government which your government then scrapped?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Through you, Madam Chair, when it comes to public safety—comme je l'ai déjà dit : qui dit Ontario sécuritaire dit Ontario fort. It's so obvious a safe Ontario is a strong Ontario. It's something that we're very proud of.

The announcements that we made in the spring: the investments that we made in the repeat and violent offenders parole enforcement unit—the ROPE squad—and I talked about that in my opening remarks; the investments we're making to combat auto theft over \$50 million, which is a major problem and completely unacceptable; the investments we've made at the Ontario Police College, which is encouraging people in record numbers to come to Aylmer, Ontario, and to have a career as a police officer—these are in direct response to the fact that our government has taken public safety more seriously than any other government in the history of our province, and we're really proud of that. So we will continue to be proactive and purposeful. We'll continue to be precise in our investments so that we can target crimes and keep communities safe.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you, Minister.

“In a damning decision released Friday, Ontario Court Justice Peter Fraser referred to a ‘clearly staggering’ number of courtroom closures, occurring with ‘discouraging regularity,’ causing ‘significant disruption to criminal matters’”—this is the justice's remark. He goes on to say

that staff shortages have wreaked havoc on the orderly conduct of business in the Ontario Court of Justice.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Justices have been warning this government, along with court workers, that they just don't have enough people to staff them. So the question for you, Minister, is, can you ensure that there will be no more darkened courtrooms next week by making sure that you take action today? How do we ensure we do not throw out another case where a violent offender is let back on our street, which I think we can all agree is absolutely unacceptable?

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Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Again, thank you for the question. Through you, Madam Chair: We take our roles very, very seriously. I'd like to ask the Deputy Solicitor General to comment more specifically to your question.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you for your question. This is a pressing issue, and the issue of courts and staffing is the exclusive jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Attorney General. We had this very discussion yesterday, when the entire sector met with the Chief Justice of Ontario, including—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): That's all the time we have. Thank you so much.

We'll now turn to the independent member for 10 minutes. MPP Collard, you may begin.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you, Minister, as well, for your presentation and your answers so far. Of course, there are a lot of pressing and serious issues surrounding your mandate, and certainly there are questions that are complex and are not easy.

I would like to first ask you about the increased crime related to mental health and addictions. I think you opened your remarks relating to that. In Ottawa this summer, there has been a lot of media attention to the situation. What's happening is happening in plain sight. We have people injecting themselves in the street. There is an increased rate of violence, and we hear daily about businesses in downtown-core Ottawa—one of the most touristic areas, in the ByWard Market—being broken into, and the police just seem to be not equipped to address that. It's gotten out of hand, and people knock on my door every day to ask me, "What is the government doing about this?"

So I would like to hear about what kind of investments you're doing and what kind of solutions you're working on to address this, and I do hope that you're also working with the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions on that. I'm looking forward to some clarification on that. Thanks.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Thank you very kindly for your question. Through you, Madam Chair: I've been to Ottawa numerous times in this past year, and I speak very, very regularly with Chief Eric Stubbs, the chief of police. He's an amazing chief, and the Ottawa Police Service is a tremendous service that I have a lot of respect for.

Each community has nuances of the public safety issues that are directly concerning their communities. I understand your question very well. I can tell you that the Ottawa

Police Service continues to lead by example with the complement of incredible sworn officers and civilian officers to be responsive and agile to the issues that they're facing.

I'll ask the Deputy Solicitor General to comment further.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you for your question. Your question is in regard to addictions and all of the issues surrounding addictions that we're seeing in various communities. That is a complex question, and we have been having discussions with the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Health is the lead with regard to treatment for addictions, and so those discussions are currently ongoing. It is a serious discussion. I've been talking to Deputy Minister Zahn about this very issue.

But I think that one of the key things that we need is investment with regard to treatment. People need the necessary treatment to make sure that there's an offramp to the addiction cycle that they face, and so without looking at treatment, I think that this problem will in fact persist.

But our officers are equipped to take action with regard to those people who they find that have an inability to take care of themselves. There is a Mental Health Act that can be leveraged if those people are found to be demonstrating behaviour that is a danger to others or a danger to themselves and have demonstrated an inability to take care of themselves. So the tools are there if police officers actually observe first-hand that behaviour. There could be apprehensions made under the Mental Health Act.

However, the main issue is with regard to addiction, and we have so many people that are suffering because of the COVID epidemic that have been addicted to fentanyl. Fentanyl is being smuggled into this country from overseas, and so we need a lot more work to be done at the borders as well, through our CBSA partners.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you. I do understand the problem; what we don't have right now is a solution. I do know that the police are out of options right now to intervene. If you listen to some of the media reports that were done over the summer, it's very clear. I actually went for a ride-along with police officers where we clearly saw situations happening on the street and they wouldn't do anything, because what are they going to do? Are they going to pick up that person who is injecting themselves? And then do what with them?

What I hear is a repetition of the problem that we know exists. I don't hear solutions. I don't hear a strategy working with the different ministries that need to be involved—yes, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, your Ministry of the Solicitor General—to try to have a strategy to address the problem right now. We're trying some patches that are clearly not working, and now it's the community that is suffering the impact of these behaviours that clearly need to be addressed. And we don't have enough support services in our communities to help those people. So yes, we need more treatment, we need more investment, but are we working on a strategy to really address this? Because it has gotten out of hand. I don't see any sign of improvement on the ground.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Thank you for the question. Again, through the Chair: We are working on a strategy, because it's a multi-government approach. It's not only multi-ministry, but it's multi-government. It involves the city of Ottawa, the provincial government and the federal government, and within the provincial government, as the Deputy Solicitor General referenced, it's the Ministry of Health. There are other ministries as well.

But again, what I can tell you—and perhaps share a different personal opinion—is that Ottawa Police Service is a great service. Chief Stubbs and his command leadership, including Deputy Chief Bell and others who I have had the pleasure of meeting multiple times, have enormous capability to understand and to be positive in the approach to work alongside other government agencies and ministries to help keep Ottawa safe. At the end of the day, that's what they do: They keep Ottawa safe.

But again, for further elaboration, I'll ask the Deputy Solicitor General to comment.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you for your question. The direct strategy for Ontario and Canada has four key pillars: treatment, harm reduction, prevention and enforcement. Our ministry is focused on enforcement. However, there's also that treatment aspect, and that is the exclusive jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health. We are having those discussions.

What we seek to do is to keep fentanyl, the main opioid that people are addicted to, out of the hands of people with this illness. That's what we seek to do, and we provide substantial grants to our police services to make sure that they have robust enforcement measures at hand. We continue to work with CBSA to make sure that our borders are strengthened so that fentanyl is not smuggled illegally into the country. So our ministry is focused on enforcement; the Ministry of Health is focused on treatment and harm reduction.

Having said that, there is a cross-ministry approach. I sit on a deputy ministers' round table with Deputy Zahn and other ministries to look at this very complicated problem as well. We are aware of it. We are working collaboratively, and we will be making progress. But it is a very complex issue, and it is not just in Toronto and Ottawa, but it's right across the country; look at what's happening in BC and Vancouver, as an example. So it is a very complex issue that is going to take considerable resources from a multitude of stakeholders to look at this societal problem.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I think you alluded to collaboration that's needed, not only across ministries but also across jurisdictions. So are you right now speaking with interveners—not the stakeholders; I would say responsible people at the federal level and at the municipal level—to work on that strategy? Because everybody needs to work hand in hand if we want to achieve any kind of results. So are you doing that right now?

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Well, again, thank you. Merci pour la question pertinente. Absolutely, our government takes the safety of all of our communities in Ontario very seriously. And I'll repeat it again: Tous ont le droit de se

sentir en sécurité chez eux, dans leurs collectivités. For us, there's nothing more important than our right to feel safe in our own homes and communities, and that's exactly why the Deputy Solicitor General mentioned what's ongoing with the Ministry of Health in Ontario, but also a cross-government approach through the different levels of government: with the city of Ottawa, with the provincial governments, with the federal government. This is something that is absolutely the case.

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But at the end of the day, we also have to work hard in reducing the amount of these illegal substances finding their way and disrupting our communities. It's completely unacceptable.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Am I out of time? Pretty much?

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): You have five seconds.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you very much.

We'll now turn to the government: MPP Hogarth, you may begin.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you, Minister, for being here. Thank you, Deputy Ellis and Deputy Di Tommaso, for also joining us this morning.

Actually, I want to touch on something that's near and dear to my heart and one of my passions. Over the last year, we've implemented Keira's Law, which is training our judicial bodies to look at domestic violence and intimate partner violence, and I introduced a motion called Clare's Law, which allows people the right to know. Now, I know that's not in our ministry—it's with the Attorney General—and there's still some work to do, because that's a motion. But when it comes to intimate partner violence, we all know that is an absolutely heinous crime and it has devastating impacts. It affects people of all ages, genders, races, ethnicities, religions, cultural backgrounds. We need to do more. We always need to do more. There is never enough we can do.

But I know that through your Ministry of the Solicitor General, you accepted most of the recommendations that came out of the Renfrew inquest. I would just like to know a little bit more of what you are doing for the victims. We want to turn these victims into survivors, but can you tell us a little bit about what the ministry is doing to assist victims of intimate partner violence?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I want to thank you for your question. Through you, Madam Chair: The ministry is building its capacity to help survivors of human trafficking, intimate partner violence and at-risk individuals. We have to make sure they get the support they need when they need it and where they need it. Through our Victim Support Grant, the VSG Program, \$5.9 million was being invested over two years—that's 2021-22 and 2022-23—to fund local supports and services, increase law enforcement's investigative capacity, introduce specialized intervention programs and create culturally sensitive awareness campaigns.

Some 37 local projects developed by police services, in collaboration with local organizations and community

partners across the province, were funded, with added support from the federal government. Of these projects, 17 will focus on addressing the needs of Indigenous survivors or strengthening relationships with Indigenous organizations and communities. Moreover, everyone should expect an announcement on this year's VSG grant very, very soon.

This is very, very important. Additionally, I might add that all police recruits in Ontario get intimate-partner-violence training at the Ontario Police College. We also have programs in our other adult correctional systems that are examining existing probation and parole interventions further. This is something that we take extremely seriously.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you, Minister, for that answer. It is important that we can continue to push this envelope forward. We certainly don't ever want to take two steps forward and 10 steps back, so we have to continue working on this file.

The other question is with regard to human trafficking. A lot of work has been done, even in the opposition days, by our colleague Laurie Scott. And I know our other colleague Natalia Kusendova-Bashta has done a lot of work, as well, in the last term on human trafficking. Human trafficking is criminals preying on the vulnerable, targeting the most helpless victims. I know later on today, our other colleague, MPP Lucille Collard—we'll be talking about Bill 41 and about debts that have been incurred by some of our victims, who we want to call survivors.

Just a question for our ministry about support for the victims of intimate partner violence and human trafficking: Is this grant that you mentioned previously applicable to victims of human trafficking, as well? And are there other measures that the government is undertaking to combat this heinous crime? Can you expand a little bit more on what we're doing to help out those survivors?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Thank you for the question. Through you, Madam Chair: Human trafficking, in all its forms, is heinous, deplorable and completely unacceptable. When it comes to human trafficking, some of the most vulnerable people in our society are, as you have mentioned previously, the most at risk, and it is our duty to act decisively and effectively to protect them from exploitation. That's why our government's anti-human trafficking strategy is investing \$307 million over five years through a proactive and comprehensive action plan to combat human trafficking. A crucial component of this strategy involves strengthening law enforcement and justice sector initiatives to support victims, improve our abilities to target and find perpetrators, intercept human trafficking networks and, ultimately, bring criminals to justice.

One success of the strategy includes the government's support for the human trafficking intelligence-led joint forces strategy, a joint initiative between the OPP and 20 municipal and First Nations police services. Since 2021, the strategy has been successful in conducting 65 human trafficking investigations which have helped 61 victims and laid 239 charges against 28 people. We are continuing to increase intelligence gathering and investigative capacity

in correctional services and in the OPP to better identify, monitor and target human traffickers and support victims.

I might add that in 2021, our government passed the Combating Human Trafficking Act. The legislation builds on the government's response to human trafficking by:

- increasing awareness on the issue;

- supporting more survivors;

- strengthening the ability of children's aid societies and law enforcement to protect exploited children and increasing penalties for persons, including traffickers, who interfere with a child in the care of a children's aid society; and

- clarifying how and when police services can access information from hotel guest registers to help deter trafficking, identify and locate victims.

The Ministry of the Solicitor General offers grant programs that are primarily available to police services in collaboration with community partners for initiatives focused on community safety and well-being.

Regarding your question on the Victim Support Grant Program, it is designed to support both human trafficking victims as well as intimate partner violence. Recently, under this grant, the province issued a call for applications for the 2023-24 year. This year's theme includes intimate partner violence, domestic violence, human trafficking and child exploitation. The province received a total—and I think this is important—of 45 applications.

In addition, the Community Safety and Policing Grant provides eligible police service boards with greater flexibility to implement initiatives that address policing needs and priority risks related to safety and well-being. Under the current 2022-25 CSP grant program, we've allocated more than \$267 million over three years, with approximately \$42 million provided through the provincial priorities funding stream of the program, which supports police service boards in addressing key priority areas, including gun and gang violence, sexual violence and harassment, human trafficking and other key provincial priorities.

Specifically, under the provincial priorities funding stream, approximately \$13.2 million has been allocated over three years to 15 projects to address human trafficking. Through this investment, police service boards are working towards seeing improvements in human trafficking-related metrics as a result of their local projects, such as an increase in officers trained in human trafficking and an increase in the number of human trafficking charges laid.

In addition, the government has invested approximately \$1.5 million over two years—that's 2022-24—through the Safer and Vital Communities Grant; over \$820,000 in supporting nine community-based not-for-profit organizations and First Nations chiefs and band councils to address online human trafficking as one of the themes under this grant cycle. And through the Proceeds of Crime Front Line Policing Grant, the ministry invested \$1.5 million over three years—that's 2020-23—for five projects focused on anti-human trafficking initiatives.

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As part of Ontario's Anti-Human Trafficking Strategy, the ministry is also working with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services to implement two new

children at risk of exploitation units, being prototyped in Durham region and in Toronto. The CARE units pair child protection workers with police officers and provide specialized intervention to identify and locate children and youth who are at risk or involved in sex trafficking.

As part of the Ontario strategy in response to the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, First Nations police services have received over \$15 million over three years—that's 2021-24—for specialized investigative and victim support services.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you. I'm going to hand it over to my colleague.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Jones?

Mr. Trevor Jones: Thank you, Chair, and through you: Minister, thank you for your leadership and thank you for your team's commitment, and the deputies for being here as well, because you have a number of concurrent and very complex challenges to overcome. I can tell you from first-hand experience that our communities are feeling that progress.

From my perspective, to ensure public safety, we must enhance crisis response across the province. Police are called upon to respond to thousands of mental health calls each year. Having officers and mental health partners like trained clinicians work together decreases the impact on related policing and hospital resources, and it means improved safety and better outcomes for everyone.

This is something I was very fortunate to witness first-hand. As an early adopter to the mental health response unit model at Essex county OPP, we saw plainclothes police officers working hand in hand in plain vehicles with mental health clinicians, and we saw dramatic outcomes from this progress.

So, please, can you share with the committee, as Solicitor General, the work you've done to address this type of response to mental health calls?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Thank you so kindly for your question and your historical service to Ontario as a police officer.

Through you, Madam Chair: The Ontario Provincial Police, the OPP, established mobile crisis response teams, or MCRTs, enhancing crisis response across the province. The MCRTs are best positioned to respond to people experiencing a mental health or addiction crisis and de-escalate situations that could pose a risk to public safety. These teams typically consist of police officers and crisis workers working together to respond to complex situations where mental health or addictions may be a factor.

We're proud to have invested \$267 million under the Community Safety and Policing Grant. Approximately \$30.7 million has been allocated over three years to support 32 projects involving an integrated response between police and mental health workers.

The OPP has released a framework for Ontario and tools for developing mobile crisis response teams. The framework and tools will help communities establish specific types of crisis response team models based on the local needs and profile. In developing the framework, the OPP

chaired a provincial working group that included the ministry and the Ministry of Health, and was supported by the provincial Human Services and Justice Coordinating Committee. As part of the development of this resource, the working group held extensive consultation with existing mobile crisis response team models and other key stakeholders across the province.

The OPP has a Crisis Call Diversion Program across the province. The OPP's Crisis Call Diversion Program embeds trained crisis workers in the provincial call centres, enabling them to engage directly with callers who may be experiencing a mental health- or addiction-related issue, or who would benefit from mental health de-escalation, support and/or community resources. This will alleviate the need for a police response in a non-emergent situation.

Similar to the mobile crisis rapid response teams, partners and other programs that see officers with mental health crisis workers provide an opportunity at the onset of a call to offer collaborative intervention and support. Crisis workers involved in the Crisis Call Diversion Program are professionally trained and experienced to provide empathy, build rapport and explore—and I think this is key—de-escalation and coping strategies to assist the caller through the time of the crisis.

When required, the crisis worker may implement de-escalation techniques prior to police arriving on the scene, creating a safer environment for the police, the callers and the general public. The crisis workers may provide additional call details that can be communicated in real time to the front line to better equip first responders when appropriate, and the crisis workers can offer alternative services which may be more appropriate for the situation, thereby decreasing the volume of non-emergent mental health and/or addiction related calls for service by the OPP.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Bailey?

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thank you, Chair. Welcome, Minister, and of course Deputy Ministers Ellis and Di Tommaso this morning. My question is—

Interruption.

Mr. Robert Bailey: I'll take this off; it's echoing.

My question is: We know the police can't be everywhere. We've got a great police force across this province with the OPP, all the municipal forces and everyone that works together. I know that there has been a lot of money invested and spent on closed-circuit TV. I'm wondering if you could expand a little upon that, where we're at today, where you see us going and what the successes are.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Thank you. Through you, Madam Chair, I want to thank my friend for the question and, by the way, for his commitment to his community of Sarnia-Lambton. It's a great part of Ontario.

Last year, we invested close to \$1.8 million to help 20 police services across the province better protect communities from the threat of gun and gang violence with an expanded video surveillance. Just yesterday, we announced recipients of our \$2.8-million CCTV grant, installing or upgrading cameras in areas where crime is known to happen.

The following police services are receiving CCTV grant program funding for the 2023-24 year:

- Barrie Police Service, \$200,000;
- Belleville Police Service, \$64,337;
- Durham Regional Police Service, \$200,000;
- Greater Sudbury Police Service, \$71,050;
- Guelph Police Service, \$200,000;
- Kawartha Lakes Police Service, \$28,902;
- London Police Service, \$200,000;
- Niagara Regional Police Service, \$192,276;
- Nishnawbe Aski Police Service, \$23,334;
- Ontario Provincial Police, Goderich, \$47,443;
- Ontario Provincial Police, Greater Napanee, \$100,500;
- Ontario Provincial Police, Kincardine, \$26,500;
- Ontario Provincial Police, northwest region, \$20,000;
- Ontario Provincial Police, town of Prescott, \$50,000;
- Ontario Provincial Police, township of Chapleau, \$25,000;
- Ontario Provincial Police, Wasaga Beach, \$29,445;
- Ontario Provincial Police, West Perth, \$200,000;
- Stratford Police Service, \$200,000;
- Thunder Bay Police Service, \$200,000;
- Toronto Police Service, \$120,000;
- Treaty 3 Police Service, \$55,033;
- Windsor Police Service, \$200,000;
- York Regional Police, \$200,000.

Funding is being delivered through the Ontario Closed Circuit Television Grant Program, introduced in 2020 to help local police services install or enhance closed-circuit surveillance systems. No gang member wants to be caught on film. No trafficker wants to be caught in the act.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: The CCTV grant funding will be used to replace outdated equipment, which will expand or enhance current technology and install new or additional surveillance cameras in the areas where gun and gang violence and correlated crimes, such as drug and human trafficking, are most prevalent. The data collected from CCTV surveillance can also be used to support criminal investigations and prosecutions.

In the end, the CCTV grant recipients for 2022 and 2023 include 12 municipal police services, two First Nations police services, five OPP municipal contract locations and one OPP non-contract location.

I want to thank my friend the member from Sarnia-Lambton for the question.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): There are 20 seconds left. You can begin, and then continue after.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Great. Thank you, Minister, for your attendance today, and thank you to your deputy ministers for attending as well. I wanted to switch gears a bit. We'll have to come back to this, but I was really going to ask you question about fire safety and your efforts across the province. I know you've come to visit my fire hall in Collingwood—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): And that's all the time that we have.

We'll now turn to the official opposition for 20 minutes. MPP Wong-Tam, you may begin.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Minister, I want to come back to a question that was raised by MPP Hogarth. She specifically cited the Renfrew shooting, the Renfrew inquest. Obviously, there were 75 recommendations that came out of that inquest. It was a very painful time for families in Ontario, especially for the members who had fallen in that community.

Twenty-nine of those 75 recommendations are directed at the province, including declaring intimate partner violence an epidemic. Minister, there is a letter that came out from the government that specifically gave a very technical reason why it couldn't be done, but that response has now been refuted by public health experts and others.

So, Minister, I'm just very curious. If the government's commitment to intimate partner violence and ending intimate partner violence is such, why is it that this government has not declared intimate partner violence an epidemic and then gone ahead to implement a task force to ensure that every single one of those 29 of the 75 recommendations that are directed at the province are going to be actualized as soon as possible?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Well, I want to thank the member for the question. To the Chair: Our thoughts, my thoughts, are always with the victims impacted by intimate partner violence. Our government is breaking the cycle of intimate partner violence and supporting survivors, because we have to help keep our communities safe.

And we talked earlier about how the repeat and violent offenders must be off our streets because they're the ones, in part, creating these heinous crimes. We will continue to look at our concerted whole-of-government approach to combating intimate partner violence. We'll hold offenders accountable to keep Ontario safe. But—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you, Minister. My question was, why will the government not declare intimate partner violence an epidemic, which was recommendation number 1 based on the Renfrew inquest?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Well, thank you for the question. We don't believe using a medical term to describe something is action; we believe action is action. That's exactly why we invested the \$55 million in various grants aimed at combatting IPV, and we're exploring expanding the grants to—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Minister, sorry. I'm just going to take my time back. Cities such as Toronto and many other municipalities have now gone ahead and declared intimate partner violence an epidemic. We've now seen this raised at the Association of Municipalities of Ontario. This is a very big issue. We're talking about ensuring that communities are safe.

The shooter at the Renfrew shooting was actually a repeat offender, quite known to the police. He had been apprehended, charged, set through trial and he was on probation. His probation was not properly supervised. There were no assurances to keep him away from others. Minister, that was an entirely preventable series of murders, and so the systemic failings of the government need to be addressed as soon as possible. The very simple recommendation number 1 from that inquiry was to ensure that—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you. I'm going to have to stop you there, MPP Wong-Tam. It's now 10:15, and the committee will have to recess until 1 p.m. Thank you, everyone.

The committee recessed from 1015 to 1300.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Good afternoon, everyone. We are going to resume consideration of vote 2601 of the estimates of the Ministry of the Solicitor General. There is now a total of 46 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates.

When the committee recessed this morning, the official opposition had 16 minutes and 44 seconds remaining. I'll now return to MPP Wong-Tam to continue with her question.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate that.

To the minister: With respect to policing in the First Nations territories, they have expressed a lot of concern that the government has not fulfilled its obligations to them and commitments to them to fund policing in First Nations territory.

As we know, the Community Safety and Policing Act was brought in in 2019. It largely mirrored an omnibus bill from the Liberal government in 2017; there were some changes, albeit very modest. The communities have said that they're actually waiting for years so that First Nations police services could be deemed essential and then properly resourced for success. Minister, why has there been such a lack of resources to First Nations policing, and when can the First Nations leaders see the funding flow to their communities?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I want to thank the member for the question. Through you, Madam Chair: I was up just last week in Sioux Lookout. It was a great honour to spend the better part of a day in Lac Seul First Nation. I have to tell you, when you go up to see the Lac Seul Police Service, you have a great appreciation for everyone who keeps that First Nations community safe.

Since I was sworn into office as Solicitor General on June 24, 2022, I have made it my personal interest to meet as many of the First Nations police chiefs as possible, get to know them and have them continue to educate me. I also met last week with Chief Roland Morrison at NAPS. I spoke to Chief Kai Liu at Treaty 3; he has now moved on to IPCO to be the executive director. I speak to Chief Darren Montour at Six Nations. I think I carry on my predecessor's tradition in staying in excellent contact with all our First Nations police chiefs, and I'll tell you why—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Minister, thank you. I appreciate you having a lot of conversations with our First Nations leaders. My question was, specifically when will the investments flow to the communities? They're looking for resources and investments to ensure that they can police themselves. This is obviously part of a commitment that the government has made.

The estimates have listed that there's only \$6 million in grants to First Nation policing services. This is obviously not adequate. It needs to be significantly more. The Nishnawbe Aski Nation has detailed that there are only a handful of

officers and sometimes one single vehicle patrolling an area the size of France.

So in your conversations with these chiefs, Minister, the question that really deserves an answer—and I hope that we can have one today—is: When can they see the investments flow to their communities?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Again, I want to thank you for the question. Through the Chair, our government continues to invest in First Nations police services, including ensuring that at the Ontario Police College, when they have a cadet who's ready to go to the Ontario Police College, there's a space there. I wanted to make mention that one of the reasons I was in Lac Seul is to understand that they are now placing four cadets in the current cohort of the Ontario Police College.

But more specifically, I'll ask our Deputy Solicitor General to address your question.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you for the question. We have already invested \$16.7 million this year in First Nations policing through our various grant programs that we've made available—not just to municipal police services, but to First Nations as well. In addition to that, we have funded First Nations police services to the tune of \$69.9 million through the First Nations and Inuit Policing Program, and that's just 48% of what they are funded for; Canada funds the other 52%.

Over and above that, we are waiting for the federal government to roll out essential services legislation, which is within their exclusive jurisdiction. We are encouraging the federal government to hurry up and roll out that legislation, because that will provide additional funding supports to First Nations.

Over and above that, when the new CSPA comes into force in the first quarter of 2024, First Nations will have an ability to opt in to the CSPA. If they do that, they have to meet a certain standard which is called the adequate and effective regulation standard. In order to do that, I anticipate that they will require even more funding to meet those thresholds. Given that, there will be provision for more funding available as the CSPA comes into force.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you. Will we get a commitment from the government to adequately fund First Nation policing services and make it an essential service when that legislation comes in, or can we see that come in sooner?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Thank you for the question. We take First Nations police services—and all police services, all public safety in Ontario—very seriously. That's exactly why I travelled up to Lac Seul, which is north of Sioux Lookout. That's exactly why I met with Chief Roland Morrison at NAPS the following day. We are continuing to dialogue with them, and we're continuing to ensure, as I said before, that we have placement spaces available at the Ontario Police College.

But let me again turn your question back to our Deputy Solicitor General.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: I have been having conversations with my deputy minister counterpart at the federal level, at Public Safety Canada. We have been encouraging

the federal government to roll out this legislation as soon as possible because it is sorely needed by the First Nations communities. So we are waiting for that legislation. That's the exclusive jurisdiction of the federal government.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: And then the funding will follow? The funding will not precede it?

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: I'm not in a position to bind the government; that's a function of the Treasury Board. But I would like to see First Nations funded so that they can deliver policing services akin to and similar to the way in which municipal police services deliver police services to the rest of the communities in Ontario.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you, Deputy. I hope that the minister takes your advice.

I will cede my time to my colleague.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Glover.

Mr. Chris Glover: Thank you to the minister and the deputy minister for being here. I've been listening intently to the conversation this morning.

You said that your government takes the safety of the province very seriously, but the indicators indicate that the province is far less safe than when the Conservative government was elected in 2018. The solutions that you mentioned in your comments this morning were around more policing, more jails, more CCTV. But when I've spoken with police officers, both those who are currently working and those who have retired, they say that what the government is trying to do is make them deal with socio-economic problems that are caused by government policy, and they point to the housing crisis, the homelessness crisis, the opioid epidemic and the mental health crisis. Even the former chief of police of the city of Toronto said, on the issue of gun violence, that you cannot arrest your way out of this issue. You need to deal with this.

When I talk to not just police officers but EMS in general, the amount of calls that they get where they're responding to people without homes, people who are experiencing homelessness who are in crisis, that's the bulk of their work nowadays.

So my question is your government going to deal with the socio-economic crises that are fuelling violent crime in this province?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I want to thank the member for the question, through the Chair. In fact, when we look to the record \$25 billion of investment that is being made throughout our province, when we look at the Volkswagen commitment to build the largest battery plant in the world here in St. Thomas, one of the key decision-makers they assessed in our province was public safety, and it's completely undeniable.

I've travelled all around the province and I absolutely believe that Ontario is unlike many other international jurisdictions, or even jurisdictions within Canada, because we take public safety so seriously. Earlier in the questions this morning, we specifically addressed that—

Mr. Chris Glover: My question is around the socio-economic drivers of the increasing crime rate. I'll just mention the statistics—your government's own statistics—around gun violence: In 2021, there were 114 gun-related

homicides in Ontario—this was a 21.3% increase from 2020; a similar trend in gang-related homicides, with 65 victims in 2021, an increase of 25% from 2020; and since 2015, there has been a 132.7% increase in gun-related homicides and a 209.5% increase in gang-related homicides.

The record speaks to the fact that actions your government has been taking over the last five years have not helped the situation; they've actually made it worse. So where is the pivot, where is the change of course to reduce gun-related and gang-related homicides, not just by asking the police to solve these problems but by dealing with socio-economic drivers of them?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I'd like to thank the member for the question, through the Chair. I spoke earlier this morning. Our government—what did we do in the spring? We announced three major announcements to combat this rise in criminality.

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Number one—and we spoke about it—we announced \$112 million in new funding to prevent these violent and repeat offenders from endangering our community. Again, we turned to the federal government. So you ask, what is going on? We said we are investing \$112 million to combat and to create a grant that will help us enforce and get these violent or repeat offenders off our street—that's number one.

The second thing we said is that it's totally unacceptable that every 40-odd minutes an auto is being stolen somewhere in Ontario. That's why we announced the \$51-million investment to tackle auto theft.

The third thing we said is we want to have as many people come into and have a successful career in public safety. That's why we eliminated the tuition in the Ontario Police College.

But you've raised a number of issues that are as a result of issues that the federal government must tackle—border safety. We called on the federal government. I said to my federal counterpart, Minister Mendicino—when he was there, he is not there anymore—“Meet me at the border,” because we know that almost every illegal gun coming into our country used in an illegal activity, activity of criminality, is emanating from the States—

Mr. Chris Glover: Let me jump in here. Gun violence is an issue that I feel very deeply about. I've been working on this issue for 14 years. I've attended many, many funerals of young men killed in gun violence.

Three of my son's classmates were killed in gun violence. I was the trustee in Etobicoke Centre when the Dixon raid took place in 2011. The challenge was that most of those young men were arrested. They did a five-year stint. A few of them got out and did change their lives. I've met with some of them. A lot of them went back in. What happened was, while they were out, there were other young men in desperate situations, in low-income communities, who were ready to take up their post when those people were arrested.

We actually waste the efforts of the police—the courage and all the incredible danger that they put themselves in—

to arrest these people. If there is some other young person waiting to pick up their gun or pick up their spot in the gang, we've accomplished, as a society, nothing. That's why I keep driving back to the socio-economic determinants.

We need to address poverty. We need to address homelessness. We need to make sure there is affordable housing. We need to deal with our disability and mental health issues. That's where I'm looking for direction, and I haven't heard from you in the responses yet a statement saying that we will absolutely address these socio-economic drivers of the increase in gun violence—

Ms. Jess Dixon: Point of order, Chair.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Dixon.

Ms. Jess Dixon: I would just like to note, we are in the estimates portion. I respect what the member is bringing up. However, from what I hear, a lot of what he is mentioning would be under the mandate of other ministries.

From what I can hear, the minister has made many attempts to provide an answer of what this ministry is doing about gun violence, giving a number of examples of exactly what his ministry is doing.

I would ask that the member consider that we are an estimates for the Ministry of the Solicitor General versus the Ministry of Health or mental health and addictions etc.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you, MPP Dixon.

You may continue.

Mr. Chris Glover: I've got a couple of questions that were sent to me by a retired police officer. They're very specific: Is the chief firearms officer now actively applying Bill C-71 requirements for adult lifetime background checks and gun licensing? Additionally, if this is being done, is the CFO—and the FOs with delegated authority—now actively refusing licences based on the adult lifetime background checks, including in cases of personal violence and domestic violence?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I want to thank the member for the question, and through you, Madam Chair: Getting illegal guns off our street is our top priority. Ontarians expect a government that will keep our community safe. That's why we're working hard each and every day in deploying the investments that we've made just this year, over a \$112 million to get these violent and repeat offenders off our streets, to combat auto theft and to encourage more people to go to the Ontario Police College, but let me please—

Mr. Chris Glover: If the minister doesn't have the answer to that specific question, can I email those questions to you and have a response sent to my—

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Let me please ask the Deputy Solicitor General to reply.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you for the question. The answer to both your questions is yes. The Chief Firearms Officer briefs me on a monthly basis and updates me on all the different strategies and investigations that are conducted.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: I can assure you that on a regular basis, the Chief Firearms Officer is declining to issue licences to those individuals who have criminal records and are not appropriate to be licenced.

Mr. Chris Glover: Okay, thank you. The next question I have is around a 2019 report where the government reduced the amount of available funds to victims of violent crimes, and the maximum grant was changed from \$25,000 to \$5,000. Has that been changed or is that still in place?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Again, I want to thank the member for the question. Our thoughts are always with those who are victims of crime, and this is something that's very important to us.

Let me please ask the Deputy Solicitor General to comment further.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you for the question. I'm not aware of any reduction in the Victim Support Grant. To the contrary, during my tenure here and under this government, the Victim Support Grants—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): That's all the time we have for this round.

We'll now turn to the independent member for 10 minutes. MPP Collard, you may begin.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you, Madam Chair. I do have a question about correctional services, but before, je voudrais demander au solliciteur général de peut-être expliquer brièvement pourquoi, dans l'organigramme du ministère, il y avait un poste qui était dédié aux services en français qui n'existe plus. Alors, si je compare la charte d'organisation en 2019, sous « services ministériels »—donc, « corporate services »—il y avait un « French language services », puis maintenant, ça n'existe plus.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I want to thank the member for her question. It's been a great privilege for me to travel Ontario and appreciate the rich culture of the Franco-Ontarian community, from Hawkesbury to Sudbury, and to understand that until I was elected, I really had no appreciation for the richness of the Franco-Ontarian community.

Specifically to your question, I'd like the Deputy Solicitor General to reply.

Mr. Mario Di Tommaso: Thank you for your question. We are absolutely concerned about the provision of French-language services in Ontario.

There are two points I wanted to make with regards to the OPP. One of the things that they have done is they have increased their staffing within their communications centres, to include people who are exceptionally fluent in the French language. So when people now call in to one of the four communication centres with the OPP, they will have an option to speak to a French-speaking operator to address their call for service.

Over and above that, one of the things that the OPP does is send out alerts notifying the community of public safety issues. We have now had the obligation—and we are responding to it—to ensure that those communications to the community are also in French in a timely manner. So we do take the requirement to provide French-language services very seriously, and those are some of the things

that the OPP are doing. But there's certainly room for improvement, and the OPP seeks to hire people that have skills in both official languages.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Right, okay. Thank you for the answer. I'm not reassured about the fact that you no longer have somebody within the ministry who can advise on French-language services, but I understand that you've said that there is more availability on the ground.

Moving on to correctional services, because I have limited time and it's a very important issue: I had the opportunity to visit the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre. First of all, I would like to know what the plan is for that detention centre. When I visited the centre, I was less than reassured about the adequacy of the infrastructure and also the obvious lack of programming to help inmates rehabilitate, so I would like to hear more about that.

Also, if you look at page 15 of the brief, the detailed financial information, it shows that there is an increase in budget for Ontario police services, but a decrease in funding for correctional services. I'm just wondering: If we're giving more money for police to jail people, but then we're decreasing the funding for our correctional services, how are we going to be managing that? Maybe I'll let you answer this first part and maybe we can complete it with supplementaries.

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Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Thank you so kindly for your question. Through you, Chair: I was at the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre just a couple of months ago. I found the character of the management, the union representatives and our correctional staff to be exceptional. I toured as much of the facility as I could. Anybody who has ever gone with me to a correctional tour knows that I don't go on a red carpet tour. I want to see absolutely everything that I can. That's why I'm absolutely supportive of our government's investment of over \$500 million over five years to modernize correctional institutions like the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre.

I want to also highlight that the programming that is being done there by the chaplains and by the native inmate liaison officers—the NILOs are absolutely exceptional. That's why we've hired over 1,800 correctional officers just since 2020. We're going to continue to do more.

For the balance, I would appreciate if we could have the Deputy Solicitor General for corrections, Karen Ellis, reply.

Ms. Karen Ellis: Thank you very much to the member for the question. Merci, madame. I am Karen Ellis, Deputy Solicitor General for correctional services within the Ministry of Solicitor General. I just wanted to highlight a few of the things that this investment, the \$500-million investment, has actually helped in the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre.

Since 2018, we've hired 150 new correctional officer staff which is really important in terms of having adequate staffing to keep the jail safe, but also to do programming and rehabilitation. We've had a number of infrastructure projects trying to create more space for programming. For example, a courtyard enclosure that provides extra programming space for inmates to receive services.

I wanted to just share that, in terms of our services, we've got basically 24-hour medical care, including medication and emergency dental care. We've got recreation, education programs, crisis intervention, counselling, psychiatry and psychology services. We also have, as the minister mentioned, a lot of spiritual and cultural supports for Indigenous inmates and inmates of other backgrounds, providing religious and spiritual care for the inmates who want that and seek that.

We also have discharge planning and reintegration services trying to help people who are getting ready to go back into the community.

I can certainly highlight a couple of these programs. We have got rehabilitative programs for substance abuse issues aimed to reduce harmful consequences related to drug and alcohol abuse. The participants do get assistance to reduce or eliminate their use of these substances and develop alternative coping skills.

We also have an anger management program running at OCDC. We have another program called Connections, which is an introductory group program, and it's designed to help offenders who have a pattern of repetitive behaviour to try and basically help them change their thinking for more positive and healthy ways of dealing with things and try to help them not to return to a life of crime.

I just wanted to say that I also have visited a number of times and toured the institution, and some of the infrastructure projects that we've delivered and are now planning for that institution actually have a really positive impact on morale. So something like getting new lockers for the correctional officers a couple of years ago had a tremendously positive impact on something they've been looking for, for a long time.

When we can improve things in the environment, it actually does a lot for the staff who are working in challenging conditions. It allows them to focus on the rehabilitation and other services they need to ensure the inmates have—

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you for that.

So you've given me specific numbers on additional staffing, additional money, additional programs. Do you have any information or data to share on the success of these new programs? How many inmates have you helped rehabilitate? How does that translate into concrete results?

Ms. Karen Ellis: So that one I can take back to the ministry, because we do have a team that does data for us. I don't want to provide something that I don't have accurate numbers and statistics on, but we'll take it back to the ministry.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I would appreciate it, definitely, because if we have improved the situation in our detention centres, we need to be able to show the positive results as well. Otherwise, they're just words.

I want to touch upon the solitary confinement aspect of this. I got mixed information when I did visit the detention centre and when I looked at data of our detention centres across the province. In some instances, I was told that solitary confinement is not used anymore, but then evidence showed the contrary.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: We do know that there is an over-representation of Indigenous people and racialized people who find themselves in these situations. So what is the overall policy of the ministry on that, and how are we addressing that?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I want to thank the member for the question. Through the Chair: We have made dramatic improvements in reducing segregation dramatically, and the numbers bear it out.

What's more is I've seen it for myself. I've gone to so many of our correctional facilities—some with the Deputy Solicitor General—and I know that the mindset now is not to move in this direction.

But again, I would welcome the Deputy Solicitor General to comment further.

Ms. Karen Ellis: We use conditions of segregation, really, as a last resort for dealing with people who may need to be in a cell by themselves for a period of time, but our approach is to make sure that they are getting a minimum of two hours out-of-cell a day with meaningful social interaction. We also—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you. That's all the time that we have.

We'll now turn to the government for 20 minutes, beginning with MPP Coe.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Chair, and through you: Solicitor General, thanks to you and your staff for being with us this morning and now this afternoon.

Sir, it's my understanding that cybercrime is on the rise, and people like those who I have the privilege of representing in Whitby—which is situated in the region of Durham, which you've visited often—are largely unaware of how to identify and avoid fraud and other digital threats that are out there. Could you spend a little time just describing the efforts that are under way within your ministry and other partnerships that you have to prevent cybercrime, please? Thank you.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I want to thank my friend the member from Whitby. Through you, Madam Chair: Our ministry, the Ministry of the Solicitor General, is investing in solutions to prevent cybercrime, such as internet fraud that preys on vulnerable seniors, and luring, which can lead to human trafficking. Some of the most effective solutions are community-driven, and this government is investing more than \$1.6 million over two years to help fight cybercrime, including online hate crimes, human trafficking and fraud. The investment is part of the ministry's Safer and Vital Communities Grant Program, which promotes community-based solutions to address local and provincial crime priorities.

Cybercriminals are weaponizing the Internet in greater numbers, more than ever before. Approximately 193 out of 100,000 Ontarians are victims of cybercrime, and this grant program will support projects led by community-based, not-for-profit organizations and First Nations chiefs and band councils that address local risks to safety and well-being in the community. For 2022-24, grant funding has been allocated to 18 community organizations that will work closely with police partners to implement local initiatives to combat cybercrime, and these projects include educa-

tion campaigns and community resources to increase public awareness, tools to help teachers alert students to the signs of cybercrime, supporting community workshops, and providing resources to prevent cybercrime in the retail sector.

In addition to partnering with their local police service—I want to give a special shout-out to the Durham police service, which I know, for the member in Whitby, keeps Durham safe—grant recipients are encouraged to partner with at least one other organization from a separate sector to ensure a broader range of community engagement.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, sir, for that answer. Through you, Chair, my supplementary: A new topic, Solicitor General, is bail reform, one that you've done tremendous work on along with your staff—and thank you for that leadership.

About a week and a half ago, I was at the Durham Regional Police Association dinner, where I spoke, and one of the topics that came up was bail reform, as you would anticipate. Many of the front-line members there expressed their frustration with the federal government and their lack of movement on this topic of bail reform. But I think it's important today, when we're discussing your estimates and for the record, that you please share with us the work that your ministry has been doing and will be doing on bail reform to keep repeat violent offenders in jail and not on the streets.

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Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Thank you to the member from Whitby. Through you, Madam Chair, it's so obvious: With rising crime rates, we can't afford to have a justice system where repeat and violent offenders are arrested one day and out on the street the next. It's completely unacceptable. If an individual is out on bail, they need to follow their bail or court-ordered conditions. And we need a system that can assess who is a high-risk, repeat or violent offender, and that provides judges with the tools that they need.

Along with every other province and territory in the country, we called on the federal government to work with us to fix Canada's bail system. We are pleased that they have recently introduced a piece of legislation, Bill C-48, in the House of Commons, which puts the onus on offenders who are known to be violent or have committed gun crimes in the past to prove they are safe to release on bail.

For our part—and I mentioned this earlier, in my answers to the members opposite—we announced \$112 million in new funding to prevent repeat and violent offenders from endangering our communities. This funding includes \$24 million which will be made available over three years to help the OPP and municipal and First Nations police services establish dedicated bail compliance and warrant apprehension teams. Teams will also assist prosecutors with gathering evidence and assessing public safety risks during the bail hearing stage.

Grant funding may also be used to acquire bail compliance technology or support a network that police services could use to share bail offenders' information, such as the Bail Compliance Dashboard. I spoke about that earlier this

morning. These teams and technologies will work to reduce the number of high-risk accused persons alleged to have violated bail conditions, as well as those who are unlawfully at large.

Some \$48 million to create a dedicated bail compliance unit within the OPP: That's the repeat offender parole enforcement unit; we call it the ROPE squad. This new dedicated, provincial-wide bail compliance unit will apprehend high-risk provincial offenders who have broken their bail conditions or are unlawfully at large.

And \$26 million to create intensive serious-violent-crime bail teams within the courts system, to ensure that there are dedicated prosecutors and subject-matter experts to prepare for and, I might add, properly conduct the often lengthy and complex bail hearings: A new province-wide bail monitoring system will allow the police services to monitor high-risk offenders with the most accurate data possible.

We'll do anything we can to keep our communities safe. There's nothing more important to me as a Solicitor General, and to work with our Premier every day for public safety. With these measures, we're giving our partners the resources and tools they need to reduce violence and protect our communities, now and in the future.

We're closely monitoring the passage of the bill through the House of Commons, and to be honest, we're encouraging the government in Ottawa to move forward on Bill C-48 absolutely as quickly as possible. Too many innocent people, as we know, have lost their lives due to dangerous offenders being on our streets instead of being behind bars. We'll continue to work with the federal government to make meaningful bail changes, because at the end of the day, this keeps Ontario safe.

In partnership with the OPP, Toronto Police Service and Durham Regional Police Service, our dashboard—and the Deputy Solicitor General spoke about the dashboard and its timing earlier this morning—will lead to a province-wide system to enable police services to obtain map-based and real-time data to assist in the monitoring of high-risk offenders who have been released on bail, regardless of geographic location in the province. I've seen simulations and demonstrations of this dashboard. It's absolutely unbelievable. This will make it easier for police to monitor any high-risk offenders in their jurisdiction.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Solicitor General.

Chair, through you, to MPP Saunderson, please.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Saunderson.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: you, again, Minister, for attending today and for your answers so far, and to your deputy ministers as well.

You've talked a lot about safety in Ontario and how it's your role to keep Ontarians safe, and it's a big priority. I know we've spoken at length about law enforcement, so I'd like to switch gears and look at fire safety. I know we're working very hard with our fire departments to keep Ontarians safe, both in firefighting and fire prevention. There are many different models across the province, from full-time firefighters to volunteer firefighters to everything in between. In my riding, I have seven different fire departments who are very different, each and every one of them.

But I'd like to talk a bit about northern Ontario because of the distances they have to travel and the propensity for fire up there with the forests and with the businesses. I'm wondering if you can tell us what efforts your ministry has put into augmenting and assisting our northern communities in battling fires.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I want to thank the member for the question. Through the Chair: Last week, it was absolutely tremendous for me to be in Thunder Bay. I was also in Sioux Lookout, but in Thunder Bay, we made a major announcement that Ontario is investing nearly \$35 million to acquire 17 new firetrucks and firefighting equipment for northern fire services and two new mobile live fire training units. The additional firetrucks and equipment will support the responses of northern fire services to local fires and emergencies.

Ontario's two new mobile live fire training units will travel and will criss-cross all regions of the province to expand and modernize firefighting training. The new mobile live fire training units will help, as an example, the Ontario Fire College bring additional high-quality, hands-on training directly to fire services to help firefighters prepare for real-life scenarios. We saw some of those last week when the live training units were there in Thunder Bay. We were joined by our member from Thunder Bay—Atikokan. These mobile units can be transported directly to a local fire station and, again, simulate real situations.

These additional units are part of our province's ongoing strategy to expand and update access to firefighting training across the region. The Northern Fire Protection Program provides assistance and support for fire protection services to 47 communities that are without municipal organizations. Thank you for your question.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Just to follow up, if I may: You've talked about certification, and I know this government has been working hard at creating uniform certification as well as providing access to the training. I'm wondering if you can speak about your efforts to create uniform training in the certification.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Thank you to the member. Through you, Madam Chair: Firefighter certification protects the safety of firefighters and the public and ensures a consistent standard of training that is delivered across the province. The ministry's mandatory fire certification regulation came into force on July 1, 2022. Prior to this, there was no minimum firefighter certification standard in the province. The absence of such standard meant that firefighters might not have the appropriate training to provide a level of service set by the municipality, resulting in potential safety issues for firefighters and the public.

I want to give a shout-out to those great firefighters and volunteer firefighters and our fire chiefs that keep Ontario safe every day. But fire services across Ontario have four years to achieve the certification for most fire protection service standards and six years for technical rescue disciplines. The mandatory certification process validates training that should already be occurring in fire services today.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Thank you very much. Those are my questions.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Kusendova-Bashta.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you so much. Merci beaucoup, Solicitor General, for your presentation today. Some of our colleagues across the aisle spoke about the social determinants of criminality. I just want to point out that the opposition voted no for every possible measure, like our budget, which had a lot of support for things like homelessness prevention, for mental health, so it's just curious that they would be talking about social determinants of health and social determinants of criminality, when in fact they voted "no" to every single attempt of our government to support these very important issues.

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But today I want to talk a little bit about the administrative burdens that our police officers face. Because I'm a nurse, I work in the ER, and I often see our men and women in uniform. In fact, we have new protocols for hand-off because we're trying to off-load some of the resources and make the protocol as seamless as possible to ensure that our men and women in uniform can go back out in the community, and that those resources are not being kept at the hospital if it's not necessary to do so.

Even in my work as a nurse, I often have to deal with a lot of administrative work, and that takes away my time from my patients. I'm a highly skilled individual, as are our men and women in uniform, and my time would be best spent actually utilizing those skills and working with my patients. I think the same can be said for our men and women in uniform. So I think that we do need to modernize processes to allow police officers to provide more efficient services to our communities.

Solicitor General, can you highlight for us some of the initiatives that your ministry has undertaken to decrease these administrative burdens?

L'hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Je remercie ma collègue pour cette question excellente.

Ontario's platform has built a more connected criminal justice system, allowing front-line police officers to spend more time combatting crime and ensuring communities are safe. We've reached an important milestone in the modernization of the criminal justice system by completing the installation of what we call the eIntake digital platform, in courthouses to reduce this administrative burden.

Originally officially launched in December 2021, following successful tests in Barrie and Orillia and beginning in 2019, the eIntake expedites the process for police officers to file criminal charges electronically and streamlines the information shared between police and other enforcement agencies and courts in real time. It allows Justices of the Peace to enter decisions, sign documents digitally, and request digital information from police officers online. This is to reduce the administrative burden and modernize it.

More than 110,000 charging documents since 2019 signifying the commencement of a criminal case have already been received by eIntake, cutting the volume of paperwork and reducing the time spent by police officers travelling to and from the courthouse, and streamlining the court system. This system is currently being used by 64 enforcement agencies and 129 courthouses across Ontario. It is among

a series of digital initiatives and innovations that the ministry and the Ministry of the Attorney General are taking to modernize the justice system and make it more efficient and responsive, and less of an administrative burden.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Well, thank you so much for sharing that.

We also talked a lot about mental health today, and I had the opportunity to also go on a ride-along with a mobile crisis intervention unit. I think it's a really wonderful program. I know different communities, not just the community of Peel, have adopted it. It's a great opportunity for mental health nurses or crisis intervention workers to work together with police officers when they are responding to those mental health calls.

We know through anecdotes and also statistics that police officers are dealing with mental health issues more and more, and they are sort of becoming the front line to mental health issues. And so, what I wanted to ask is about the local priorities. In my community of Mississauga, mental health is a local priority. I know that criminality does not fit a one-size-fits-all solution and these solutions have to be tailored to each community.

Solicitor General, can you talk a little bit more about local crime priorities and what your ministry is doing to address these issues?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Well, I want to thank the member for the question. Through you, Madam Chair: You're right. That's why the Ontario Provincial Police, the OPP, established the Mobile Crisis Response Teams—or we call them MCRTs. Enhancing crisis response across the province, MCRTs are best positioned to respond to people experiencing a mental health or addiction crisis and de-escalate situations that could pose a risk to public safety. These teams typically consist of police officers and crisis workers working together to respond to complex situations where mental health or addictions may be a factor. We're proud to have invested over \$267 million under the Community Safety and Policing Grant.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Approximately \$30.7 million has been allocated over three years to support 32 projects involving an integrated response between police and mental health workers.

The OPP has released a framework for Ontario and tools for developing mobile crisis response teams. The framework and tools will help communities establish the specific type of crisis response team models they need to serve their local communities.

The OPP has a Crisis Call Diversion Program across the province. I've travelled the province and I've seen this for myself, and this will help alleviate the need for a police response to non-emergent situations. This is exactly what it's about. When required, we know that the crisis workers may implement a de-escalation technique prior to the police arriving at the scene. They are very, very important and involved in every phase of the Crisis Call Diversion Program. They're great, professionally trained people; I can't say enough about how—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you, Minister. My apologies. That concludes our time and that concludes

the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of the Solicitor General.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 2601, ministry administration, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare vote 2601 carried.

Shall vote 2603, public safety division, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declared vote 2603 carried.

Shall vote 2604, Ontario Provincial Police, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare vote 2604 carried.

Shall vote 2605, correctional services, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 2606, justice technology services, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 2607, agencies, boards and commissions, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 2609, emergency planning and management, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 2610, strategic policy research and innovation, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 2612, inspectorate, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 2614, emergency services telecommunications, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 2615, data insights and strategic initiatives, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 2616, health services, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 2617, infrastructure, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of the Solicitor General, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of the Solicitor General to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Thank you very much, everyone. We will now recess until 1:55 p.m.

The committee recessed from 1350 to 1357.

MINISTRY OF PUBLIC AND BUSINESS SERVICE DELIVERY

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Good afternoon, members. The committee is about to begin consideration of the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery for a total of two hours. Are there any questions before we begin?

I'm now required to call vote 1801, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Public and Business Service Delivery.

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you very much, Chair. Good afternoon, colleagues. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. It is a pleasure to be here to present the expenditure estimates for the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery for 2023-24. As you may know, we were previously the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services and over the past year transformed into a new, forward-thinking ministry.

We deliver many vital programs, services and products that Ontarians rely on in their day-to-day lives, ranging from health cards, driver's licences and birth certificates, to addressing consumer protection and public safety issues, all with the goal of creating a better quality of life for the great people of Ontario. As our name would suggest, we are focused on delivering services to the people and businesses of this province. We are constantly looking for ways to improve our services because Ontarians deserve a government that is working for them while helping to foster long-term growth across the province. And while our public-facing services might be the most recognizable, our work goes far beyond that.

Amongst other things, we manage the province's archival history and we are the guardians of Ontarians' personal data, whose importance grows every day in this information era. We are also a significant source of revenue for government. In addition to that, we also serve other partner ministries by providing central services that help them get their work done. If our government were a house, those services would be the pipes. And, by extension, our work flows to every person, business and organization that every ministry deals with.

The Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery is in a strong position to drive government-wide improvements and collaborate with other ministries and organizations to enhance service delivery for the people and businesses of Ontario. Focusing on the customer experience, we are extending better services to the people and organizations we connect with every day. And it is with that extensive mission that my ministry is able to provide streamlined, impactful services and solutions 24/7, 365 days a year. We continue our commitment to provide front-line service delivery and related program supports that benefit all other ministries, agencies and the broader public sector.

Our efforts are focused on achieving three fundamental objectives: Enhancing service delivery to our clients, the people of Ontario; supporting businesses and job creation; and making government work better for Ontarians. With the dedicated work of our ministry's Consumer Protection Ontario team, strengthening protections for Ontarians is my and our government's top priority. Our administrative authorities also play a key role, and are overseen by the ministry to ensure their compliance with this governance, accountability and transparency while they work to deliver on their mandates.

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Our role is to enforce consumer protection legislation and safeguard consumers as they make significant decisions like signing a contract for home renovations, buying a new home or living in a condo, booking a trip with a travel

agent, buying a car or taking out a payday loan. By doing this, we strive to foster a market that is fair, safe and informed for both consumers and businesses in our great province.

In our latest efforts, we have enhanced measures that provide better protection for consumers, particularly new homebuyers, as they are making one of the most significant purchases of their life. We have also expanded deposit insurance and completed consultations on consumer protection measures for new home purchase agreements.

Additionally, we have consulted with consumer groups, the public, the home building sector, the legal community and others on a cooling-off period for a new freehold home. As part of this consultation, our government has sought input on whether new homebuyers should be required to get legal advice on their purchase agreements, and about limits on the amount that builders can increase the price of a home by after it has been sold. These proposed potential new measures could help us further protect and inform homebuyers and consumers alike, empowering them to keep making smarter, safer decisions.

At the same time, we will continue to put policies in place that will ensure Ontario can work towards delivering on our promise to build at least 1.5 million homes and creating more opportunities for people to find the home that fits their needs and budget. As our province grows at an incredible speed, we want to ensure Ontarians can achieve the dream of home ownership sooner, and our government will continue to stand up for homebuyers and ensure their interests are protected.

In recent months, we have made significant progress with our digital dealership registration, an online service that saves time, money and paperwork, allowing participating dealers to register new or used vehicles online and issue permits and licence plates directly to purchasers, making it easier for Ontarians to buy a car and get on the road faster.

These are just some examples of the high-quality services and programs that my ministry maintains for the people and businesses of Ontario, but they are only part of our story. Simultaneously, we manage and coordinate services and procedures within the Ontario Public Service, the OPS, with many also extended to the broader public sector. While my ministry's role in these is not always obvious to a casual observer, we have an important role bringing other ministries' programs to life.

For example, through our work on the one-contact centre, we are providing Ontarians with one simple, seamless way to connect with government, and regenerate economies of scale by helping ministries manage common business functions and allow them to focus on the core business that only they can do. This also means faster, better services designed around customers' needs.

Until just a couple of months ago, we also managed many of the government's supply chain and procurement functions, which we have since handed off to Supply Ontario, an agency now overseen by the Treasury Board Secretariat. I want to take this opportunity to thank the staff for the tireless work, and important work, that they have put into

getting crucial supplies like masks, gloves and air purifiers when and where they are needed the most during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is part of our government's broader plan to make our purchasing systems more integrated and modern while leveraging the overall purchasing power of the public sector and getting better value for taxpayers.

In addition, strong government-wide collaboration is helping our digital delivery program lead our online presence, integrating government services and information.

From 2019—or the last pre-pandemic year—to 2022, the total traffic to ontario.ca increased from 82.9 million to 137.4 million visits. That's a huge 67% increase in people who are using our website as their destination to connect with the information and services they need.

This was an extraordinary and unprecedented period when people came to ontario.ca to get up-to-date information about the COVID-19 pandemic. They needed reliable information quickly, and in 2020, 175 million visitors came to find out how they could keep their families safe and learn about the supports offered to the people and businesses of Ontario. Over the course of one year, the traffic to our website increased by more than 110%.

In 2021, another 155.6 million visitors visited our site as Ontario rolled out vaccines. So ontario.ca was a crucial tool in our fight against the pandemic. With over 137 million visits to ontario.ca last year, its growth continues. The data clearly shows just how important our website has become, as people continue to look for government services online.

And our priority continues to be providing exceptional service to the people and businesses of Ontario, as well as our partner government ministries. Our expenditure estimates reflect that commitment and the critical public programs, services and products that we deliver. Our unwavering attention is directed towards fulfilling the requirements of individuals and businesses both now and in the future. Each day, we work towards enhancing our vision of exceptional public and business services serving as the one window to faster and better access to government services.

We provide client-centric services that are personalized and involve proactive outreach and engagement. Our emphasis is enhancing government services to the public, backing businesses and facilitating efficient government, all of which are crucial to fuel our economy and enhance our global position. We take a customer-oriented approach to create simpler, faster and better access to services, saving time and money for Ontarians and businesses.

To fulfill these commitments, our government is dedicated to safeguarding the data we oversee and earning the trust of Ontario's people and businesses, utilizing advanced technology to enhance the quality and efficiency of services for the people of Ontario, promoting equity and providing opportunities for unrepresented communities to develop and take on leadership roles, and fostering collaboration to achieve the best outcomes for our customers and partners. We are intentionally transforming our ministry to adapt to changing needs, redefine our role, and improve our methods of operation.

We have identified priority areas that will help us better serve the people of this province. This includes improving digital delivery, enhancing public services and strengthening consumer protection. We are purposefully and proactively putting the necessary tools in place to achieve these goals. This includes an around-the-clock online presence because the public expects us to be there. Simply put, we cannot be an offline government in an online world. To meet public expectations, we are working hard and making significant progress in our digital transformation efforts. For example, ServiceOntario, the public face of our government, provides more than 100 services, with more than 55 of them offered online.

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And we understand that online options alone are not the answer to everyone's needs. Our priority is to provide comprehensive support to the public through various channels with user-friendly and accessible services to ensure customer satisfaction. Our Digital First strategy, complemented by our ServiceOntario service centres, provides Ontarians and businesses with time and cost savings.

We continue to focus our efforts on alternative service delivery methods and expanding partnerships to bring in-person services to Ontarians, particularly in underserved areas of the province. For example, we have partnered with North Shore Tribal Council and their Indigenous-led centre, providing them with a mobile unit equipped to serve local First Nations communities. We know there is interest in Pickle Lake and will have more good news to share very soon.

These services play a vital role in the lives of Ontarians by facilitating important events such as birth, marriage, adoption and organ donation. They also assist in obtaining drivers' licences, health cards and accessible parking permits.

Every year, ServiceOntario manages more than 57 million transactions through in-person visits, online transactions, mail and phone calls to our contact centres. ServiceOntario's online services have become even more convenient, with expanded offerings that are accessible 24/7, right from the comfort of your home on the device of your choice. This allows people to easily maintain their government issued identification and permits at their own convenience and get reminders that are easy to sign up for.

Our enhanced appointment booking system at ServiceOntario is now available at more than 100 of our busiest centres throughout the province, and this will expand to 120 this year. Customers requiring in-person visits can book multiple services in a single appointment on any device of their choice or book a single appointment for the whole family. Ontarians also have the option to identify accessibility needs ahead of their appointment, so services can be provided to meet their individual needs efficiently and effectively.

ServiceOntario continues to enhance the customer experience through several pilot programs, including virtual services. Eligible Ontarians who may find it difficult to visit a ServiceOntario centre in person can book virtual

appointments to have their health cards renewed through live video calls. We know no one enjoys long wait times trying to reach the contact centre, so new technology is rolling out to cut down the time callers spend on the line with quicker interactive responses or call-backs.

Furthermore, as part of our work to provide Ontarians with more online delivery options, soon-to-be-married couples can apply for a marriage licence online through a new secure portal in participating municipalities. This program continues to expand, with new municipalities being regularly onboarded to offer this new service.

We have removed barriers for Ontarians with disabilities by making it easier to apply for and renew accessible parking permits online. This is just one of the many ways we continue to build on the other existing online offerings, such as requesting a change of address or applying for a traveller's permit or a motorcycle decal.

Ontario is also part of a nationwide effort to join The Hague Convention, an international agreement to make it easier to authenticate documents issued in Ontario for use overseas. To help with this process, my ministry has expanded the number of offices where people and businesses can authenticate their documents and implemented a Web portal option for people to initiate the authentication process online.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute.

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Our ministry's approach is digital-first, not digital-only, and we are actively laying the groundwork for more digital transformations in our daily lives. We achieve this goal by delivering a cutting-edge, contemporary and seamless experience that we continually refine, while also fulfilling our government's commitment to safeguarding consumers and providing the programs and services that businesses and consumers depend on daily.

I know you will all have thoughtful and valuable feedback on what we have shared with you today, and I look forward to your questions. Together, I know we can and will make our vision and a bright future for all Ontarians a reality. Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you very much, Minister.

We will now begin questions and answers in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition members of the committee, 10 minutes for the independent member of the committee, and 20 minutes for the government members of the committee. As always, please wait to be recognized.

For deputy ministers, assistant ministers and staff: When you are called on to speak for the first time, please state your name and your title for Hansard.

I will start with the official opposition. MPP Wong-Tam, you have the floor.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you for your presentation. I was quite impressed with your presentation with respect to your commitment to technology, ensuring that there is a digitization of the government delivery process. I think that's absolutely critical, especially since more and more of us rely on our smart phones. I don't even recall

the last time I actually carried much cash, to be quite honest—it's all sort of coming through the devices.

I'm just curious, Minister—your own personal background, I believe, is actually in tech. Is that why you are so committed to making sure that the delivery system here in Ontario is digitized and why we have such a strong online presence?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you very much for the question.

I believe that Ontarians deserve a government that understands the needs of the future. That's why I feel like it is very important for us to make sure that we continue to bring services online as much as possible.

As I said in my remarks, digital-first does not mean digital-only. I always give this example about my own father, who—as much as I would love to renew his accessible parking permit online, he still loves to go to ServiceOntario.

Again, the whole idea is to find ways we can make life easy for the people of this province. That's why it is so important to make sure that we gradually bring services online but do it in a way that there are no issues or problems.

As you rightly said, when it comes to technology, you want to make sure that your decisions to bring services online are actually really making a difference in society.

I know the deputy would—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Actually, I have a follow-up question for you, Minister.

Just because of your personal commitment to digitization and moving Ontario forward in a modern way—I note in the Integrity Commissioner's report released on August 28 that you paid for some flights and hotel with cash, and you paid \$4,450 worth of travel, airfare by cash. I'm just curious to know the contradiction there.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Kusendova, point of order.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: I really don't know how this would relate to the line of questioning on estimates of—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: If you give me one minute, I will get there. It's absolutely related.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): I'll allow it for now. But let's remember to keep the line of questioning to estimates for this particular ministry.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Minister, why did you pay for the airfare in cash, considering you're such a proponent of digitization and moving to an online economy?

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Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: As I said in my remarks as well, I want to make sure that Ontarians get the service they truly deserve. And I want to give huge kudos and credit to the ServiceOntario team, who are doing such an incredible job each and every day. When it comes to services, I want to make sure that Ontarians can get great service. As you said, we use our devices and everything each and every day; we want to make sure that Ontarians can continue to get service in the comfort of their home. But I'm sure the deputy would love to—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Minister, sorry, I apologize; that didn't quite answer my question. It actually did not answer my question. I'm curious to know your own personal commitment. You've given us a presentation about your commitment, this ministry's commitment to digitization, to moving onto the online economy. You've talked about streamlining processes and cutting red tape, and I think that that's all absolutely important. But in your own business transactions, were you actually paid \$4,550 for airfare to Los Vegas?

Mr. Lorne Coe: Madam Chair, point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Coe with a point of order.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Madam Chair, the member is out of order. Pursuant to standing order 25(b), by directing speech to matters other than the question under discussion—that is the estimates, the parameters to which you've already established.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you, MPP Coe, for the point of order. I did give the member an opportunity to ask her question, and the line of questioning still hasn't gone there, so I would like to ask the member to please just focus on the topic at hand, and the topic at hand is estimates, not anything that is not related to estimates.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: So the question I have for you is, Minister, were any government funds used for that trip? Were you entirely—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Again, to the member: Is that a part of estimates?

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: It is. I just asked if government money was used for the trip. We have expenses coming and going all the time. This is a very straightforward question. The minister can choose to answer or not.

Interjections.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Hold my time, Madam Chair?

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Minister, was that part of the program or is it unrelated to the program here in the estimates?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: I don't see any line in estimates about the question being asked.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Okay. Then we'll have to move on to another topic. Thank you.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you. I'm just curious to know: We have to ensure that the public has confidence in all our systems, in our committee processes and in the ministries that operate and do good work on behalf of the people of Ontario. When we lose faith in government, when we lose faith in the integrity of government and how they act, this is the one forum, the absolute one forum, where we get to ask our ministers questions that are relevant and before us. So myself asking a question whether or not ministerial dollars were used to fund trips is—

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Point of order, again.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Yes, MPP Hogarth?

Ms. Christine Hogarth: I believe the Chair has already dealt with this.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Yes, we have. So, like I said, let's move on. Thank you.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: And I am moving on—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Like you said, this is an opportunity to ask questions, so you're welcome to ask a question. But it has to remain within the confines and the scope of the estimates committee. And if you could also maybe provide some guidance as to which line item the question is related to, that would be helpful as well.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: So with respect to the operations of the ministry, what I'm very interested in knowing is whether or not there's been any misuse of government funding within your ministry for the payment of trips.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Again, I believe that it is out of order to make allegations, because the question was—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: No, that was a request.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): But are you then, MPP Wong-Tam, assuming or alleging that there has been any misuse of funds? I'm confused about the line of questioning here.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Sure. My question was: Considering the minister is such a big proponent of digitization and the online economy, why pay for anything in cash—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Okay, but, MPP Wong-Tam, what does that have to do with the line—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: —especially something that's thousands of dollars' worth of airline tickets?

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Again, you'd have to refer to an actual line item and program. I appreciate that you want to ask the question, but again, it is out of order in this particular committee, because this committee is about estimates and it's about the line items that are in the estimates book provided. There are opportunities to ask these questions during question period and other times, but right now, in this particular committee, I would ask all committee members to please remember to just focus on what's at hand in front of us.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you, Chair. I was simply reflecting on the minister's opening statement.

Minister, with respect to table 2, where we see the combined operating and capital summary by vote, I note that there are a number of services that have now seen some cuts. Enterprise information, privacy archives, and digital delivery program: I see a cut of \$60 million. ServiceOntario: I see a cut of \$3 million. Consumer services: I see a cut of \$224,000. Government services integration cluster: I see a cut of \$9 million. In total, there's an about-\$22-million cut in services in your ministry. What is the reason for these reductions, and what impact does your ministry expect it to have?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: I will let the deputy further elaborate on your question.

Ms. Renu Kulendran: Thank you, Minister.

My name is Renu Kulendran. I'm the deputy minister responsible for the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery.

I thank the member for the question. There are a number of changes in our budget. Some of them reflect accounting

changes—for example, related to the motor vehicle compensation fund. That is in alignment with an Auditor General recommendation. Others reflect the fact that programs and services have transferred to other ministries as a result of the changes that happened last year. For example, responsibility for supply chain has moved to the ministry of the Treasury Board. Some of the accounting changes related to consumer services are related to expenditures that were previously allocated to a consumer services tool for businesses. So there are a number of changes that relate to the organizational changes for the ministry.

I will also ask my colleague who's the chief administrative officer to come join us—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I'm quite satisfied with the answers so far.

I want to dig a little bit deeper into ServiceOntario. I recently had to renew a health card. Like everybody else, I wanted to have a new photo. It has been 10 years—I thought I'd update myself, and I didn't want to hide behind a photo that was just too young. It took a pretty long time, to be quite honest. While I was sitting there for two hours, waiting to get a photo, I was also seeing that the entire room was filled with people, and this was just at 777 Bay Street.

ServiceOntario is now seeing a cut of \$3 million. Can Ontarians now expect a longer wait time when accessing services at ServiceOntario?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: I'll apologize for the experience or the delay that you had.

I'm really proud of the team at ServiceOntario, across the province, who have been doing a really good job. As I mentioned in my statement earlier, we are bringing a lot of services online to make sure Ontarians can get these services in the comfort of their home, whether they are renewing their driver's licence, health card, accessible parking permit or so many other services.

Again, our priority, my priority is to make sure that Ontarians get the best service possible that they truly deserve.

I'll ask the deputy to further elaborate on the great work that we are doing at ServiceOntario.

Ms. Renu Kulendran: Thank you to the member for the question.

We are certainly investing a lot in transforming our services at ServiceOntario. The minister outlined some of the things that we are doing to provide different channels of service delivery to meet Ontarians where they want to have their services, and that includes innovative new programs like the Digital Dealership Registration program.

We have been steadily expanding the number of services that we provide online, including expanding in May 2022 to specifically support stakeholders with accessibility challenges—the ability to renew their health cards online using the Ontario photo card.

1430

We've also introduced, since last year, online renewals for commercial vehicle plates, farm vehicles, buses and school buses, and making these conveniences easier to access. We have about 55 different services now that we offer online, and I'll ask my colleague Nelson Loureiro to come and talk a little bit about those service improvements—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: That's not necessary.

Ms. Renu Kulendran: Oh, sorry.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: It's not necessary because I have a few more questions. I want to make sure I get through it.

That was very helpful; thank you for that. I do appreciate the big effort—the big push, I'm going to call it—to move everything online.

The briefing book also outlines that enterprise business and financial services are now seeing—well, first of all, they provide services to ministries, OPS service employees, agencies, external transfer payment partners and BPS entities, as well as the public. Obviously, this type of program delivered through enterprise business and financial services is pretty core to making sure that government actually works. If you don't pay your vendors or you don't pay your suppliers, nothing is going to come back.

So, I'm just curious to know: Why is the government cutting almost \$60 million from that service line?

Ms. Renu Kulendran: I'm going to start to respond. I'm going to ask my colleague Jackie Korecki to join us at the table as well.

As I mentioned earlier, some of this reflects accounting changes with the transition of the supply chain program to the Ministry of the Treasury Board, and some of the other organizational changes that have occurred over the past year. Also, the accounting treatment related to the motor vehicle compensation fund, which I mentioned, was aligned with a recommendation by the Auditor General.

Maybe I'll ask Jackie to talk about the transition at a high level.

Ms. Jackie Korecki: Hi, I'm Jackie Korecki. I am currently chief supply chain operations officer with Supply Ontario, but was assistant deputy minister of Supply Chain Ontario in the ministry previously.

We have recently transitioned Supply Chain Ontario into Supply Ontario, and so that has made changes to how the finances will look going forward. Last year, however, there were changes in accounting treatment for the personal protective equipment and critical supplies and equipment budget. They were previously recorded as operating expenses, and now as statutory expenses, so it's a very large reduction in operating expenses but you see a corresponding increase.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you. That answer was very helpful.

Item number 1816 outlines the roles and responsibility of the consumer services branch. The government estimates that they will be spending \$224,000 less on consumer services this year. When we actually compare this to the actuals of 2021-22, it looks like it's now a \$3-million reduction. What items from consumer protection is the government actually cutting? And is consumer protection still going to be an ongoing priority for the government?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: I'll definitely pass this on to the deputy to further elaborate on your question.

Ms. Renu Kulendran: Thank you to the member for the question. Absolutely, consumer protection is a high priority for government, from both a direct service-delivery

perspective as well as an oversight perspective. That is why we recently consulted with a wide variety of stakeholders and communities on our new consumer protection reforms. We held quite a few round tables and consultations and received many submissions. The submission period closed in March of this year.

We're now reviewing the recommendations that were brought forward in many areas of consumer protection, and across the consumer protection space, we continue to make regulatory changes and find opportunities to ensure the legislative frameworks not only of the ministry, but our entire ecosystem of consumer protection.

With respect to the specific line item change that you mentioned, I mentioned earlier that the consumer services operations division is developing a best tool, and I'm going to ask my colleague Barbara Duckitt to talk a little bit about it. Essentially, it's to help support business compliance, and it was a one-time expenditure. That's why that notation is different in terms of the amount that you mentioned.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: So, essentially, once you spent the money and the program was executed, it wasn't planned to come back. Is that correct?

Ms. Renu Kulendran: It's to develop a technological tool.

I will ask Barb to talk a little bit about the work of the consumer services operations division.

Ms. Barbara Duckitt: My name is Barbara Duckitt. I'm the assistant deputy minister for the consumer services operations division at the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery.

Thank you very much for the question. Yes, as the deputy mentioned, this was monies we received to develop a tool, and that involved engaging services external to do user research to make sure that as we move forward with proactive tools and information for businesses—to actually help them comply. We're actually meeting their needs and providing it in a form that's useful to them. Now that we have completed that work and we have that information, we will, within our own division, continue to be developing the products.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Then, with respect to the government services integration centre, which saw that \$9 million cut—what was that \$9 million about, and will it actually affect the service levels?

Ms. Renu Kulendran: I can take that question, Minister.

No, that is just an adjustment related to the government services cluster. It is a minor adjustment to take into account expenditures that were time-limited from last year, and that's why the amount is smaller.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: So Ontarians can expect to at least be able to see the same service levels? They won't be reduced, they may not be enhanced, but they're going to be roughly the same?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you, MPP, for your concern. Absolutely; the number one priority is that Ontarians continue to get the best service possible when it comes to, whether it's—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you. That's all the time we have for this round.

We'll now turn to the government for 20 minutes. MPP Coe, you may begin.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you very much for being with us this afternoon, and thank you for all the work that you've done in strengthening consumer protections across Ontario—and they've been significant.

From time to time, as you would expect, in constituency offices, you get constituents coming in with questions and concerns about a variety of areas. One of the more recent occurrences has had to do with real estate transactions. When you step back and you look at the rules and regulations—and they're not something that you would normally be looking at regularly, unless you're considering purchasing a house or condominium or some type of accommodation along those lines. And I appreciate that it has evolved.

I think for the purposes of your presentation today, it would be very helpful for those watching or those listening in and for the general record overall if you could take a little time to tell us about the changes, Minister, your ministry has made to the Real Estate and Business Brokers Act through the Trust in Real Estate Services Act. And more importantly—because this is what you've done in other categories across the province in helping other people—how is that going to help Ontario homebuyers?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you very much, MPP Coe, for your question.

Honestly, the real estate industry in Ontario has significantly changed since REBBA first became law. That's why the ministry took action to introduce legislative amendments to REBBA to ensure that rules of real estate brokerages, brokers, salespersons and registrants reflect contemporary business practices.

The Trust in Real Estate Services Act, 2020, as you mentioned, that amends REBBA, the legislation that governs Ontario real estate registrants—TRESA, 2020, was passed in February 2020 and received royal assent, I believe, in March 2020. Then, on October 1, 2020, parts of TRESA, 2020, and related regulations came into force. The changes allow real estate salespersons and brokers to actually incorporate and be paid through a personal real estate corporation. In addition, the registrants are now able to use terms such as “real estate agent” and “realtors,” where applicable, to describe salespersons and brokers in their advertisements.

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I'll pass it on to the deputy to further elaborate on your question. Thank you for the question.

Ms. Renu Kulendran: Thank you, member, for the question.

I will ask my colleague Michèle Sanborn to join us. She's the assistant deputy minister responsible for oversight of our delegated administrative authorities and policy.

The ministry has done quite a bit to enhance the real estate council's tools and powers. Together with the legislative changes made in the Trust in Real Estate Services Act, we've got more tools at legal disposal to focus its

compliance and enforcement efforts, and I'm going to ask my colleague to talk a little more about them.

Ms. Michèle Sanborn: Good afternoon. I'm Michèle Sanborn. I'm the assistant deputy minister of the policy, planning and oversight division.

Thank you for the question. Yes, TRESA has been a big focus for the ministry. It has been a three-year journey for us, and some important changes will be coming into play in December 2023. The minister and the deputy have talked about some of the changes, but I did want to focus on one important piece, because I think it's very relevant to the answer, and that is the updated code of ethics. I think that's kind of at the heart of the question, in terms of the behavioural real estate agents and actually the consumer protections. It's part of TRESA, and it's part of the regulatory framework that's associated with the legislation. The code of ethics will be updated, and with that will be new powers for the Real Estate Council of Ontario to enforce that code of ethics; this will have such things as imposing conditions on a licence, being able to take clear action with a real estate agent in terms of the registrant's licensing. So I think that's a really important consumer protection.

In addition, I think the deputy talked about some of the other changes that the legislation will have that will significantly modernize the framework in the province—designated representation, for example, that will give buyers and brokerages more flexibility in terms of how they want to transact in that transaction.

In addition, there will be more flexibility in terms of sharing the content of an offer. At the seller's discretion, if the seller chooses to share the content of offers, that is now going to be permitted as part of the transaction.

So there are a lot of different changes.

I will just add that the entire initiative has included a lot of engagement with consumers, a lot of engagement with the real estate sector to really make sure that we strike the right balance between burden and between the changes the sector would have to make, and those consumer protections.

We'll continue to work with the sector and the Real Estate Council of Ontario in rolling this out, because an important component will, of course, be to ensure that consumers understand these changes, that consumers can take advantage of these changes, and that the registrants also understand their duties and obligations, and so we're fully committed to doing that.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you for that response. At the end of the day, it has improved consumer choice for homebuyers.

Chair—and through you, to my colleagues, I know, who have further questions.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Dixon.

Ms. Jess Dixon: Minister, you've spoken quite a lot about the new digital age, the online age, and obviously, for many Ontarians, that also raises the question of cyber security. Now, I know that you obviously wouldn't be getting into details about our cyber security mechanisms, but I think even just yesterday I wasn't able to access the

weather because the Weather Network app was down due to a cyber security attack, of all things. So I wonder if you can talk a little bit more the plans for cyber security and securing the digital data of Ontarians.

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you so much, MPP Dixon, for the question. I always say that cyber security is very, very important to me. I always say that apart from my five kids keeping me up at night, cyber security is something that keeps me up at night as well. Imagine being responsible for almost 16 million Ontarians, give or take, and their data and their information.

I'm really proud of the team behind me here right now, who have done an incredible job in making sure that Ontarians' information is secured and protected. That's why, about a year and a half ago, we formed a committee, a task force, that actually looked into how we can make sure that Ontarians' information is protected. That committee actually gave us some really good feedback, and we actually are now in a process of also trying to work with the broader public sector as well, because, again, it's the same individuals. As you represent the riding, your municipalities also hold your information, similar to the province, and we want to make sure that we are collaborating with everyone.

Again, we hear news out there every day about cyber security and attacks and that's why I always say to the team here that we have to make sure that we are on top of things. It's like all these individuals, the bad actors, are always a step ahead of things. But what we are doing here, with an incredible team behind me and under the leadership of the deputy over here, is they are making sure they're always on top.

That's why we work, actually, with the private sector as well. We make sure that we understand and see what are the latest trends of attacks that are happening, to make sure that we are able to understand and be proactive rather than reactive, because the last thing you want is that, God forbid, something happens and the entire system is down.

I'm sure the deputy would love to elaborate further on the great work we are doing in cyber security. Deputy, please.

Ms. Renu Kulendran: Thank you, Minister. Thank you to the member. While I'm talking, I'm going to also introduce Ontario's Chief Corporate Information Officer, Mohammad Qureshi, who is just behind me on his way up here.

Just to reiterate what minister said, we have a comprehensive program in the Ontario public sector to safeguard ministry data and also the data of the people and businesses of Ontario. We monitor Ontario's public service network 24/7 for evidence of intrusion, malicious activity and cyber threats, and we deliver cyber-risk advice to our partners within the Ontario Public Service and also the broader public sector.

Our cyber security operations centre operates 24/7, seven days a week, 365 days a year, and monitors the electronic network. We provide a rapid response. We work very closely with our partners in Public Safety Canada, communications security in the Ontario Provincial Police, the Provincial Security Advisor and the RCMP. So we have access to this broader network of expertise, so that

we get early insights around emerging threats as well, and we're constantly connected.

But I'm going to turn it over to Mohammad to talk more about his team and the work that they do.

Mr. Mohammad Qureshi: Thank you, Deputy, and thank you to the member for the question. My name is Mohammad Qureshi. I'm corporate CIO and associate deputy minister within MPBSD, leading the IT organization.

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Ever since this government has taken over, they have made significant investments in cyber security. I think that's just in recognition of the threat that cyber security is across the world, not just within Ontario or within Canada. We see cyber security risk growing rapidly every single day across the industry, and the team that we have in MPBSD really has a great passion and takes it to heart to ensure that we keep the data of Ontario citizens safe and secure. By doing so, we work with ministries across the board, as the deputy had already mentioned, really providing cyber risk advice to all of the ministries. As we start digitizing our services across government, we really do embed cyber security professionals right into project teams to ensure that we're taking a security-and-privacy-by-design approach to all systems and all solutions that we develop.

The minister also mentioned that the ministry did work with the cyber expert panel back in late last year, around October 2022. There was a report that was released around the cyber expert panel, making recommendations to this government around what additional things could we be doing, not just within the OPS, but also broadly across the BPS to support digital resiliency across the ecosystem. And I will say that the cyber security team within MPBSD has made great strides from 2018, until the current day, just improving the cyber security maturity where we are now one of the leading organizations and practices across our other counterparts in public service, when we did our last independent audit around cyber security maturity across the OPS.

Ms. Jess Dixon: Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Hogarth?

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you, Minister, for being here. Cyber security: I was really interested in that answer because it is so important, and it's something we do in our everyday lives. Now, Minister, you mentioned cyber security is very important and you also mentioned bad actors. My question is actually around consumer protection, because, once again, it's very important and there are bad actors out there. We have to make sure people are protected when they go shopping, when they buy online. We have to protect not just regular Ontarians, but also our business.

Our Consumer Protection Act: I think you mentioned it in your opening remarks. You've done some consultations, but it hasn't been really reviewed since 2005. I'm wondering if you can elaborate on what you heard in those consultations, and—I don't know if you're able to share this today—where your ministry plans on going to protect our most vulnerable, our victims.

We certainly don't want to see scams and victims of fraud. We all hear that in our constituency offices. We get

those calls. We all get those calls ourselves. Once they find your number, they keep calling you back. So obviously, that's an educational program, to get that information out to people—maybe not to get sucked into those scams. But can you just elaborate on what your ministry is doing to protect and inform people so they can shop with confidence?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you very much, MPP Hogarth, for your question. One thing after becoming the minister, I had my first conversation with the team about how we can protect consumers. And as you rightly mention, as a member of provincial Parliament myself for my own Mississauga East–Cooksville riding, we hear stories about the bad actors taking advantage of the most vulnerable community members or members of our community.

As you mentioned, actually, the last time the act made some changes was 2002. So just think about that. Since 2002, things have changed. Things have moved online, and yet, we are still in that old 2002 Consumer Protection Act. That's why—again, thanks to the incredible team over here—we decided to see. “Let's go out, have a consultation and understand what the market requirements are. Talk to businesses, talk to individuals and see, if someone is knocking on your door, what are your rights?” I want to make sure that Ontarians have the confidence, before they put the ink on the signature line, that their government has their back. That's why we are continuously having these conversations and consultations. We all take consumer protection very seriously and continue to take necessary actions to protect Ontarians from scams and bad actors. We want to continue to create and promote safe and ethical business practices in the province of Ontario.

We continue to focus on modernizing and streamlining the Consumer Protection Act. As mentioned, this act has not undergone changes since 2002. We understand and that's why we know that the businesses and consumers engaging in the marketplace have significantly changed in the recent years. The CPA requires a comprehensive review and honestly, I would say, a catch-up. Now, we do everything on our devices and we want to make sure that whatever purchase you are making online, you have the confidence. And that's why we focused heavily on understanding the market, but also getting the feedback from individuals and businesses.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Earlier this year in 2023, we published a consultation paper, as I said, seeking for a comprehensive review. We did encourage businesses and consumers to review the proposals, which intend to help strengthening consumer protection. I know Premier Ford always talks about the individuals, the Ontarians, and how we can protect them, and that's why I am, and we as a ministry are, so focused on making sure that Ontarians understand that any purchase—and we hear stories about HVACs all the time, as well. I know colleagues from both sides have come and talked to me about how these bad actors are taking advantage especially of our senior members of our community—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you very much. That's all the time that we have for this round.

We'll now turn to the official opposition. MPP Glover, you may begin.

Mr. Chris Glover: Thank you to the minister for being here and for your comments and responses today.

You mentioned at the beginning of your statement that a home purchase is often the biggest purchase that people will make in their lifetimes and that it deserves to be protected. There was a government consultation document that came out in June of this year called Price Escalations and Consumer Protections Related to New Home Purchase Agreements. I believe it came out in response to a number of cases, but one in particular where a developer told homebuyers that had already purchased their homes, signed the contract, paid their deposit, that if they wanted to actually continue to buy the home that they had already purchased, they would have to pay an additional \$175,000.

And so in this consultation paper, there's some real concerning questions that the ministry was asking and one of them was whether they should cap price escalations. And the danger with capping price escalations is that, if there's price escalations that are allowed, then the consumer doesn't know how much they're paying. This is a real concern. So is your ministry going to be allowing escalations in prices after consumers have purchased their home?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you very much, MPP Glover, for your question. A part of our ministry's administrative authority is the HCRA, which is the Home Construction Regulatory Authority. The whole thing is that we need to hold bad actors accountable, as you rightly said in your question. That's why we are taking actions. Just today, the HCRA has taken action against two Ontario home builders due to the concern of improper conduct, and that's why we want to make sure, as I said in my statement as well, that Ontarians—

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Mr. Chris Glover: My question is about price escalations. Is your government going to allow price escalations after a contract is signed? Because that, in terms of consumer confidence—if I'm buying a home and an average home in Ontario is \$1 million now and if, after I purchase it, the developer says, “Oh, I'm allowed by this government to increase the price by 10%, 20%,” how could I possibly, as a homebuyer, account for that? How can I plan for it? If I sign a contract, I need specifics. I need to know what I'm responsible for, and I need to know what the home builder's responsible for. And this consultation paper from your government seems to indicate that you're going to give the home builders the option of increasing prices. So are you or are you not going to give home builders that option?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you very much for your follow-up question. Actually, part of the consultation is to make sure when individuals are signing that piece of contract that they understand, and that's why we are currently doing that consultation to understand, because I have seen and heard stories, to your point, about after-the-fact things happening, and that's why not just only HCRA but we also want to make sure that individuals have the time to read the contract and are not rushed into signing—

Mr. Chris Glover: Thank you for your response, but reading the contract doesn't make it viable for me as a

homebuyer or for other Ontarians as homebuyers if we don't know whether the price we're paying is \$1 million or \$1.1 million or \$1.2 million or whatever the cost is.

The other thing is that in most home contracts there is an addendum that's 40 to 60 pages long, and it's used by developers to protect their interests. This document has even been criticized by lawyers and judges. Basically it gives the builders the ability to change the design of the home, the timing of the completion, and now what you're proposing is the actual cost. This is a real concern.

I've seen it on contracts. When I've looked to buy a condo, I've seen it where it says, "Your condo may be between 600 square feet, give or take 10%." Surely they have the blueprints. How can consumers in Ontario be confident in buying a home in this province—and this is your ministry's responsibility—if they don't know what size the house is going to be and they don't know how much they're going to be paying for it and they don't know the timing of the completion? Those are the three essential elements of the contract that should be nailed down so that the homebuyer knows what they're getting.

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: I appreciate your follow-up question. Actually we are reviewing the consultation, but I know, Deputy, if you can further elaborate as part of the consultation and the process please?

Ms. Renu Kulendran: I'm happy to, and I'll also ask my colleague Michèle Sanborn to join us at the table again. But I'll say that we expect all builders and vendors of new homes to operate in a professional manner, with fairness, honesty and integrity towards consumers, including pricing.

Yes, you referred to the consultation that has happened, for which we are reviewing feedback. We consulted with consumers; we consulted with a wide spectrum of stakeholders. However, there are a number of tools that we have in place to address unethical behaviour by builders, including through the Home Construction Regulatory Authority. Through the More Homes for Everyone Act, we have enhanced the role of the discipline committee so, for contraventions of its code of ethics, fines have increased from \$50,000 for individual licensees and \$100,000. And so—

Mr. Chris Glover: I appreciate that response. How much time have I got left?

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): You have 13 minutes.

Mr. Chris Glover: Okay.

I appreciate the response. My question is: The average home in Ontario is \$1 million, and currently, with these addendums that the home builders built into their contracts, the buyer doesn't know when their home is going to be completed, they don't know the quality of the home or even the size of the condo, for example, that they're building. What the government's consultation paper suggests is that they're going to allow developers to increase the cost after the homebuyer has signed the contract. If you build that into the code, the act, or into your regulations, then the home builder would not even be in violation of those regulations; they would be exercising the powers that your government has given them.

So the concern is, are you going to allow home builders to escalate the price after a contract has been signed?

Ms. Michèle Sanborn: Thank you for the question. It was our paper in the policy area.

I thought I would just step back to your comments on the addenda, because I think that's really important. You rightly note that there is a lot of detail in the addenda, and some of that detail allows for the changing of pricing. The intent of the consultation was to look at how those price increases could potentially be capped. That was really the policy intent. We had heard over the past two years from home purchasers, from consumers, about price escalations at various points in the purchase process, mostly around closing time. The purpose of the paper is to be asking everyone in the sector and the consumers around possible parameters and caps around what those increases could be, because they can vary depending on the agreement of purchase and sale—you talk about the addenda; it's the addenda to the agreement of purchase and sale. So it was really meant to be an engagement around that concept of what is happening in the market, how these price escalations need to be looked at, how they could potentially be capped from all sides—from the consumer, from the builder side, and from the sector overall in terms of housing—in conjunction with those other safeguards: mandatory legal review, a cooling-off period, as well. Those three things were meant to be consultation around consumer protection, together as a bundle.

Mr. Chris Glover: Thank you for that response.

I would strongly recommend that homebuyers in Ontario need to know the quality of the place that they're buying; they need to know the size of the home that they're buying; they need to know when it's going to be completed, if it's a new build; and they need to know what price they're paying. Otherwise, they cannot have confidence. That is this ministry's responsibility. So I ask you to build those into the contract, rather than going on a consultation to allow home builders to escalate prices after the contract has been signed.

I'll pass it to my colleague MPP Wong-Tam.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Wong-Tam.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Just following up on my colleague's questions: Recognizing that this ministry has the responsibility for consumer protection, I'm sure that the minister is aware that there is a lot of frustration out there in the marketplace, especially for homebuyers, with respect to not getting the product that they rightfully paid for but also that they expect. There's a bond and a trust that goes into an agreement of purchase and sale—and for a lot of first-time buyers, it is their dream home. They have saved and really cut expenses in a time when everything is expensive. Getting the keys to their home and then being rapidly disappointed with the outcome is a story that we've heard too much of.

Certainly, having the Home Construction Regulatory Authority, which is now the successor to Tarion—I received over 800 complaints as of last year alone and that there was not anything that was dealt before the disciplinary committee. We know that there's no builder code of conduct—and there hasn't been before 2021; in its 43-year existence, there hasn't been one.

We know that Tarion, or the HCRA, as we now know it to be, is funded to the tune of \$500,000 or \$600,000 per purchase in Ontario. All of that cost is borne by the homeowner. That is a significant amount of money that goes into “consumer protection,” and yet, at the same time, there isn’t a single case that’s been posted on the HCRA/Tarion discipline committee website.

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Homebuyers in Ontario want to be able to put their money into that home ownership, which is their lifelong dream, and they want to know that they can do that safely, and they need to know that the government has their back.

So can you explain to me, Minister, why it is that we haven’t seen the HCRA take action in ensuring that bad developers who don’t deliver the product as promised, who’ve overcharged their customers, their clients—why is it that they’re not being held responsible?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you very much, MPP Wong-Tam, for your question.

Actually, just today, HCRA has taken action against two Ontario home builders. As I said in my initial statement, I want to make sure that Ontarians feel that their government has their back when it comes to the biggest purchase of their life, and that is a home. That’s why we continue to consult. But I’m really happy that HCRA is taking the necessary step—along with working with Tarion.

I’m sure the deputy will elaborate more on the technical side, as well.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Before the deputy minister does that, I just want to highlight that you’ve said that they’ve taken action against two home builders. There have been 800 cases that have been filed since February 2021, and the HCRA says that only 10% have proceeded with an investigation. That is a significant shortfall to even meeting the needs of the consumers. So how can we possibly take this authority seriously? This is their job. Their job is to regulate. Your job is to protect the consumer. Why is it that consumers are not being protected? And what has happened to those cases that aren’t being investigated?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you, MPP Wong-Tam, for your follow-up.

These actions taken by HCRA are based on evidence and information to support the allegations of—they have to actually look at all the details and take appropriate action. And this is not just two, but they have taken actions in the last few months as well—but maybe, Deputy, if you want to elaborate more on the certain actions they have taken?

Ms. Renu Kulendran: Thank you, Minister, and thank you to the member.

I just want to clarify that Tarion is still a delegated administrative authority. It runs the home warranty program, and HCRA is the regulator. There are protections that have been made to enhance the work that Tarion does, as well as additional tools for the HCRA.

Thus far in 2023, Tarion has made regulatory changes that enhance protections for new homebuyers, including increasing the warranty cap for freehold homes to \$400,000 to better align with the costs associated with new home

construction in Ontario, and establishing a new temporary accommodation warranty that will provide per diems up to \$15,000 for homeowners who have to relocate. These regulations came into force this July. Previously, the ministry made a number of regulatory changes to enhance transparency for consumers and new home buyers with respect to Tarion to provide information around condo project cancellations and the number of condo purchase agreements terminated by vendors, through no fault of the purchaser, for the Home Construction Regulatory Authority to post on the Ontario Builder Directory, which is a publicly available directory that allows potential homebuyers to be able to track the record of builders in Ontario.

In 2021, we also enhanced the dispute resolution and new home warranty claims processes through changes in the Ontario New Home Warranties Plan Act. That simplifies the process for consumers by helping them through the process of making a claim and providing more transparency in that process.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I’m just curious, considering that you’ve just outlined that there is significant work under way. But we are hearing from people who are stuck in the queue. They’ve filed their complaint, they’ve paid their money and they’re stuck. They’ve been stuck there for years, and \$15,000, potentially, if you get it back from Tarion to relocate, is really nothing when they’ve been languishing for years—perhaps now holding a mortgage that they have to pay for. They’ve closed on a deal, and they still can’t move in because of shoddy products; the home is unsafe for them to live in for whatever reason.

So I really want to understand: How is the government prioritizing? Because you told me you were going to prioritize consumer protection. Given all that we know about the failing of Tarion and the HCRA, how are you prioritizing these buyers of their dream homes? Because now they’re turning into nightmares.

Ms. Renu Kulendran: Thank you—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: The question is for the minister.

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Oh. Thank you so much, MPP Wong-Tam. That’s exactly what we are doing. We are making sure that these administrative authorities, such as the HCRA, are taking appropriate action in a way that these individuals—again, going back to my earlier comment, I want to make sure that when Ontarians are signing that piece of paper, they know that their government has their back. That’s why HCRA has been taking appropriate actions—and, as I mentioned today, in the news, as well.

Maybe, Michèle, if you want to talk more and further elaborate on the question from MPP Wong-Tam.

Ms. Michèle Sanborn: Maybe I’ll start with Tarion, and then answer a few of the issues around the HCRA.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

Ms. Michèle Sanborn: Some of the changes that have been made as a result of some of the issues that consumers have raised have resulted in some recent changes to the Tarion framework. For example, the warranty amount has increased by \$100,000; it has gone from \$300,000 to \$400,000. Tarion has also created a new fund for families

to access, to the total of \$15,000, while their home is being repaired.

In addition, Tarion did a number of consultations to improve their customer service standard and to really allow the consumer, in the first year of occupying the house, to have more flexibility in terms of the timelines in flagging the defects in the home. Those are just some of the changes that Tarion has made.

I just wanted to quickly talk about the HCRA complaints that you raised. The HCRA, correctly, has received—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you. That's all the time that we have for this round.

We'll now turn to the government side for 20 minutes. MPP Saunderson, you may begin.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Thank you, Minister, Deputy Minister and staff. You clearly have a broad scope, judging from the number of individuals we have in the room to help bat for you, so you have a great deal of responsibility.

I can say, as a former lawyer in the real estate sector, that I have worked with Tarion, and I applaud the government for your measures, proactively, to assist consumers when they're purchasing something such as a home to get legal advice and to understand and to have a cooling-off period. Those are two large issues that, in my practice, I know would have greatly assisted a number of the clients that I had who also dealt with Tarion. I'm happy to see the numbers being increased for the automatic warranty. That's important work, and thank you for that.

My question, though, is going to talk about the ontario.ca website. You gave some impressive statistics of how in 2019, there were, I think, just under 83 million, to 2022, where there were over 137 million hits, a 67% increase. I know in my riding of Simcoe–Grey, we have a lot of small businesses; we have a lot of entrepreneurs who need easy access to government services so that they can navigate and get answers to their questions, so that they can comply with all the regulations around small business, to make sure that they are compliant and that their consumers' interests are being protected.

But I've also heard from a number of my residents that navigation of the system, because it's so broad in scope, is often difficult, and it's difficult to get to the right place at the right time. I'm wondering if you can talk about the efforts you're making with your ministry to streamline that process so that it's easier to navigate, so that there's connectivity, not only the access to the services, but that it's easier for them to find them.

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: I appreciate it, and thank you very much, MPP Saunderson, for your question. As I said in my initial comments as well, we want to make sure that we are making Ontarians' lives as easy as possible.

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I remember those days when you would go on a website to go through 10 different options before you reach that one page that you were looking for. That's why what we did is we said, "Okay, how can we streamline the process?" That's exactly what Premier Ford always talks about, streamlining the process, and we said, "Okay."

Again, kudos to this incredible team sitting here. They have worked diligently in making sure—and this all started during the pandemic, because we wanted to make sure that Ontarians have access to all the information. That's why ontario.ca is somewhat like a one-stop-shop website where, when you go on that website, you can access any page of other ministries through that one ontario.ca. That's why I always say it's like a single window for business as well. Especially when it comes to businesses, we want to make sure that we are putting not just only the people, but businesses at the centre of everything, making sure that they get faster, easier and more convenient access to all the information.

Even though I was not the minister at that time, the team sitting here did a really fantastic job in making sure that individuals can get access to the vaccine information or booking tools. Ontario.ca also allows them to get access to ServiceOntario, as well, and all those appointment bookings and everything. We continue to make sure that we make everything easily accessible for Ontarians to have access to all the information.

I always say ontario.ca/business also makes life easy for entrepreneurs to just know how to start a business, as well. Again, we want individuals making a decision to start a business, as an example, to just go on ontario.ca/business and they can have all the information; ontario.ca/serviceontario, all the information. That's why it has become a hub, a one-stop-shop place where Ontarians can go and get all the details.

I don't know, Deputy, if you want to further elaborate on the great work the team is doing on ontario.ca.

Ms. Renu Kulendran: Sure, I can talk a bit more about the work we're doing. I'd also like to introduce our Chief Digital and Data Officer, John Roberts, who can talk a bit more about some of the specific initiatives like the single window for business.

But just to say, we've been in a multi-year process of migrating content to ontario.ca from many ministries and organizing it in a user-friendly way based on user research, so work that is conducted by our staff that engages the public, that engages business in terms of curating the information and making it easily accessible so that kind of navigation comes a lot sooner—fewer clicks. We work across government with many ministries to support that work. In fact, last year we served over 137 million visits hosted on ontario.ca.

I'll ask John Roberts to talk a bit more about the work that's being done to support businesses in terms of navigating what can be sometimes challenging in terms of multiple regulatory frameworks in government.

Mr. John Roberts: Thank you very much for the question. My name is John Roberts. I'm the associate deputy minister for privacy, archives, digital and data; the Chief Digital and Data Officer for the province; and also I'm the Archivist of Ontario and Chief Privacy Officer, so a number of titles.

As the deputy and the minister have said, we really appreciate that provision of information is a foundational online service, and being able to find that information simply

and easily and have confidence in it is a core service that ontario.ca offers. In attempting to meet that need for Ontario businesses, it was important that we didn't just decide for them what information they needed or what their pain points were, so we have consulted extensively, and part of our services is a user research lab where businesses and consumers can come in and actually we can see how they navigate the site to ensure that we're observing not just what we think or what they think but the actual behaviours that people demonstrate. We can see where they are failing to find information, where they are misinterpreting things, and that feeds into the design of a highly citizen-centric and business-centric website that is intended to really meet what people need and what businesses need.

And in engagement with businesses, what they told us very clearly and what we saw from working with them in the lab was two things: A consolidated one-stop shop for information, everything from soup to nuts, particularly around the supports that the government offers for businesses, how to claim taxes, all the various aspects; and secondly, a real focus on staffing and growing a business. That's a particular pain point for many small businesses where they are needing to engage with multiple ministries, multiple programs, understand the right sequencing, the dependencies between what we appreciate is a complex environment. So those were the two focus areas as we built out the single window, the ontario.ca/business that the minister mentioned. That has proven to be very attractive. We've seen nearly a million visits since that was established—956,000 is the last number that I have.

A particular tool that was developed was around the starter business. To make sure that people had an easy self-guided way of working through the different pieces, a very effective tool was developed that enables a small-business owner to provide information about their situation, the nature of their business, where they're at in the process, and to generate a personalized checklist that will help them step-by-step through the process. Again, because that was what people said they wanted and we listened to them, we've seen it be very heavily used; 13,000 businesses have downloaded that checklist already to guide themselves through the process.

Because ontario.ca is a platform that is designed to be creating reusable tools, reusable patterns, we were also able to use some of the existing functionality. For example, we have a very good geospatial tool that enables people to understand and find where ServiceOntario offices are. For businesses, that could be readily repurposed to help them find the Small Business Enterprise Centres, the 47 supports that are available to them right across the province for assistance in building out their business. Again, this is part of the philosophy of building a platform that creates reusable components, listening to users and businesses, working with them in a hands-on way to understand their behaviour and make sure that we build something that is really meeting their needs and that is a platform that we can continue to iterate as we hear more from businesses and observe their behaviours and observe their feedback using the tools that have been provided and continue to build that out over time.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Kusendova-Bashta?

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you so much, Minister and deputies and to the entire team for coming and presenting and giving us this very valuable information.

I just wanted to ask about one of my favourite subjects, and that is our Franco-Ontarian community. September 25 is coming up; it is Franco-Ontarian Day. The minister and I often discuss actually how we can improve our services to our francophone population. We have 700,000 Franco-Ontarians living in this province, which is the largest francophone community outside of Quebec. We do have 1.5 million French-language speakers, and that population keeps on growing. We're seeing a lot of immigration coming especially from African countries that are French-language speakers, and so it is really important that we continue providing good French-language services.

We have 26 designated regions across the province of Ontario—with one more coming online very shortly; Sarnia will be our 27th designated region in the province of Ontario—where about 80% of our francophone population lives. I know that in every single one of those 27 designated regions we have multiple ServiceOntario locations. Minister, can you tell us about some of the initiatives that your ministry has put forward to really ensure that we have adequate services for our francophone population?

1530

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you very much, MPP Kusendova-Bashta, for your question, and thank you for always being a champion for the francophone community. As you and I have talked about a few times, we are committed to delivering the highest-quality customer service to Ontarians in both official languages, to meet the needs of our francophone community, and especially our francophone customers.

Franco-Ontarians have broad access to French-language services when they visit almost 111 out of 276 service centres in 26 designated communities. They can call the bilingual contact centre or complete any of the more than 55 services available online 24/7.

To better serve the francophone community—and we have talked about this—the Ontario government offers the option of French-language characters on Ontario's drivers' licenses, Ontario photo cards and Ontario health cards. Ontario's francophone community can also conveniently access vital documents that reflect their unique identity for free through ServiceOntario centres across our province.

But I would love for the deputy to further elaborate on the great work we are doing at ServiceOntario to support the francophone community.

Ms. Renu Kulendran: I'm happy to. Thank you, Minister and thank you to the member. I'm going to ask my colleague Nelson Loureiro to come and speak to some of the great work of our ServiceOntario team.

We know we can still do better, so we're continuously piloting approaches, and part of that includes how not only can we offer services in French, but other languages, so we've got a pilot that's aimed at doing so. I'm going to ask Nelson to talk a little bit about it and the kind of things that

we're trying to do, location by location, to improve customer service in Ontario at ServiceOntario locations.

Mr. Nelson Loureiro: Thank you, Deputy, and thank you, member, for the question. My name is Nelson Loureiro. I am the assistant deputy minister of the customer care division.

As the deputy mentioned, we are always looking to improve our services to francophone Ontarians. And to the member from Sarnia: We're ready in Sarnia. We are ready to deliver those services in French. In all our spaces, whether it be digital, on the phone or the front counter, we are always looking to deliver services to our Franco-Ontarians, not only in designated communities—the minister mentioned the designated communities where we deliver the services—but we are looking to, “How do we deliver in all our communities, in all our centres, in many languages?”

We are piloting translation devices, for instance, in all our communities, so if somebody walks in and requires a service in a different language, we have 86 iPads right now, distributed across the province, to deliver those services. We are also looking at video channels. As the minister mentioned, the pandemic has taught us a lot, and we are looking to video service. If somebody were to walk in and require services in another language, we can provide those services through a video channel as well.

The other aspect, I would say, is that we continue to develop these pilots, we continue to test new approaches, we continue to listen to the customers who walk in every day and we continue to seek feedback from that perspective. We are looking to continue to improve and looking to continue to deliver more services to Ontarians in the language of preference.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Jones.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Through you, Chair: Thank you, Minister, for your leadership and for your team's efforts to truly modernize vital government services while ensuring easy access to them for everyone.

We've heard a lot in the past year about work being done to modernize many of the services and to make them more easily accessible and online. In my riding of Chatham-Kent-Leamington, we have thousands of migrant workers that come from parts of Latin America and around the world to work in farms. I want to commend the agility of your ministry and ServiceOntario to pivot and offer online access and complementary, in-person services to quickly accommodate a number of renewals that were coming through the cycles.

Still, I know we've heard today, in this committee meeting, that there's some persistence of long wait times for in-person services, especially for health card renewals and those photographic renewals that come up during a five- or 10-year cycle.

What is the ministry doing to make improvements, to have easier access to online services for a wide range of services that are essential?

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you very much, MPP Jones, for your question.

I want to start by saying a huge thank you to the ServiceOntario team across the province. They are doing a fantastic job.

We know that as more and more immigrants come into our province—and we welcome them—these services are going to get more and more busy. We have brought a lot of these services online, along with—now you can book an appointment online to go to ServiceOntario, as well. Whether you are renewing your health card, driver's licence—you can do it online. I always say, “Every service that we bring online is one less person in line,” which means that the individuals who are coming into our province are—they did get the opportunity to go in the line and get their health card and, to your point, their driver's licence. But individuals like ourselves, we can do things online, and that's exactly what we are focused on.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute.

Hon. Kaleed Rasheed: Again, we will continue to find ways we can provide these services better in person or online.

Also, we want to make sure that Ontarians can continue to rely on the services that they're getting through the great team at ServiceOntario, here, but also in the field. That's why we are always exploring new ideas, understanding what other jurisdictions are doing and what we can do to make sure that Ontarians can get the service that they truly deserve through ServiceOntario, whether it's the accessible parking permit, because, again, we don't want—when we talk about our most vulnerable, especially the—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you. That's all the time that we have, Minister.

We'll now go back to the official opposition for 20 minutes.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I have no further questions.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Glover?

Mr. Chris Glover: No.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Does the government side have any more questions?

So everyone yields their time? Okay.

Thank you very much, Minister. This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 1801, ministry administration, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 1809, enterprise information, privacy archives, and digital delivery program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 1811, enterprise business and financial services, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 1814, ServiceOntario program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 1816, consumer services, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 1817, Government Services Integration Cluster, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall vote 1821, enterprise information technology services program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the vote carried.

Shall the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the motion carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the motion carried.

Thank you very much. We will now recess until 4:15 p.m.
The committee recessed from 1541 to 1615.

PROTECTION FROM COERCED DEBTS
INCURRED IN RELATION TO HUMAN
TRAFFICKING ACT, 2023

LOI DE 2023 SUR LA PROTECTION
CONTRE LES DETTES CONTRACTÉES
SOUS LA CONTRAINTE
DANS UN CONTEXTE DE TRAITE
DE PERSONNES

Consideration of the following bill:

Bill 41, An Act to amend the Consumer Reporting Act and the Prevention of and Remedies for Human Trafficking Act, 2017 with respect to certain debts incurred in relation to human trafficking / Projet de loi 41, Loi modifiant la Loi sur les renseignements concernant le consommateur et la Loi de 2017 sur la prévention de la traite de personnes et les recours en la matière à l'égard de certaines dettes contractées dans un contexte de traite de personnes.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Good afternoon, members. We are here to conduct clause-by-clause consideration of Bill 41, An Act to amend the Consumer Reporting Act and the Prevention of and Remedies for Human Trafficking Act, 2017 with respect to certain debts incurred in relation to human trafficking. Are there any questions before we begin?

Are there any comments or questions to any section or schedule of the bill? And, if so, to which section? If not, then we will now begin clause-by-clause consideration of the bill.

We now turn to section 1. Are there any comments, questions or amendments to section 1? Actually, there are no amendments to—

Interjection.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Oh sorry. These are amendments. Right. I see. For section 1, there is notice of motion number 0.1 MPP Scott.

Ms. Laurie Scott: I move that section 1 of the bill be amended by striking out clause 9(3)(b.1) of the Consumer Reporting Act and substituting the following:

“(b.1) information respecting any coerced debt within the meaning of section 18 of the Prevention of, Remedies

for and Measures to Support Recovery from Human Trafficking Act, 2017;”

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you. Is there any debate? MPP Scott.

Ms. Laurie Scott: I'll just explain. The new provision has a clear link between human trafficking and coerced debt by engaging the definition of “coerced debt” set out in the bill at section 18.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Further debate? Seeing none, are members prepared to vote? Shall motion 1 carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare motion number 1 carried.

Shall section 1, as amended, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare section 1 carried.

Turning now to section 2, we have motion number 0.2. MPP Scott.

Ms. Laurie Scott: I move that subsection 2(3) of the bill be amended by striking out section 18 of the Prevention of and Remedies for Human Trafficking Act, 2017 and substituting the following:

“Interpretation, ‘coerced debt’

“18. Subject to the regulations, a debt is a coerced debt for the purposes of this part if the debt was incurred as a result of the debtor being subjected to human trafficking.”

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Is there any debate? MPP Scott.

Ms. Laurie Scott: I would just say the definition of “coerced debt” changes from being “incurred while subject to human trafficking” to be “incurred as a result of being subjected to human trafficking.” I can expand more, but that's just the gist of why the definition changes, in consultation with some stakeholders.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Glover.

Mr. Chris Glover: I just have a question on this, and I think you've sort of answered it with what you've said. In consultation with some of the stakeholders, there have been some cases where a person was kidnapped into trafficking while they were attending school, and they had an OSAP debt for that year so they weren't able to complete school and they weren't able to pay off their OSAP debt. So when they escaped from the trafficking and they were a survivor, they still had this bad OSAP debt, and a lot that debt is incurred as a result of human trafficking. Will this language include those pre-existing debts that somebody has had, that they weren't able to make payments on while they were being trafficked?

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Scott.

Ms. Laurie Scott: The fine details will be in regulation, but the intent is certainly exactly as you said. It's caused because of human trafficking, and that will be captured. I can say that's totally the intent. The regulations will, I think, help reinforce the “coerced debt” meaning.

Mr. Chris Glover: That's really good, actually. It's good that we get it on the record here too, so when they're developing the regulations, they know what the intent of it is.

Ms. Laurie Scott: Absolutely. Yes, subject to regulations, but definitely, that's the entire intent.

Mr. Chris Glover: Okay, thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you very much. Further debate? Seeing none, are members prepared to vote? Shall motion number 2 carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare motion number 2 carried.

Turning now to motion number 0.3: MPP Scott.

Ms. Laurie Scott: I move that subsection 2(3) of the bill be amended by striking out section 19 of the Prevention of and Remedies for Human Trafficking Act, 2017 and substituting the following:

“Prohibition on collection of debts

“19. Despite any other act, no person or entity shall, through any means whatsoever, knowingly collect or attempt to collect a coerced debt.”

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Further debate? MPP Scott.

Ms. Laurie Scott: This revised measure prevents people or entities who do not know a debt is coerced and attempt to collect said debt from facing repercussions. It really is just adding “knowingly” because an institution or creditor might know this was going on, but we’re hoping to correct it going backwards when we get this bill in.

1620

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Further debate? Seeing none, are members prepared to vote? Shall motion 0.3 carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare motion 0.3 carried.

Turning now to motion number 0.4: MPP Scott.

Ms. Laurie Scott: I move that subsection 2(3) of the bill be amended by striking out section 20 of the Prevention of and Remedies for Human Trafficking Act, 2017 and substituting the following:

“Debt not to be considered

“20. Where the existence of a coerced debt has been established, no person or entity who is determining whether to provide a debtor who has been subjected to human trafficking with credit services or products shall take the existence of the coerced debt into consideration when making that determination.”

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Further debate? MPP Scott.

Ms. Laurie Scott: This provision makes it clear that creditors are not to consider established coerced debts when assessing if they should offer credit to a debtor who has been subjected to human trafficking. It just protects victim-survivors from having their coerced debt used as a reason to deny them further credit services. It just provides greater clarity that a coerced debt must be established in order for it to not be considered.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Further debate? Seeing none, are members prepared to vote? Shall motion 0.4 carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare motion 0.4 carried.

Turning now to motion 0.5: MPP Scott.

Ms. Laurie Scott: I move that subsection 2(3) of the bill be amended by striking out sections 21 and 22 of the Prevention of and Remedies for Human Trafficking Act, 2017 and substituting the following:

“Application to prescribed individual or groups of individuals

“21—”

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Sorry, could you just repeat the title again?

Ms. Laurie Scott: “Application to prescribed individual or group of individuals.”

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you.

Ms. Laurie Scott: Sorry about that.

“21(1) Subject to subsection (2), in the case of a disagreement as to the application of this part to a debt, the debtor or creditor may apply to a prescribed individual or group of individuals for a determination as to whether the debt is a coerced debt.

“Same

“(2) An application by a debtor must be accompanied by a letter from an organization that satisfies the prescribed criteria, setting out prescribed information in support of the application.

“Determination

“(3) After affording the debtor and creditor an opportunity to be heard, the prescribed individual or group of individuals shall,

“(a) make a determination as to whether the debt, or some part of it, is a coerced debt and, if applicable, the amount of the coerced debt; and

“(b) notify the debtor and creditor of the determination in writing.

“Regulations

“22. The minister responsible for the administration of this act may make regulations respecting any matter necessary or advisable to carry out effectively the intent and purpose of this part and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, may make regulations,

“(a) respecting anything that, under this part, may or must be prescribed or done by regulation;

“(b) prescribing types of debts that are not coerced debts for the purposes of this part;

“(c) prescribing criteria that must be satisfied in order for a coerced debt to be established;

“(d) governing applications made under section 21, including governing the application of the Statutory Powers Procedure Act or any of its provisions.”

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Is there any debate? MPP Scott.

Ms. Laurie Scott: One of the most substantial changes is that the amended provisions replace the need for tribunals. The overt goal of this bill being to help survivors get their lives back on track in a way that is effective and respectful of their experiences, tribunals have been replaced so that a more trauma-informed approach can be implemented.

The amendments provide a balance between the competing interests of victims seeking to eliminate their coerced debt while avoiding re-traumatization and creditors seeking concrete proof that the debt itself was coerced.

Under (2), a debtor’s application to remove coerced debt must be accompanied with a letter from an organization. In this way, victims are not re-traumatized by having to relay their story and engage in difficult conversations with creditors. The organization will ensure that appropriate

information is provided to creditors so that the onus is not on the victim themselves.

As for (1), this provision provides a greater degree of reassurance on the part of creditors. Should a creditor disagree with a debtor's claim that their debt was coerced, creditors could seek an application to a prescribed individual or group of individuals to determine the validity of the coerced debt. This provision helps survivors and creditors alike by providing creditors with an opportunity for a determination, while ensuring that legitimate instances of coerced debt can be remedied effectively.

Under (3), the prescribed individual will make a determination regarding the coerced debt, and will inform the debtor and creditor of the determination in writing. The purpose of this provision is to create concrete paperwork establishing the existence of a coerced debt. The determination stage provides creditors an opportunity to have the claim verified, which will help mitigate fraud or falsified claims.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Is there any further debate? MPP Collard.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Just for the purpose of really recording for the purpose of the development of the regulations, it is not very clear here, but it should be in the regulations, that debtors can be represented by an organization and that they wouldn't have to appear themselves in any of the process. We all agree that the purpose is not to re-traumatize the survivors—so just a note for the development of regulations.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Scott.

Ms. Laurie Scott: Thank you for that clarification. For sure. Under 21(2), it says, "An application by a debtor must be accompanied by a letter from an organization...." So that's what we're saying: an organization that would represent them so the survivor-victim does not have to appear in person.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Glover.

Mr. Chris Glover: And in determining the prescribed individual or group, has there been some thought given to that, or is there some direction?

Ms. Laurie Scott: Yes, I think that it really—this is a bill that stretches many ministries, and so there's been a lot of thought and effort in how to do this. I know you mentioned before about the OSAP example. There already is a group of individuals within the government that make determinations of whether an OSAP grant is forgiven or not, and so it would reflect upon that. And in regulations, I think it will flesh out—because there are so many ministries involved here, that would become clearer. But that it is the intent. It would be within the government structure to do that, so not a tribunal, but within government with officials, and then an agency representing the victim would be selected through an RFP.

Mr. Chris Glover: Sorry, a further question—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Glover?

Mr. Chris Glover: The agency selected for the individual: Can the individual select their agency to represent them?

Ms. Laurie Scott: Yes, well, the agency has to be recognized by the body that we mentioned.

Mr. Chris Glover: By this body—okay.

Ms. Laurie Scott: So they'll set parameters out, who qualifies etc.

Mr. Chris Glover: Right. Okay.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Saunderson.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Through you, Madam Chair, to MPP Scott: Is it possible that there would be more than one organization that would be recognized that could implement or be involved in this process?

Ms. Laurie Scott: Well, that will be determined, maybe, more clearly in regulation. But the parameters are going to have to be—because we have to be trauma-informed and have financial ability to look at financial records to provide the proof. They would put an RFP out, I guess, to see those parameters. So I can't really speak to that exactly, and regulations will form that out.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: And if I could, just as a follow-up, then—because it's a large province, I don't know if it's all going to be centralized in one area or if there would be organizations throughout the province that could vet local applications.

Ms. Laurie Scott: Again, I think that because we've doing this bill and we've educated a lot more people within ministries and agencies, there's a willingness, where other parts of the province don't have the resources or the expertise within their communities, communities that are bigger and stronger—like in Toronto, we heard from some agencies—might be able to help them. So, yes, it would be—one agency from some part of Ontario could use another agency to help them with the expertise that they need, if they're ones selected within the parameters.

1630

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Glover.

Mr. Chris Glover: Just to clarify: So this RFP would go out from one of the ministries, and they would be looking for multiple agencies to represent, and then the survivor would be able to go to one of those agencies of their choosing to represent them at this hearing?

Ms. Laurie Scott: Well, I'm getting into the details and regulations—what I don't really want to do, because that's why we need more time to flesh it out. But really, I think the main thing is that the survivor, the victim, is not the person who's coming forward to make the claim and be re-traumatized. So you need an agency, an organization, that is able to do the forensic accounting to make sure—that also has a trauma-informed side.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Collard.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Well, first of all, a survivor, in order to engage in this process, would have to probably be represented by an organization of their choice already. And of course, to be able to make the process—or to appear on behalf of them, they have to be recognized on certain criteria to be determined. So there could be multiple agencies—as there should be—across the province, just to give as many options as possible, but these agencies would need to apply and meet the criteria.

Mr. Chris Glover: When I was on the Toronto District School Board, we had a process where we had approved vendors for contracts. We had a list of approved vendors, and then they would put in bids for work.

You're not going to be putting in bids for work, but is there going to be an approved slate of agencies, and then the survivor can choose from that approved slate of agencies? Is that the intent, or is that not fleshed out yet?

Ms. Laurie Scott: I don't think it's quite fleshed out yet. They have to build, in regulation, the parameters that would qualify an agency to be approved. So you want all the work done before it comes to the government body, to say, "Here's the proof. This is the debt that was incurred while the person was being trafficked." We're building it from scratch, but, roughly, that's the outline, I think.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Presumably, if it gets to that point, it's because a survivor has been working with an agency on trying to get their debt erased from the creditors, so the agency would already be engaged and have all the information relevant to being able to advocate if there is a conflict—a disagreement by a creditor that wouldn't agree that this is debt that was coerced. So, presumably, that would be the same agency, but there could also be some other agency pre-qualified that a survivor could decide to go to, as opposed to the one that they've already been working with in order to get the debt erased.

Ms. Laurie Scott: You're right. This is the appeal mechanism, so a lot of times, as we've heard in committees, they're working with some agency—from whichever agency across Ontario—and they're trying to resolve these things. This is just strengthening the ability—whether it's a disagreement—so they can push it through, get it decided, and the victim moves on with their life. So it's a small group—we're hoping—of people.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Further debate? Are members prepared to vote?

Shall motion number 0.5 carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare motion 0.5 carried.

Is there any further debate on section 2, as amended? Are members prepared to vote? Shall section 2, as amended, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare section 2, as amended, carried.

Turning now to section 3: MPP Scott, motion number 1.

Ms. Laurie Scott: I move that section 3 of the bill be amended by striking out "the day it receives royal assent" at the end and substituting "a day to be named by proclamation of the Lieutenant Governor".

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Scott has moved motion number 1. Is there any debate?

Ms. Laurie Scott: Just further—clarifying that we need time for regulations to be built because of what has just been discussed.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you. MPP Glover?

Mr. Chris Glover: Okay. I see another proposed amendment that's very similar to this one, and it just sets a deadline of six months. I think the purpose of that amendment is just to put a deadline on this, that this isn't going to drag on. Is there a way to make this amendment so that there is

a stop date, so that we know this bill will be proclaimed and implemented by a certain date?

Ms. Laurie Scott: Well, the willingness is that it be done sooner than the six months, but I can't—no, we just have to leave it that way. But we have, as I said, many ministries already engaged, and I think we'll move forward as quickly as possible.

Mr. Chris Glover: So the intent, then, is to move this forward as quickly as possible? Because there are people out there who need this act to be passed in order to relieve their coerced debts.

Is there a direction from the committee—can we give direction to ask the ministries to please try to get this done within six months, if not sooner? Can we just at least state that into the record?

Ms. Laurie Scott: I think you just did.

Mr. Chris Glover: And is there general agreement?

Ms. Laurie Scott: Well I said we're trying to get it done before the six months, if that helps, in Hansard.

Mr. Chris Glover: Okay.

Ms. Laurie Scott: But not in the motion. This has been very complicated, but it's good, because we've educated lots of ministries and a lot of other people. MPP Collard started the ball, and we're getting there.

Mr. Chris Glover: Yes.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Okay. Thank you. MPP Scott has moved motion number 1. All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare motion number 1 carried.

With respect to motion number 2, we're going to withdraw?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Yes. I'll have to withdraw. If I can just add one comment that I'll make here?

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Yes, of course.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: There was a general consensus from the survivors, from the stakeholders and everybody involved in this bill that it should pass as quickly as possible, and that's why I did propose a timeline. Now, I understand that timelines might be difficult to respect given everything else, so we'll go with the good intention that was expressed that we will work as diligently as possible to get it implemented as soon as possible, and I won't let anybody forget about this. Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): We will help you and remind everyone as well. You can count on our support in this committee for that.

All right. Shall section 3, as amended, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare section 3, as amended, carried.

Are there any motions with respect to section 4? Seeing none, shall section 4 carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare section 4 carried.

Shall the title of the bill carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare the title of the bill carried.

Shall Bill 41, as amended, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare Bill 41, as amended, carried.

Shall I report the bill to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? I declare that I shall report the bill to the House.

Applause.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): There you go. Yes, MPP Glover?

Mr. Chris Glover: Is it possible for people to make a comment before we close the meeting?

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): I mean, I asked if there was any further debate, but you know what? You're welcome. Is it regarding Bill 41?

Mr. Chris Glover: Yes.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Okay. I'll allow it.

Mr. Chris Glover: I really want to thank all of you for getting this through to this point. I really want to thank MPP Scott for your work over the summer on this and also for supporting it, MPP Collard for bringing this bill forward and the Green MPP for supporting it so we've got

all-party support. This is a bill that's actually going to be transformative for people's lives and help the survivors of human trafficking to get on with their lives, so thank you so much, everybody, for being here and making this happen.

And, yes, let's keep their feet to the fire, so that within six months this thing is actually done. And thank you, Madam Chair, for letting me speak.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Let the record show that everyone said "agreed."

All right. Thank you very much, everyone. I appreciate everyone's co-operation on this. There being no further business, this committee now stands adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1640.

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