

Legislative  
Assembly  
of Ontario



Assemblée  
législative  
de l'Ontario

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**Official Report  
of Debates  
(Hansard)**

F-77

**Journal  
des débats  
(Hansard)**

F-77

**Standing Committee on  
Finance and Economic Affairs**

Pre-budget consultations

1<sup>st</sup> Session  
43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament

Thursday 16 January 2025

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

Consultations prébudgétaires

1<sup>re</sup> session  
43<sup>e</sup> législature

Jeudi 16 janvier 2025

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Chair: Ernie Hardeman  
Clerk: Vanessa Kattar

Président : Ernie Hardeman  
Greffière : Vanessa Kattar

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS**

Thursday 16 January 2025

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

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

Jeudi 16 janvier 2025

*The committee met at 1000 in the Sheraton Hamilton Hotel, Hamilton.*

PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Good morning, everyone, and good morning to Hamilton. We'll call this meeting to order. We're meeting to resume public hearings on pre-budget consultations 2025.

To the committee, please wait until I recognize you before starting to speak. As always, all comments should go through the Chair.

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

HAMILTON AQUATIC CLUB  
CITY OF HAMILTON  
STONE CREEK CHAMBER  
OF COMMERCE

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** We will now will then move to the first panel: the Hamilton Aquatic Club, the city of Hamilton and the Stoney Creek Chamber of Commerce.

As I said, you will have seven minutes to make your presentation. At six minutes, I will say, "One minute." Don't stop, because that leaves one minute for the punchline. At seven minutes, I will say, "Thank you," and you will say nothing.

*Laughter.*

**Mr. Dave Smith:** It doesn't work that way, Chair.

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** Does it work that way in the Legislature?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Madam Mayor, I didn't realize I would have the opportunity to say that to Your Worship here this morning.

We do ask to anyone speaking that they introduce themselves to make sure we can attribute the comments to the appropriate person.

With that, we will start with the Hamilton Aquatic Club.

**Ms. Theresa Malar:** Good morning, everybody and members of the Ontario Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. My name is Theresa Malar, and I'm the executive director of the Hamilton Aquatic Club, one of Canada's oldest aquatic clubs, founded in 1932. For over 90 years, HAC has fostered athletic excellence and personal growth through competitive swimming.

Today I urge your support for provincial investment in a multi-use recreation facility in Hamilton anchored in a multi-tank aquatic facility that includes a 50-metre pool. This project is more than a sports facility, it's an investment in health, safety, community development and economic growth, and it delivers on provincial priorities. Swimming is one of the most popular recreational activities globally, but it is also a proven way to build lifelong health, support mental health and fitness and transform communities. A new 50-metre aquatic facility would address the growing needs of Hamilton's aquatic community and position our city as a leader in sports and recreation, putting Hamilton on the global stage and driving significant economic and tourism benefits.

Hamilton's population has experienced significant population growth, with a 6% increase from 2016 to 2021, surpassing provincial averages, yet it lacks a single publicly accessible 50-metre pool for 570,000 residents. In contrast, Toronto has four publicly accessible 50-metre pools. Families in Hamilton and surrounding areas must travel long distances to access appropriate facilities, incurring financial costs and logistical barriers.

As detailed in the newly released report by the Aquatic Sport Council of Ontario, Ontario trails other provinces in aquatics infrastructure. While Ontario has one 50-metre pool per 748,000 people, Quebec has one per 472,000 and Alberta one per 387,000. Only 30% of Canada's indoor 50-metre pools are in Ontario despite the province representing 40% of the nation's population, and there are no 50-metre pools currently under construction in the province at this time.

Existing facilities in Hamilton are outdated, designed for recreational use and unsuitable for competitive training and/or hosting major events. Without immediate action, Hamilton and our province risk falling further behind.

Pools provide far-reaching benefits beyond serving elite sports. Research highlights that swimming promotes lifelong fitness and mental health while addressing water safety needs. For example, high-risk groups, such as new

Canadians, are four times more likely to lack swimming skills.

Expanding aquatic infrastructure ensures more people can access life-saving water safety programs. Learn-to-swim programs run through public pools provide Ontarians with access to life-saving drowning prevention skills. Prevention remains a priority in Ontario, as there were 211 drowning deaths recorded in 2020, the highest in the decade. In 2018, drowning-related deaths in Ontario resulted in \$175 million in economic losses and \$8 million in health care costs.

Pools built for sport multiply community benefits. They provide recreational opportunities for all ages and support community pride and economic growth through events, tourism and year-round revenue-generating activities.

A 50-metre pool in Hamilton directly aligns with the government's priorities for Ontarians, including improving Ontarians' health and well-being by providing affordable, accessible spaces for the community for physical activity and promoting lifelong health and mental wellness and spurring economic growth by creating construction jobs, sustained operational employment and economic boosts from hosting events that would attract visitors and support local businesses.

Sport tourism generated \$2.45 billion in visitor spending in Ontario in 2019, accounting for 41% of Canada's sport tourism activity. It works to develop our youth by supporting the next generation of athletes with equitable access to proper training facilities, enabling them to reach their full potential, and it builds community by strengthening bonds through inclusive recreational opportunities for all ages, including seniors and young children.

We know that 73% of Ontarians want the government to build more facilities and fund more lessons so people can learn to swim.

A vision for Hamilton's future is not just about competitive swimming, it's about fostering a healthier, more connected and economically vibrant community.

Last season, the Hamilton Aquatic Club hosted nine competitions, many of which were held outside of our region due to the lack of access to adequate facilities. Each event attracted hundreds of athletes, families, officials and friends, filling hotels, restaurants and local businesses, generating significant economic activity that Hamilton is currently missing out on.

A modern 50-metre pool will improve the health and wellness of the community and address a 30-year gap in Hamilton's ability to produce Olympic-level athletes. Consistent long-course training is essential for success at the national and international levels, and we know that 52% of Ontarians want more facilities to support Olympic athletes' training and competitions. The new facility would serve as a community hub and provide accessibility and equity. This facility would reduce travel costs and barriers, ensuring all athletes and community members can participate and thrive. This location would serve as a central hub in the corridor from Mississauga through to Grimsby, which are all communities that lack a 50-metre pool.

And 73% of Ontarians want the government to build more facilities to fund more swimming lessons so that people can learn to swim.

Hosting events in a modern facility would enable Hamilton to host regional, provincial and national events, even including international competitions, driving tourism and elevating the city's profile. Our community gains the ability to host prestigious events such as the 2029 International Children's Games, that would showcase Hamilton on a global stage.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Theresa Malar:** This project can strengthen community partnerships. By collaborating with our key partners like the YMCA, the city of Hamilton, McMaster University, we can ensure that the facility is designed to meet the diverse needs of our community. Together, we can create unique opportunities and build a sustainable aquatic hub that fosters athletic excellence, promotes community engagement and supports a healthier future for everyone.

With Hamilton's population projected to exceed 900,000 by 2051, municipal budgets alone cannot meet this critical infrastructure need. We urge the provincial government to prioritize funding for a 50-metre pool in the 2025 budget.

Thank you all for your continued support of sport and recreation initiatives, including the Ontario Trillium fund grant that the Hamilton Aquatic Club has received this year that allowed us to expand our programs and impact even more lives this year.

Investing in a 50-metre pool will not only elevate Hamilton as a leader in health—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

We will now go to the city of Hamilton.

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** Good morning, members. Welcome to the great city of Hamilton. It's nice to see some of your familiar faces and some new faces as well. We're very pleased that you chose our city as one of the opportunities to get some feedback for the pre-budget consultations, so thanks for being here. We welcome the opportunity as a city to participate in the consultation process.

This year's provincial budget comes at a critical period, as Ontario's municipalities continue to grapple with complex challenges such as a housing crisis, an infrastructure deficit that's growing and climate change, of course, which we all, I think, know is continuing to affect us.

Hamilton, one of Canada's largest cities, with a population of over 575,000 people, is rapidly expanding and is planning for a future population of about 900,000 people. It is home to a traditional manufacturing base, a nerve centre of health care research and training, and is a destination for an emerging knowledge-based economy. We are also very blessed with a significant agricultural sector as part of our economy.

**1010**

Hamilton continues to prioritize sustainable growth and innovation, reflected in our investments, its critical infrastructure like water and waste water infrastructure, enhanced transit, as well as investments in housing—infrastructure

throughout the housing continuum, in fact, from market housing, affordable housing, as well as supportive housing to transitional housing. It's quite a robust sector. These investments are essential to the future prosperity of the city of Hamilton, and I'm going to take you through a few details in that regard. But municipal governments do face a balancing act in maintaining and expanding services in a way that's fiscally sustainable, while being responsive to the economic challenges that are currently facing us, particularly the rising cost of living and the ongoing affordability crisis.

To address the housing piece particularly, Hamilton's current population needs, in both urban and rural areas, and anticipated population growth requires Hamilton to provide solutions to accelerate all types of housing development, and we are doing that work. However, despite our efforts, housing affordability and homelessness is a crisis for our city, as it is many municipalities in the province. Hamilton continues to do everything within our ability to respond effectively, and we need the assistance of the province to be an active partner to help us keep moving in the right direction. We're working towards the ambitious target that the province set for 1.5 million homes over 10 years. In 2023, we exceeded the provincial housing target with 120% of the target achieved that year. As a result, the city received the \$17.6 million in funding through the province's Building Faster Fund. Fiscal partnership is essential, and we appreciate the province advancing this funding, which is critical for housing-enabling infrastructure.

Hamilton has demonstrated a strong financial commitment over the past number of years to the housing crisis. We continue to make sizable local investments towards affordable housing, our shelter system and homelessness services, while calling on other orders of government to similarly increase funding towards this crisis because it cannot be sustainably managed at the local level. This past year, the city of Hamilton invested many resources in homelessness and housing, about \$186 million—\$39 million, or 27%, more than in 2023. Local taxpayers are, unfortunately, left to fund 67% of the total investment, two times what the federal and provincial governments have committed to.

That's the housing picture. I have many more on that, but honestly, I'm looking at my clock and I'm really a little bit worried because I have a couple of other topics to cover, but I'm happy to respond further in the questions. I do want to thank your colleague Minister Calandra, who has been here in Hamilton to review and tour some of the sites that we are hoping to build housing on, as well as some of our solutions.

We have a request; you'll see it in the package. I'm grateful for the announcement that came in December. We applied for both of the funds that were made available: \$62 million from the province towards the 425 affordable and supportive units, as well as \$6 million in one-time capital and \$14.4 million in annual operating funding to enhance the homelessness initiatives and managing our new shelter beds. We've increased that significantly and, again, some of the details are in the package. I'm happy to review them in greater detail in the Q&A.

Infrastructure is a huge issue for us. As folks may know, Hamilton is a very, very old city, as per the previous presenter's comments. You may not know that we have the second-oldest water system in the entire country—not just the province, the entire country—and the third-oldest waste water system in the entire country. So we have not only the challenge of growth and meeting the ambitious targets that the Premier has set, which we, as I said, are partnering and trying to do that, but then we also have a very old existing system that services the current, if you will, population and needs significant resources. We are also asking for some support in that regard. We've presented, by the way, to various ministers through AMO conferences and those kinds of things, so government is well aware of some of the challenges that we're facing.

We're on a path, right now, to invest in the delivery of 53,000 service units in our affordable infrastructure projects. We have significant transit infrastructure that we're looking for.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** In fact, you may not know this, but the 53,000 hours is reflective of the fact that we were one of the first municipalities to get back to our pre-COVID ridership, and we were very proud of that.

Again, water/waste water is really challenging for us: \$315 million in 2025 is what we're investing; \$4.5 billion is what we need over the next 10 years; \$90 million in assumed grant funding from the federal and provincial governments is what we're looking for with respect to our Woodward and Dundas waste water treatment plants—again, lots more detail in that regard.

But to conclude, I once again want to state that I'm really happy that you're here in Hamilton, really happy for your commitment to the LRT, and I know that on your way in from the 403 you may have seen lots of new buildings on Main Street. On your way out if you go down King Street, you'll see lots of new buildings. Much of that private investment is because of the LRT.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

We'll now hear from the Stoney Creek Chamber of Commerce.

**Ms. Brenda Wilson:** Good morning, everybody. I'm Brenda Wilson, the executive director and CEO of the Stoney Creek Chamber of Commerce, which has proudly served the businesses in our community for over 75 years. We represent hundreds of businesses and communicate with hundreds more through our chamber newsletters. We're also members of and work with the Ontario chamber and their 60,000 members.

These are challenging times marked by significant uncertainty in both the political landscape and trade relations. It is crucial that provincial governments focus on economic stability, empower new businesses, support the growth of existing ones, drive job creation, ensure smooth-running supply chains and foster healthy communities, all so we can make the economy competitive—no challenge there, guys.

Stoney Creek is home to a diverse range of businesses with construction and manufacturing at the forefront,

followed by retail, accommodation, food services and transportation warehousing. Most of Stoney Creek's manufacturing are located in our ward 10, an urban area situated in the Niagara Escarpment with an industrial and commercial corridor on the Queen Elizabeth Way.

I would like to focus most of my remarks on the manufacturing sector, a cornerstone of Canada's economy, because manufacturing plays such an important role in job creation innovation.

Over the last two decades, the Ontario manufacturing sector has been subject to an increasingly stark and dire reality. Competing jurisdictions outperform Ontario. The cost of doing business in the province was soaring due to increased red tape and energy costs, and as a result, Ontario lost nearly 300,000 manufacturing jobs that played a critical role in supporting the province, leaving some regions with negative growth. Between 2022 and 2023, the United States manufacturing sector's output grew 3%, yet in Ontario it comparatively shrunk by 14%. In that same period, Ontario manufacturers' exports increased at a slower rate than all provinces other than Prince Edward Island. This has had a stark impact on Ontario's economic performance.

Additionally, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce's Business Data Lab reports that Canada lags behind other developed nations in research and development, and according to the OECD, Canada underperforms globally.

So here in Stoney Creek, for the past two years, we have conducted extensive surveys to consult with our members and identify the key priorities of businesses in Stoney Creek, upper Stoney Creek, east Hamilton, Glanbrook and Winona. These priorities were identified in descending order as access to reliable and skilled labour, employee retention and red tape reduction. In terms of the skilled labour concern, our members particularly needed us to address the need for skilled workers who are ready to contribute now; the skills gap training for current employers and the support for the unskilled workforce; the underrepresentation of women in skilled trades, which currently sits at about 5%; and preparing for the impact of emerging technologies and automation on the workforce.

What needs to be done? We need to strengthen the collaboration between businesses and post-secondary institutions to develop new and innovative programs—we have lots—that incentivize the employers. We need to increase—it's great it exists, but it's capped at \$3,000—the Ontario Co-operative Education Tax Credit. We need to continue education investment. Thank you to the Minister of Colleges and Universities for the \$200 million that we got. That was great, and some of it came to this area, so we're happy. But allow for the engagement of outside skilled trades to support curriculum development. Fund workforce programs that are employer-driven. Continue to promote skilled trades as a viable career path targeting women.

**1020**

You'll notice I have a little thing here that says, "Use the chamber." A lot of what I will tell you is that you aren't doing terrible things; there are things out there, but nobody knows and they can't get to them. Here's your opportunity to reach hundreds of businesses every day.

The second one was employer retention. Some of the key factors there were continuous learning and skills development, safe and healthy workplaces, competitive compensation and transparency in recruitment. What we have to do is continue to support the Skills Development Fund—it's great; we need to keep doing that—but ensure that small businesses know about these and have equal access to these resources. We need to implement a comprehensive Ontario work plan that brings together all the regional agencies so that they offer market data, but get it out to the businesses. We need to fund and promote employee wellness programs, focus on mental health, encourage and potentially subsidize mental health support programs, support flexible work arrangements, assist with competitive compensation, and provide resources and guidance to help businesses stay informed about the median wage in their sector.

The third one was access to new markets. The challenge here isn't that the support isn't there—thank you. But the challenge is that the small businesses—let me remind you that in the federal census, small businesses are defined as one to 99. But in the chamber, my small business is one to 10, as are many, many chambers. Many small businesses are overwhelmed with the day-to-day responsibilities, and have no time to scour the Internet, websites and Facebook. They don't have time, so we need to get programs to them. Let's get programs to them. Just keep working on customizing the expert development training, the digital monetization—they're all great; we just need more out there.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Brenda Wilson:** Last of all, red tape reduction: Ontario's red tape reduction efforts have been largely successful—again, thank you—with notable achievements in cost savings, time savings and achieving goals. Despite these successes, there's room for improvement:

- understand that the regulatory burdens that have significant impact on small businesses are often disproportionate to the big businesses;

- enhance the transparency of publishing regulatory documents, address internal trade barriers and allow consumer shipments;

- continue to reduce unnecessary regulation; and

- promote the red tape portal.

There is much work to be done and the challenges are many. However, I encourage you that everything you do needs to get out there. It's not. I speak to hundreds of businesses; they don't know and they don't know how, and they don't have time to find it. You have to get the message out. Here's a way.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the presentations.

We will start the first round of questions with the official opposition. MPP Shaw.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you to all the presenters today.

Ms. Malar, I have to say, I completely support the idea of the investment in your swimming pool. I know that Hamilton has produced their own gold medallist—Joanne Malar comes to mind—so we have seen the benefit of that, so I completely support your proposal here.



Our time is short here today, so I am going to focus my round of questioning primarily with Mayor Horwath and the city of Hamilton. Thank you for your presentation. It's nice to see you, as well. I'm very surprised to hear that 67% of the investments for housing fall on the municipal property tax. I think it needs to be clearly articulated that municipalities—not just Hamilton, but across the province—are struggling with the downloading costs from the province. We have heard it through these pre-budget consultations all across Ontario. It also needs to be noted that when it comes, for example, to housing, Ontario is the only province in Canada, actually, where they make sure that the municipalities are responsible for social housing, so it's no wonder we're in such a bind trying to address the very fundamental needs of people in the province.

I want to start with your comments on your infrastructure, water and waste water. I knew the Dundas water plant was one of the oldest in the country, but I didn't know that all of it was quite that old. We know that there has been this provincial downloading of responsibilities to municipalities. We know that we really need to make sure that we have good infrastructure in order to attract investment. Can you just talk a little bit about how the burden that is being put on the municipalities by the province is impacting not only delivery of social services, but our ability to attract investment?

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** Thanks very much for the question.

It's interesting. When you look at some of the older municipalities—and I've shared this with the Minister of Housing recently—it's really important to identify that as we transition our city into a greater population, which I identified, we not only have to build the new capacity, which other cities who are newer—let's just say, who aren't as old as Hamilton—have to do that as well, but they don't have the legacy infrastructure that is quite, quite old and in need of repair, and so we have a dual mandate.

The Dundas plant that the member refers to is really not a plant that is going to facilitate growth. It's a plant that is going to continue to serve existing residents. So when we have programs, federally and provincially, that are based on new growth, those kinds of legacy pieces of our systems aren't included in terms of opportunity for funding. That is a concern for us. That means that entire cost of the complete replacement of a significantly aged facility sits with the taxpayer at the property tax level, without any opportunity for resources from the other orders of government. We are really, really committed to making sure that we finance the project.

It's interesting to have watched, in my years, over the last number of years, as the province has really focused on asset management as a priority for municipalities, and I can say that this municipality benefits from that focus. Because maybe we have not, in past years, met the state of good repair we should have been meeting in the past—I was not here at that time—but that does mean that we have work to do, and we're committed to doing that work because that's what our residents deserve.

The order of magnitude is quite high, as I mentioned. It's also in your packages as well. But I did say that the

updating and scaling of our infrastructure to meet our growing needs and maintain our existing systems isn't going to be cheap: a \$4.5-billion strategy over the next 10 years—\$4.5 billion—so really hard for the municipal tax base to cover and we're looking for some help. Again, state of good repair as well as growth-enabling projects are part of that cost.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you very much.

I do now want to turn to the investments that municipalities are making when it comes to, essentially, the homelessness crisis that we are seeing all across Ontario. I know Hamilton has made significant investments—Hamilton taxpayers are making significant investments.

AMO, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, just recently released their report calling this a tipping point. It's a homelessness crisis, as we know. More than 80,000 Ontarians were homeless in Ontario. And they are calling on provincial government to take significant long-term action in addressing housing, and certainly, the mental health and addictions and wraparound supports that come with that. We know municipalities are contributing far and above what they need to, beyond the provincial subsidies.

My question to you is, can you put to rest the idea that municipalities should bear the brunt and municipal taxpayers should bear the brunt of addressing this crisis in our municipalities, when the province is downloading costs and the province has not made significant contributions?

We need to make sure that the province is at the table in a significant way when it comes to addressing these dual crises. How is that having an impact on the city of Hamilton in delivering services and the city of Hamilton providing housing when you're constantly trying to scrape together some resources when the province is certainly not stepping up to the degree that they should?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** I appreciate the question and also the reference to the AMO report that was recently released because it shows that it's not just the city of Hamilton—

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** No, it's not.

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** —and it's not just big cities. It's communities all across the province. Some of your communities, likely, are facing homelessness challenges and housing challenges as, certainly, our MPPs here in Hamilton are. They know that about Hamilton, as do the government members.

**1030**

But the fact of the matter is that we have expended, in 2024:

- \$185.9 million for housing and homelessness funding;
- affordable housing: \$21.3 million;
- tenant supports: \$23.6 million;
- social housing: \$93.6 million;
- shelters: \$39.1 million;
- encampments: \$8.3 million.

Of course, we did receive some funding:

- \$28 million from the federal and provincial governments;
- \$12 million for the Canada-Ontario housing initiative;

—\$7 million in federal funding for Reaching Home; and

—the balance, \$9 million funded from the city's internal funds, including the—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

We'll now go to MPP Hazell.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Good morning to all the presenters—Andrea, it's great to see you again after a long time—very well-detailed presentations.

Andrea, I have one question for you. Congratulations on the great work you're doing on housing. That's a lot of work. That's tough. So when I look at your presentation, I will dive into it a little bit deeper.

But I want to ask about your health care system in Hamilton, because what jumped out to me is your population has grown. It's at 575,000 now. You're looking to take up to 900,000. We know where infrastructure and health care is: There are 2.5 million Ontarians without a family doctor. How is that impacting your city?

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** Thank you so much for the question. I do know that you're seeing our hospital sector representatives coming later today—I believe Hamilton Health Sciences and St. Joseph's hospital—and they'll be able to provide you specifics around the direct pressures that they're facing, because when somebody doesn't have primary care, they rely on emergency room services. And then, of course, with the crisis that we face with housing, homelessness, addictions and mental health, those crises also end up in the emergency wards.

The other thing to know about the crisis in health care in our city particularly is it's absolutely a primary care shortage already, so the need is growing and it will continue to grow. We need to work together, I think, to respond to that in all the communities that are growing. It's something I think the government is looking at, and I'm glad that they are, because it's really important.

The other thing is, Hamilton is a regional centre. Both of our hospital systems are regional centres for major departments or divisions, if you will, that support people from the entire region, so not just Hamilton, but Brantford–Brant, for example, and St. Catharines and the Niagara region and Burlington. We have trauma centres. We have cancer centres. We have mental health centres and centres of excellence. The children's hospital is here. So when people come for services from around the larger geographic area, when we think about how we fund hospital expansion, for example—again, not just primary care; hospital expansion is going to be needed, and our hospitals are old, as well, right? So there's the demand for the community contribution, if you will.

One of the things I put on the radar for the Minister of Infrastructure and the committee at AMO that was hearing our delegation was to maybe rethink how we do that community contribution, because it's not just Hamiltonians who are utilizing the hospitals; it's a broader reach. So how do we ensure that the entire reach of our regional services is supporting the infrastructure expansions that are necessary to keep these fantastic hospitals providing the amazing

and, in some cases, cutting-edge services and procedures that we see happening here?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** We have a growing health care sector in terms of life sciences, research, amazing investments. AstraZeneca bought a lab, basically, that was doing radiotherapy for cancer. It was called Fusion. They were a research organization; they got spun out from the innovation park that's associated with McMaster University, and AstraZeneca actually bought them recently. So this shows that the life sciences sector is booming and the research is booming. It's creating jobs and investment, which is so exciting, but we can't forget that we have to meet the health care needs of the people, the workers, the researchers that are going to those jobs.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** I'm excited to hear from the health care presenters and where the pressure points are.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** We will now go to the government. MPP Smith.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** I want to thank all the attendees for being here this morning and thank Hamilton for hosting us. I appreciate everything our invitees brought to the table.

I do want to focus in on Theresa, if I may call you Theresa. I'm a lifelong swimmer as well. I grew up in the water, so to speak. A couple of years ago, I was parliamentary assistant to sports and I remember with great fondness attending the Ontario Junior International swimming competition, which I am sure you are acquainted with.

Keeping in mind the love of swim that I have—and obviously you have—I do recognize that there is funding available. You talked about the Ontario Trillium fund, which has helped you. Do you want to talk about how that enabled you?

**Ms. Theresa Malar:** Yes, the Ontario Trillium fund supports our competitions. Hamilton Aquatic Club—again, we are an old organization. We have been rooted in Hamilton for 93 years and our infrastructure was failing. Our timing system for competitions—we do not own or operate our own pool, and so we applied to the Ontario Trillium fund to replace that timing system. We received almost \$150,000 in grant money to replace that.

Where our challenges are is we have got this beautiful timing system, but we don't have adequate pools to use it at. Other facilities like the Pan Am Sports Centre in Toronto build these systems into their facilities. We have had to develop a mobile system we could take to small rec centres like Westmount rec centre, which is a great facility, but is only eight lanes, primarily used for leisure pools and activities. We can only run teeny, tiny, one session meets that can house about 200 athletes.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** I was going to ask you: The Ontario Amateur Sport Fund also provides eligible funding. Have you had any experiences with that fund as well?

**Ms. Theresa Malar:** Not at this point. We are, again, a small club really working to advocate. Our goal is to demonstrate the need of facilities in our corridor of the province.

Our kids are at a disadvantage. I will tell you a story: One of our swimmers, 10 years old, qualified for provincials. This swimmer had never trained in a 50-metre pool.

They arrive at the pool, they get on the blocks, and they've got Hamilton grit and they're just going to go for it. That swimmer landed on the podium, landed 10th nationally ranked and had never trained in a 50-metre pool, never dove off of those diving blocks. So our kids in this area are the underdogs. It just is not fair, so we would like to level that playing field.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** I appreciate that.

Recently, we introduced a \$200-million Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund to support just that, to upgrade sport and recreation facilities, specifically in line with what you are talking about. Are you supportive of this fund? Do you foresee this being an advantageous situation for a lot of community centres that include pools?

**Ms. Theresa Malar:** That \$200 million is a great asset.

At this point, the city of Hamilton is not interested in investing in a 50-metre pool, and that is where our advocacy work is really starting right now. Andrea can attest to this: They have one pool that is set to be built in Waterdown, but it's a 25-metre pool. We are attending those town hall meetings, and we are advocating to really make that facility sport-ready—so either expanding it so it can house a 25-metre competition, or partner with the province to expand it to a 50-metre. At this point, we have not had success in making that jump to the 50-metre pool. There are also other partners, like the YMCA—they will be presenting later today—that are looking at expanding their reach as well.

For us, as a small club, that funding—we don't have a shovel-ready project. We don't have a project in the queue. We're really looking for the province to provide a foundational commitment to a 50-metre pool, and then, we can start our work doing feasibility assessments and get that project off the ground. So we are really at its infancy in terms of project development.

1040

**Ms. Laura Smith:** Thank you so much.

Chair, I'm going to be sharing my time with MPP Saunderson.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** MPP Saunderson.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Thank you very much to all the presenters this morning for your helpful information.

I'm going to direct my questions to you, Mayor Horwath. You were talking about the extensive infrastructure pinch points that you have, and you're not alone across the province. That's why we've got the HEWS funding and the \$1-billion infrastructure funding. I do note that you got about \$9.5 million in HEWS funding in the first round. Is that right?

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** I don't have the figures in front of me, but we appreciate every dime, frankly, and would appreciate many more dimes.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Well, you're not alone on that either.

I was just wondering if you can walk us through the water and waste water. Are those rate-based for you in Hamilton?

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** Yes, they are.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Do those infrastructure projects form part of your DC calculations as well?

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** Yes—well, the ones for expansion, not the ones for maintenance of existing, right?

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Okay, right, because they would qualify.

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** Yes.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** You and I have never actually met on the floor. We've switched: I went municipal to provincial, and you've gone from provincial back to municipal—

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** So you know how it works.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** So we're learning new worlds, but yes.

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** Very good.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** So coming from the municipal sector, I know that that's a huge pinch point for getting the homes built.

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** Yes.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** The province has been making huge investments in trying to assist municipalities in getting the infrastructure in place that they need. So one topic of discussion—it's not just the operating costs but it's also the ongoing costs, the capital costs—is the service delivery.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** In Simcoe county, in the regional review, we heard from a number of mayors—that they would appreciate maybe a service delivery corporation, something like the county of Oxford has done, where it takes it off the municipal table so that there's funding separately from that and it's being run. It opens up funding options and flexibility. So it would give you actually better rates than the municipality can attain on its own, but it also then gives you an opportunity to focus your DCs on local projects like the 50-metre pool. It allows you to focus on recreation and other things.

I just wonder if you wanted to comment on that possibility and how that might benefit Hamilton moving forward.

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** I appreciate that. I also appreciate the difference between smaller communities and a huge city that's growing to be a million people pretty soon—meaning in the foreseeable future. And so I don't know that the models are necessarily transferable when you look at the type of municipalities. In fact, Hamilton provides some water and waste water services for other communities that are outside of the city of Hamilton—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

We'll now go to MPP Taylor.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Good morning, everyone. Thank you to our presenters. I wish we had more time to be able to hear the important work that you're doing. The chamber and the aquatic club are such important pieces of our community. I can tell you, I was watching my five-year-old granddaughter swim yesterday; it's the best. As I'm watching her, I'm like, the future—right? And that's exactly what you've brought to the table today.

Hearing from small business, we are in a whirlwind. I think of an economy today and what does that look like in the future in ensuring that we have the ability to support

small businesses, which are community engine drivers for us, is a huge aspect. But unfortunately the city is swamped in with you today. There are so many important issues happening within our city that I have to spend that time, so I appreciate everything you brought to the table. I hope that the government is listening to your presentations and to what you've put forward, but my questions will be for Mayor Horwath.

Mayor, you have done remarkable work when it comes to the homelessness crisis that we are seeing in our community. Unfortunately, a lot of that continues to be unseen and unheard because the layers that go into that are so intricate and exasperated. And there is still one taxpayer in this city and in this province and in this country. Unfortunately, other levels of government have continued to down-load those issues onto our city, leaving us to hold the bag as taxpayers. We're seeing tax rates continue to go up. We're hearing about water and waste water—and we are the ratepayers; we do pay those monthly—and the crumbling infrastructure that we're seeing, and the addition that the province is asking you to make when it comes to building more homes. The city has done a wonderful job in exceeding the targets that we have been given. That's not by accident; that is hard work you have put forward in the city.

But we continue to see a huge crisis, and I know there are more things coming—we have tiny homes coming; we have extra shelter beds being put into place—but it's at the cost to the taxpayer. As you said, 67% of that funding and investment has come from us as ratepayers in the city of Hamilton, which the province continues to not pay attention to. Yet we have local members who are part of the government and have called you to task in that very vocally in media, questioning the investments and what that means. So I was wondering if you would like to have an opportunity to be able to address that question in your integrity and in the integrity of the city—and just diminishing the hard work that the city has done. I'd like to give you that opportunity.

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** I certainly do appreciate the opportunity to clarify some of the facts, because, really, we all should rely on facts, and the fact is we aren't spending \$158 million in 2024; we spent \$185.9 million, and it's laid out in your package where those funds went in terms of the breakdown. But that's not sustainable, and that's the point. This is not a sustainable situation.

We are committed as a city to transparency, to accountability. Everything we do is public. Our budgets are public. We have an internal audit process that's public. We regularly have our staff reporting to city council in terms of how the programs are working and what might need to be adjusted to make them work better. But the sheer magnitude of the crisis that we're facing in this city and other communities across the province is not something that can be borne by the municipal taxpayer; it just cannot.

And let's not forget, municipal taxpayers are paying their taxes on their post-tax dollars. The feds and the province have already taxed municipal taxpayers, and so they're now paying their property taxes from what's left after the other two orders of government. And yet the other two

orders of government are not partnering to the extent that we need.

I do appreciate what's been done thus far, but the sheer magnitude of the crisis far exceeds the resources that are available at the municipal order of government. And so I was pleased, as I said, to see that announcement happen in terms of the new programs, but, as I said then and I'll say again, it's not enough. It's not enough.

The problem that we have as a city is we have the problem on our doorstep day in and day out. We are the ones that see folks who are unhoused, who are living in tents and in encampments in parks and on streets, literally, in downtowns and other places—again, not just the city of Hamilton; around the entire province—in fact, around the entire country.

We need to have that partnership with the provincial and federal governments. We've had particular asks on the programs that were announced, but the investment shouldn't be 67% municipal. It should be quite the opposite, in fact. It should be completely reversed. The ratio of what we spend municipally versus the other two partners, the higher orders of government, has flipped—completely flipped—in the last couple of years. That, again, is not sustainable.

These kinds of programs are income-distribution programs. They should be taken from the income tax—provincial income tax, federal income tax—not property tax. Property tax pays for parks. It pays for underground infrastructure. It pays for roads. It pays for recreation. It pays for the management of our natural areas, all kinds of things—which you would know, Mr. Saunderson.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** So let's try to rejig that formula and make sure that we're getting it right, because that's the only sustainable future way.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Thank you. I appreciate that. And, as you mentioned earlier, we have some of the greatest health facilities right here in our city—one being St. Joe's, which is a mental health facility. So we see people coming from many municipalities, landing in Hamilton, landing in our hospital system, and then being put out on the street. So we are covering the cost for a huge portion of our province, and it's falling onto the taxpayer under our property taxes.

**1050**

I know you're looking for other revenue generators. Quickly, do you have other forms that the government could be supporting to ensure the one taxpayer isn't being covered for their failures?

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** I'm not going to speak to the more partisan piece, but what I do want to say—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. You're not going to speak to anything.

MPP Hazell.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** I am going to spend my time with the Stoney Creek Chamber of Commerce. You're very passionate about small businesses. Thank you for the work you're doing to support the small businesses in Hamilton.

I want to allude to information you shared with us on the skilled labour force and where you want to see that. I

want to make sure that we do keep a balance, and I want to hear more of tourism and hospitality support that you are actually giving to the small businesses in that sector in Hamilton. We have to be very mindful of keeping that balance.

**Ms. Brenda Wilson:** Thank you for the question. Of course, Stoney Creek is an amazing part of Hamilton, and we do have—

**Ms. Andrea Horwath:** The mayor is from there.

**Ms. Brenda Wilson:** Yes. Us Stoney Creek girls, we're happy.

I was speaking to the conservation gentleman here. We're on the lake. We have beautiful beaches. We have the conservation areas. We have the Bruce Trail. We have history for the Battle of Stoney Creek. We have so much there.

Only because I had seven minutes, I couldn't have spoken to all of those things. We certainly recognize and work with all those sectors. We certainly appreciate the growth in all of those sectors.

As a chamber, my job here was to just share with you that small businesses need more help on all of the things that you're talking about because they don't have somebody to find all of this information for them.

Through the COVID crisis, you leaned very much on the chambers, and we came through for you. I'm just encouraging you to keep that momentum going because every program you put in, every bit of money you spend, every opportunity you make—they don't know about it if you don't tell them.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** That's why I want to spend my time with you. Let's detail that to the government. We said that small businesses are the backbone to this economy, but yet still, they are lacking in making revenue because of lesser footprint. Most of them are coming off COVID with over \$100,000 in debt. So how do we bring that to the forefront? They need the support. They need more resources.

I remember. As president of Scarborough Business Association, we've helped over 3,000 businesses. The message we were giving at that time was they have to innovate or die to survive COVID. They are still struggling.

How is commercial rent for you? What are you hearing from your small businesses with commercial rent?

**Ms. Brenda Wilson:** Again, we have lots of issues with taxes going up and the landlords managing to keep their property up. We've got stormwater fees. We've got lots of things that have to be managed, and they're not bad. We all want and understand that fees and taxes—

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** But what are you asking the government for? This is your time. This is your presentation. What are the specifics you're asking for, for support for the small businesses?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Just take my one minute, please.

**Ms. Brenda Wilson:** I would think that you need to incorporate all of the information into some sort of easy, accessible hub that is able to be shared with small businesses and not be so complex. The red tape part of my presentation is a big part of it. It's not that you're doing your job; it is that it's too complex, it's too hard. Make it

easier. Talk to the chambers about how to get it out there easier. Make access easier. Don't have them fill out a municipal form, a provincial form and a federal form. No, they just cannot do that. They're not able.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Thank you for detailing that. We are hearing a lot of those types of issues from many chambers of commerce—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time.

We will now go to the government. MPP Pierre.

**Ms. Natalie Pierre:** Good morning, everyone. Thank you for coming in today to present to our committee on pre-budget consultations.

My question is for Brenda from the Stoney Creek Chamber of Commerce. I heard you talk about red tape. That is something that, as government, we always are introducing legislation about. We are taking a very specific path forward in trying to reduce red tape. I was just curious if you knew about the portal that we have through the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction?

**Ms. Brenda Wilson:** Yes, the red tape portal is great. It works—if I know about it, and I know how to get to it and I have time. Again, in my red tape thing, the overall message there was that you've done some great things and you've had some successes in cost savings and time savings. But the regulatory burdens, the amount of paperwork and things that have to be done, and to find it and figure out how to do it—it's, "I don't know how to do it." "I'll do it later. I've got to go do my sales right now." "I've got an HR problem." "Whatever, I'm a small businessman."

That is just too complex. We need to make things simpler, more easy to get to. We need to have more transparency in how things are found. And again, if there were not multiple hubs—if there were a central hub, maybe, where we could find a way to address those things and leverage technology a bit better, but not so much that they are so complex that they don't know how to do it. If I'm Joe, and I have 10 employees, but I wear 10 hats—I'm HR, I'm sales, I market—I don't have time to do these things. So I am barely hanging on, to the MPP's point. It's tough times for me. I want to grow, I don't know how. I don't know how to get there. I don't know where the accesses are.

My message to all of you is communication: better communication of things, better ways to reach them, making them simpler. Yes, the red tape portal is great, but I bet if I asked 100 of my members, I would have a very small percentage who would know what it was.

**Ms. Natalie Pierre:** Have you ever used the red tape portal?

**Ms. Brenda Wilson:** I have gone on it just to play around, but I have not sent something. I have tried to look at all of your systems as I prepared for this today. They seem so easy when you are used to them, but when you don't know anything about anything, it is really hard. You have to think of the small business guy who is trying to do everything. That is my message today: Communicate better, find better ways to get it out to the small businesses and help them. Use us—the chamber network is enormous and is always there for small businesses.

**Ms. Natalie Pierre:** Thank you for that.

My next question: Back in the late fall, the end of November, the Ontario government gave back \$2.5 billion in WSIB surpluses. I'm wondering if you could perhaps comment on the impact of that to small businesses in Stoney Creek and members of your chamber, and what the effect of that is for your membership?

**Ms. Brenda Wilson:** Again, they have benefited. We have had some growth; we have had some opportunities there. There's no question that that \$2.5 billion in surpluses was something that we've used. But again, if you came and I had 100 of my members around here, they wouldn't know that it was available. They wouldn't know how to get access to that money. They wouldn't know how to use the facilities and the resources that are offered all over.

As Mayor Horwath says, thank you for the things that you do do. Thank you for the money that you do come up with. Obviously, we'd like more—the more dimes that come, the better—but it's about getting those messages out to the hundreds of businesses that don't know.

**Ms. Natalie Pierre:** And is there something about the Stoney Creek economy that you think makes it unique? Apart from communicating the information to your members, what do you think are the most pressing issues facing small businesses?

1100

**Ms. Brenda Wilson:** I'm sorry. I'm hearing impaired, so I'm watching you. Could you repeat that, please?

**Ms. Natalie Pierre:** Sure. I'm just wondering about your membership in Stoney Creek and if you could tell us what makes the Stoney Creek economy unique. What is it that you see as the most pressing issues for your membership?

**Ms. Brenda Wilson:** Again, if we look at the different sectors—I focused a bit on manufacturing because we see it as a growth opportunity.

I work very closely with Hamilton economic development and we're trying to bring, obviously, work in. We brought Amazon there. We've got the big IKEA coming into Stoney Creek. Because it's a corridor from Niagara, Buffalo, into the States, and we're the first point of entrance from that entrance point, they come into Hamilton through Stoney Creek, so there's a big transportation corridor. If I still look at the things that they said that were the issues—getting skilled labour now—it's great.

I work with Hamilton universities—McMaster University and Redeemer University, and I work with Mohawk College. We work on—it didn't come up today, all the things that are done and doing and need to be done—programs with post-secondary, but we need stuff.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Brenda Wilson:** I was talking to one of my members who said, "I need a welder now. I don't need a student. I don't need a co-op person. I need a welder now." So I think that getting skilled labour is still a very big factor in the manufacturing portion of Stoney Creek.

I think that the things that hold them back—housing. It's great to get a person to come to Hamilton, but where are they going to live? Do they have the resources? Do they have the health care? It's a domino effect. We all need to work together to have that.

But if I talk about what's unique about Stoney Creek, it's that it is a blend of many businesses. It's older—obviously, 1812—it's a very critical part in our Canadian history. But of the growth that Hamilton is expecting, a lot of it is in our area as well, so that transportation corridor is critical.

**Ms. Natalie Pierre:** When you're referring to the transportation corridor in Stoney Creek, can you tell us a little bit more? Are you talking about the QEW? Are you talking about—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time for that question. It concludes the time for this panel.

We want to thank all the presenters for a great job of preparing and coming so ably to present it to the committee to help us in our deliberations as we proceed with the next Ontario budget. Thank you very much for taking the time to be with us today.

THE ONTARIO GREENHOUSE ALLIANCE  
HAMILTON HEALTH SCIENCES  
ST. JOSEPH'S HEALTHCARE HAMILTON

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** While we're changing panels, we will hear from the Ontario Greenhouse Alliance, Hamilton Health Sciences and St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton—if we can have the next panel come forward.

As they're coming forward, we will point out that we will have seven minutes to make the presentation. At six minutes, I will give notice: "One minute." At seven minutes, I will say, "Thank you very much," and move on to the next one.

We also ask that, when you start speaking, make sure you introduce yourself so we can get the right name on the presentation.

With that, the first presentation will be the Ontario Greenhouse Alliance.

**Mr. Jan VanderHout:** Good morning. My name is Jan VanderHout. I'm a greenhouse operator here in Hamilton. I'm also chair of the Ontario Greenhouse Alliance, and so I'm here today to speak on behalf of the Ontario Greenhouse Alliance.

Greenhouses are a tremendous economic success in Ontario. We're international leaders in our field—which is actually an indoor field—creating tens of thousands of jobs and contributing billions of dollars to our GDP in Ontario. We are a significant player, and we are also contributing a lot to the exports that are going especially to the US. In fact, about 80% of the greenhouse production in Ontario is exported to the US.

There are critical domestic and international challenges, barriers and risks that our sector is currently seeing. These threaten the ongoing growth and thriving of our sector, so we really want to address those before they become issues and drive that growth, because we believe that the greenhouse sector will continue to grow. The question is, will that be in Ontario, or will that be south of the border?

On the domestic front, we really need to see accelerated investment in infrastructure. Specifically, as it relates to

this government, we need to see accelerated investment in electrical infrastructure. It is a very complicated thing, and it's certainly not only for the greenhouse sector, but the transmission lines need to be reinforced, the transformer stations need to be reinforced, the distribution into the countryside also needs to be reinforced. This will enable us to increase our year-round production using lights. We can increase the amount of production in the winter months. It also presents an opportunity for the province to use the greenhouse sector as a source of electrical generation. On greenhouse farms, we can generate electricity using natural gas engines. The heat can be used to operate the greenhouse, and the electricity can be exported into the grid.

There are some barriers to this: the electrical infrastructure, the natural gas infrastructure and the structures that make that feasible. So what will the payback be? How can that look so that that would empower us as greenhouse producers to contribute to the electrical generation in the province?

On the international front, probably most of you here today have heard about the new President and some of the things that he's threatening. I think in a lot of cases a lot of that is rhetoric. He's waiting to see what our reaction will be, and we really need to stand up to him with respect and to ensure that we are not collateral damage. We need to protect our food production system in Ontario across the board, and negotiating very carefully with the American government is really a crucial thing. With the situation in Ottawa today, I think there will be more pressure on the Premiers across the country to engage at that level. Whatever it is, we have to do our best to ensure that that trade with the US can continue, because we are entirely dependent on that. Our entire sector is dependent on that trade. As I said, over 80% is exported both in floral and vegetable production.

What we need specifically is—on a financial front, we need to have continued and accelerated investment in electrical infrastructure, and as I mentioned, that's transmission, that's transformer stations. The Dundas transformer station has been undersized. I could speak to that one, because that's my neighbourhood. We get our power through there. When we would like to generate electricity, that is a bottleneck for us. So investment needs to happen in the transformer stations, the distribution, transmission across the province. This is not a localized area. Certainly, southwestern Ontario, where a large portion of the greenhouses are, is in need, but so are we in Hamilton as well as Niagara.

From a regulatory standpoint, there are these days too many unnecessary costs, added red tape that really does not make sense. So I would challenge government to work towards the reduction of red tape. Red tape is such a fancy word. What does it actually mean? We all know red tape exists, but when I talk to fellow growers, it's often a challenge to get them to identify that red tape. But we do all know it exists, and it takes so many different forms.

One of the things that we've been coming across more challenges in terms of red tape lately is municipally. Here in Hamilton, the stormwater tax, which is being applied—and there are some formulas about how that can be

reduced on farms. But in our farm's case, that stormwater tax will be a \$9,000 burden if it continues to go through, and that's at the reduced rate. It almost sounds like a bargain when I put it like this, but originally it was over \$90,000 for us.

1110

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Jan VanderHout:** Just to conclude, I really want to emphasize that the greenhouse sector wants to be partners with government and we want to work together for a better tomorrow for our sector, for sure, but for all of Ontario. Thank you very much.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

Before we go on, I would ask to make sure that everyone realizes we have a great sound crew so don't touch the mike. They'll do everything. Start to speak and stop to speak—they'll look after that for us.

With that, the next presenter will be Hamilton Health Sciences. The floor is yours.

**Mr. Keith Monrose:** Good morning, members of the committee. My name is Keith Monrose. I'm chair of the board of directors at Hamilton Health Sciences. I'm here today on behalf of my board colleagues who are community members dedicated to supporting the 18,000 staff, physicians and learners at HHS who provide care to more than three million people across southwest Ontario and beyond. I'm also joined virtually by one of the hospital's senior leaders, Aaron Levo, vice-president, people, culture and communications.

Today, I'm here as an invested member of the community to emphasize the critical role HHS plays in our provincial health care system and the urgent need for sustainable health care funding across the province. My remarks will focus on three areas:

(1) HHS is a vital provincial asset with a highly efficient system.

(2) Government investments can be transformational and mobilize quickly to benefit patients.

(3) As an Ontarian and as a committed steward of our hospital resources, I am concerned that there is a disconnect between maintaining a balance between the budget in the face of growing demand and costs.

(1) HHS is a vital provincial asset within a highly efficient system: Ontario's health care spending per capita is the lowest among OECD nations, yet at our hospitals, HHS included, they are recognized for their exceptional efficiency, resourcefulness and quality. However, HHS faces unique pressures that compound the challenges of delivering care in a financially strained environment, including limited fundraising capacity in comparison to our GTA peers and high hospital utilization rates and significant local socio-economic challenges. As Ontario's second-largest hospital, we also fulfill a provincial mandate, delivering specialized care far beyond the boundaries of our local community. At HHS, one in three patients are regional and one in 10 are provincial. We are also a top-ranking research and teaching hospital in Canada. We produce the health care professionals

and solutions of tomorrow, contributing both to our economy and the effectiveness of our system.

HHS is not just a community resource. It's a vital provincial asset that must be supported to meet the growing needs of Ontario's population effectively. At the same time, we must look at the capacity and resourcing across the province. We are a system after all and we work together to support the health of all Ontarians.

(2) Government investments can be transformational and mobilized to quickly benefit patients: In 2023, the province made a historic \$330-million investment in pediatric care in Ontario, including almost \$50 million for HHS's McMaster Children's Hospital. One year after our teams began putting these funds to work, the outcomes are profound. We've cared for nearly 15,000 more kids across 26 programs. We've reduced pediatric emergency department wait times by 19%. We're on track to increase clinical visits by 41%. We've performed 21% more MRIs and we've performed 1,100 additional life-changing surgeries, further reducing surgical wait times for kids in need.

Transformational investments in hospital capital are also changing the landscape of care in our region. This summer we will open the doors to a new West Lincoln Memorial Hospital in Grimsby. Tendered less than three years ago, this project will improve access to hospital services for more than 100,000 west Niagara residents in the state-of-the-art facility. These are just two examples demonstrating that when you invest in HHS, patients benefit—and quickly.

Still, more investment is needed. Ontario's population is expected to grow by 36% in 20 years with the largest cohort being over the age of 65. Additionally, more than three million Ontarians will have chronic illnesses like diabetes and cancer. As it stands, Ontario hospitals are not positioned to support this growing demand.

Currently, Ontario spends less on health care per capita than any other province. The Ontario Hospital Association has estimated that an additional \$3.7 billion is needed to fund Ontario hospitals at the national average. As the cost of providing health care rises, with no budget allocation addressing inflationary pressures, most Ontario hospitals are finishing this fiscal year in a deficit, including HHS.

(3) As an Ontarian and as a committed steward of our hospital resources, I'm concerned, as there is a disconnect between maintaining a balanced budget in the face of growing demand and costs: Our board signed up with a serious obligation to the people of Ontario. We've directed senior leadership at HHS to develop a long-range financial sustainability plan aimed at reducing the projected deficit for 2024-25 and balancing the hospital's budget over the next five years. But as an already highly efficient hospital, without additional investment, we inevitably face difficult choices about how to prioritize resources.

As a member of the community, I'm concerned that it's increasingly hard for our hospitals to deliver quality care. Hospital budget deficits, arising sector-wide, are a clear indication of rapidly rising costs to achieve quality. Our board supports the OHA's request for targeted urgent financial support to sustain the hospital operations and to protect against inflation.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Keith Monrose:** I implore this committee to look deeply at the opportunities to invest further and strategically in our health care system. HHS remains a steadfast, solutions-oriented partner, and we're ready to help lead our sector into an area of sustainability and excellence. We look forward to working with the province to address these critical needs and continue creating a health care system that all Ontarians deserve. Thank you for your time today.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much for the presentation.

We now will hear from the St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton.

**Dr. Mike Heenan:** My name is Mike Heenan. I'm the president of St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton an affiliated academic health science centre with McMaster University. We are also home, most people don't know, to Ontario's second-largest mental health and addictions program.

I'm joined today on Zoom by Ms. Brooke Cowell, our executive VP and chief nurse, and Ms. Franca Vavaroutsos, our executive VP and chief financial officer.

I did submit an earlier brief. I will not read that brief today, but I will lead with four key points.

Firstly, we have a wonderful cancer program in this province, and we often talk highly about our regional cancer services. But we do not talk highly about our regional mental health services and centres.

Secondly, we have 11 of them in this province, but St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton and North Bay general are the only mental health specialty regional centres attached to large general medicine, emergency and surgery hospitals. The others are all stand-alone centres.

Thirdly, the hospital funding formula, intentionally designed 10 years ago, is a very good formula, but needs updating, and it does not recognize these integrated models of St. Joe's and North Bay.

Finally, we have over-regulated current funding to the point where there's a lot of red tape. We cannot use certain unused funds allocated to us annually to go and support others, and so we're constantly moving money back and forth between hospitals and Ontario Health. St. Joe's has appropriately operated within the funding formula to date and is now one of the lowest-cost providers of mental health care in the province, if not the country. However, we are now an overly efficient partner, unable to provide certain services, given we are underfunded compared to those stand-alone centres, because we are an integrated system.

To illustrate this, I will share a patient's story with you. Patient A is a 71-year-old male. He's widowed. He has an alcohol addiction and lives with his son and daughter-in-law. For several weeks, he has displayed significant confusion and visual hallucinations. They have manifested into violence where he physically hits his family. This violence has gradually gotten worse, and his family now feels he is a threat to himself and them.

They call our Crisis Outreach and Support Team, otherwise known as COAST. COAST arrives, which means both the St. Joe's health care worker and police officer respond to the home. They take him into care under the Mental



Health Act, and they bring him to our ER, which is a fully integrated ER, offering medicine, surgery, as well as psychiatric services, because we are the designated regional centre.

While in our psych ER, he is deemed a threat and placed in physical restraints, as there's no seclusion room left because we are overflowing with mental health volumes. He is eventually assessed with a dementing illness, secondary to alcoholism and cirrhosis of the liver. He's on 19 medications, and it's determined he can't care for himself.

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Due to his aggressive behaviours, he's placed in our acute unit where he stays upwards of eight months. An acute unit is ideally designed to stabilize and then place you in outpatient services, but because of his condition, he will be transferred up the mountain to the West 5th site to stay in seniors mental health and he'll stay there for 15 more months before final stabilization and behavioural supports. So what's different about this patient compared to other patients that go through a stand-alone centre?

Positively: The patient is in one system. He's connected with the St. Joe's health system from the moment he calls COAST—a single clinical team, a single clinical record, a single set of clinical standards and single-management and governance over acute outpatient and specialty. In other cities, he may have been transferred up to three times before he got into that regional centre.

Negatively: The patient does not have access to the same amount of clinical support services as those stand-alone centres—social work, occupational therapy, recreational therapy, psychology, behavioural and security—both as an in-patient and outpatient, leading to longer stays in the ER and on the in-patient. Sadly, he's in restraints longer for his own safety and for the safety of our staff.

As the finance committee, you may be asking, how is that financially possible? In essence: The funding formula model, called the growth inefficiency model, allocates funding based on expected volumes and case complexity. St. Joe's is a mental health hospital and a general hospital. Our mental health and complexity volume gets mixed together with ER, urgent care, medicine and birthing volumes. That general hospital volume far outweighs the mental health volume; therefore, negatively impacting how we get funding for our mental health program. Given funding distribution is fairly a pie-sharing exercise, we get funded more like a general hospital than a stand-alone mental health program. So the mental health program waits for all those other nine centres who have more funding for things like those things I mentioned.

This has had a profound impact at St. Joe's. For an ER visit, we receive \$282 per visit compared to a cost of \$1,400. For an in-patient stay up on the West 5th site, we have an \$851 day reimbursement compared to our stand-alone peer average of \$1,290. At St. Joe's, this means we have a psychiatric-ER funding shortfall of approximately \$4 million and an in-patient shortfall of approximately \$8 million.

We are therefore asking the standing committee today to increase mental health funding but, more importantly, redesign the funding formula to allow equal access to funds to an integrated health system so those who come here and

live in Hamilton or the greater Hamilton area have equal access to the services that are being provided in other cities.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Dr. Mike Heenan:** We would suggest that you no longer include mental health activity in the GEM model, and that you correct the past structural deficits so we no longer have to reduce service to pay for past debts to catch up with current inflation. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much for the presentation.

That concludes the presentation. We will now start the first round of questions to the independent: MPP Jama.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** Thank you so much for your presentation today.

My question is for St. Joe's and Hamilton Health Sciences. I'm particularly alarmed by the closure of the Hamilton east mental health services, meaning that many people who were receiving acute mental health services at those hospital services will have to make their way up to West 5th, which is unsustainable, especially for many folks who are in psychosis.

Hamilton Centre is the poorest riding in the province of Ontario when looking at income generated per household. Many people, if they're not able to receive the acute care that they need, are also unable to hold a job or receive services or keep contact with their ODSP and OW worker, and are constantly forced to live in encampments over and over again because of the lack of this mental health service and support that you're talking about.

Can you speak a little bit to how the closure of the east-end mental health facility will worsen the cost-of-living crisis here in Hamilton Centre or in the downtown area?

**Dr. Mike Heenan:** Since it's in a St. Joe's service, I'll speak to that, Mr. Chair. I thank you for the question.

First, I want to emphasize that the decision to consolidate the services of east region mental health with our West 5th program was based on volume and data. Over the last three years, the referrals to that program were being reduced 20% per year, down to the fact that we were 35% to 40% underutilized. Some 56% of that volume was delivered virtually, and it was open only four days a week. By consolidating that budget—we did not reduce that budget—with the regional centre that I talked about, we are now able to serve patients five days a week and connect them into the tertiary services that they can have now. So we've actually enhanced care because of virtual care, and also, while it was a stand-alone clinic in the east end, it is now connected into that regional centre to get the services that I just described with regard to mood disorder etc.

With the support of the province—I will applaud them—over the last number of years, they have struck funding for something called the Ontario Structured Psychotherapy Program. St. Joe's has seen a 156% increase in that volume. What that shows you is that we've done a very good job in this province on overcoming the stigma of mental health. That is a self-referral program, so people are self-referring to the structured program—a 156% increase since its launch—and they're not going through their family doctor, or they don't have a family doctor, and so they're not being

referred to east region. I want to assure the government of the day: We have not cut the budget for mental health at St. Joe's.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** My other question would be, in my office we see many people who are unable to access mental health supports in general who are applying for medical assistance in dying because they're eligible for track 2, which means that they are experiencing disabilities, they don't know where to go, the cost of living is just too much for them to be able to keep up with the low wages that they make on ODSP and OW. Have you seen an increase in people struggling because of lack of funding supports? And do you think that more funding supports in social assistance programming would support your work in terms of hospitals that are attempting to provide care for some people who are being left behind in our communities?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Dr. Mike Heenan:** I can't speak to the MAID issue. That's a federal government issue. What I can say: We have not received any requests for MAID, to my knowledge, in the 14 months that I've been here, so I can't speak to that.

However, what I can say, and we've been publicly open about this, is that we see 4,000 homeless patients per year at St. Joe's. Every two hours, we discharge patients to the street. We've been working with the Hub most recently to do some warming centres to collaborate on things like you're saying. Helping the city address homelessness, advancing the HART model—these are all things that are going to help the marginalized, and we're supportive of those efforts.

To just perhaps talk a little bit about your opening question too: If you were to say to me, "Hey, if we gave you two million more dollars, would you open east region?" the answer—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That's the time.

MPP Hogarth.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** Good morning, everyone. It is wonderful to have you all here today. Thank you for sharing your time with us.

I'd actually like to concentrate my questions on the Ontario Greenhouse Alliance and Jan, so thank you for that. The reason I wanted to highlight some of the work the greenhouse alliance does is that Etobicoke-Lakeshore is the home of the largest food terminal, which is the Ontario Food Terminal, which we're very proud to have in our community. Since I've become the MPP, I've learned a lot more about the agriculture business. It's probably a lot to do with my mentor, who is the Chair here, who knows a lot about agriculture and has shared that knowledge with all of us.

Thank you for the work you do, and thank you for when you come to Queen's Park. I know you come usually twice a year to share your interests and your asks and your beautiful poinsettias and vegetables.

We do have an active agriculture business. First of all, can you just talk a little bit about how much local produce is actually grown in Ontario?

**Mr. Jan VanderHout:** From a greenhouse standpoint?

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** Yes.

**Mr. Jan VanderHout:** Very, very little greenhouse produce is imported. So of the demand for greenhouse produce, it's all produced here in Ontario.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** That's great. We see these signs that say, "Shop local" in our grocery stores. Does that help our consumers purchase more local products, do you believe?

**Mr. Jan VanderHout:** I think it does help a little bit. I guess the definition of "local" is where the challenge comes in. Does that mean around the corner, does that mean across the city, or does that mean within the province or maybe within the country, even? I guess the definition of local is a bit of a challenge there.

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**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** That's a good point. It's not just Ontario-grown, you said, but it's Canadian-grown?

**Mr. Jan VanderHout:** I would propose that local is broader than your own community. Maybe Canadian-grown is a bit far, but we could stand to have some more endorsement of Buy Ontario. Shoring up programs like Foodland Ontario would be a positive thing. I want to be clear about that, though, because I'm also involved with the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, and Foodland Ontario is something we've been talking a lot about lately. It's a bit of a challenge, because the solution isn't throwing more money at it, the solution is finding a strategy which will promote Ontario products and figuring out what that will cost, not just throwing more money at the same program. It needs modernization.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** We've seen a lot of work through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. A couple of years ago they invested in a feasibility study to look at commercial greenhouses in northern Ontario and on reserves. Is there any feedback from that funding? Are we looking at commercial greenhouses in northern Ontario where they have multitudes of land?

**Mr. Jan VanderHout:** Almost entirely no. The bulk of the Ontario greenhouses are between Windsor and Niagara Falls, in that corner. There are a few operations that are on the east side of Toronto, towards Ottawa, but even then, not significant players. There is a reason why those greenhouses are located there: (a) labour force, (b) market, (c) infrastructure. There's a lot of reasons why you do not build your commercial greenhouse operations in northern communities.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** I was just wondering because we always are looking for other opportunities for where we can put these greenhouses because we want to create jobs, we want to make sure we have the food for the future and we want to make sure we have the beautiful plants for the future.

Alongside the federal government, we announced funding that will provide eligible farm and food-processing businesses with help to invest in innovative technologies and equipment that will help expand production capacity and enhance efficiency. Do you have any comments on that program? Is it working? Is it not? What's your feedback on the program?

**Mr. Jan VanderHout:** The concept is great. I think it's really important to encourage innovation on the farm. I don't know if this would fit in to that category, but programs like SR&ED—scientific research and innovation or something like that—I just got rejected on that on an application last week, from the audit. We're going to challenge it, because we really believe we're right.

This is where it becomes very difficult, because we do need to encourage—you don't want to just throw money at us, either. There needs to be a verification that the operations are doing the work of innovation and not just taking the money and using it for whatever purpose. That can be tricky, but at the same time we can't expect farmers to be doing research at the level that you would expect from Hamilton Health Sciences. That's just not realistic. We don't have researchers on staff. We don't have scientists on staff.

Back to my earlier point, the rural lens: I don't want to make myself sound like, "Yes, you should think about the dumb farmers." That's not the point. But the rural landscape is a big difference. The issues that we are challenged with are different and the priorities are different than what they are in the downtown core, even though it's relatively close.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** The land is definitely different, being someone who lives in Etobicoke but also someone who lived in northern Ontario, and we have to look at expanding our agriculture into other communities. I think that's why we also had an investment with Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, to look at agriculture and expanding agriculture in northern Ontario. Are you aware of the program with Lakehead University, the agricultural research?

**Mr. Jan VanderHout:** I'm sorry. I'm not.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** We gave a little over \$1 million—a million and a half for five years—to support research programming to look at agricultural research. It's really about how to yield crops in other locations, such as northern Ontario, and then the heritage fund has kicked in with a couple of programs to fund feasibility studies for commercial greenhouses. It's just a different way of looking at growing and growth.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** Any final comments on expanding it outside of rural Ontario? I know you've mentioned one thing about northern Ontario, but anything you'd like to add?

**Mr. Jan VanderHout:** I think really keep in mind that there are, especially in large-type businesses in our sector—you need to have that infrastructure, labour and market because otherwise, it becomes a big challenge even for servicing your equipment. If you have to bring in a technician from four hours south, that's going to be a challenge. That's just one little aspect.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** I think what we'd like to see is creating jobs across Ontario. If there's an area we could, I think we'd like to investigate.

**Mr. Jan VanderHout:** Where there are centres of demand and people to do the work, then that does make sense, yes.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** Thank you for all you do.

**Mr. Jan VanderHout:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** We'll now go to the opposition. MPP Shaw.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you for being here, Mr. VanderHout. Thank you for your presentation—very appreciative of what you bring to our economy here.

Given that we are in the midst of a health care crisis that this province has not seen before, a mental health crisis that continues to grow and a homelessness crisis that is being borne by all institutions, including our hospitals—never expected to be the front line for a homelessness crisis—I'm going to focus my questions on that emergency, essentially. I think that it's very important that we do, and I'm hoping that when the government does have a chance to ask that they would recognize and be a responsible government and want to hear from the hospitals as to what they're experiencing in this community of Hamilton, but we know this is happening across the province.

So I'm going to start with you, Mr. Monrose. Thank you so much for being here, and thank you to your staff, to your members, from the top right to the custodial staff, for keeping these hospitals open. They are doing the work of heroes given what they've been going through, through COVID and so forth. So from the official opposition and my colleague here, we want to first start by saying thank you for how hard you're working in unsustainable and untenable circumstances.

You had mentioned in your presentation that Ontario has the lowest per-person funding in the OECD, which I didn't know. I do know that they had the lowest funding in Canada. It's unbelievable. Ontario has the lowest funding per capita, per person, in health care in Canada. But conversely, they have the highest debt and deficit in Canada. So this is a government that's spending big, but clearly they're not spending it on hospitals, because how do you have the lowest investment in hospitals but yet the cost per person when it comes to the debt and the deficit of this government continues to soar?

So I would like you to say a little more than what you already have about a couple of your points. Really, one is the sustainability. I know when the government will talk about the investments they make, one of the things that they don't acknowledge is that they had to put a huge investment into Bill 124 and the award that they had to pay out for the nurses when they had wage suppression for health care staff. I want you to speak very specifically about the fact that this is almost unsustainable.

If you could put a human face on what is happening in your hospitals: What are your staff going through? What do your emergency rooms look like? What is it like for patients to be on wait-lists? Because we know almost 11,000 Ontarians died on wait-lists in this province. Given the fiscal irresponsibility, I would say, of this government and the human struggle in the hospitals, can you please paint a picture for me of what it's like day in and day out in your hospital to keep the doors open and to keep providing services to our residents in Hamilton and, as you've said, the region?

**Mr. Keith Monrose:** Thank you for your compliments, and I'll pass that on to the management and staff of

Hamilton Health Sciences. As you say, they do a fantastic job every single day on behalf of our community, our region and the province, so thank you for that.

In health care, and you've heard about it from my colleague Mike Heenan, we are faced with increasing demands in our community. Certainly, when we look at the aging of our population, the socio-economic load that creates a greater burden on the health care system, these are all challenges that we face. We see it every day when we go to work and we see the people that are living, as Mike mentioned, outside of a typical, proper housing situation; they're homeless. From a hospital perspective, we are grateful for the supports that we have received, and I did mention those in my comments. But increasingly, we are challenged balancing our budget in the face of growing demand and growing costs. Inflation is a real thing and that creates cost pressures. So the face in terms of examples and what that looks like in terms of our staff, because we have our VP of people and culture on the line, I'll turn it over to Aaron to provide a brief description of that.

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**Mr. Aaron Levo:** Thanks very much, Keith. I'm happy to comment a little bit more.

Thank you very much for the question, MPP Shaw. We're never doing any less of what we do at Hamilton Health Sciences, and I would say the same for our colleagues at St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton as well. It's a growth business, and so, in that instance, we're very adept at navigating how to do more with the existing baseline resources we have. That's what our teams are very, very good at, and managing to keep our services high quality and safe. Our institution has been accredited with distinction three times in a row, notwithstanding any financial challenges we face.

I would say yes, absolutely, and it's seasonal throughout the year. At this moment in time, we're navigating the viral surge season and we're doing it very proficiently. We've managed to partner with St. Joe's and others on some investments to make more options for people discharged from the hospital and the community. That kind of collaboration is key in making sure that the resources we do have are put to best use. When it comes to the workforce, we are growing our workforce. Fortunately, we're able to attract more and more people, notwithstanding the challenge of working in health care. The stat that you referred to, that Keith shared, is one from the Ontario Hospital Association about the investment per capita and the OECD comparatives.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Aaron Levo:** I'll just maybe leave you with the thought that in Hamilton, as you look at the two hospitals represented in front of you, on a per capita basis, we also have more health care jobs and health care service capacity in Hamilton than probably any other city on a per capita basis in perhaps Canada. It's an enormous asset for the community and that's something that should be treated with great deference and respect and investment.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you very much. Before we finish, I just wanted you to comment on the concern that there are potential layoffs and current shortages. Can you

just comment on that? Because I know that's a concern for people in Hamilton.

**Mr. Aaron Levo:** There aren't layoffs in process at the moment. There is always a need for more staff; we always have vacancies. We're certainly filling them at a rate that's growing, which is great news for all of us and for the teams that work so hard every day. It's very difficult when we have high vacancy rates.

You asked for a human perspective, and I'll say, yes, it is very challenging. As I walk about our institution and I talk to the people working day and night shifts, they're concerned. I think that Keith's remarks amplify and exhibit that. As you look—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes that question.

We'll now go to MPP Hazell.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** To all presenters today, thank you so much for coming in and thank you for presenting to us. I want to take my questions up with my minutes to Hamilton Health Sciences and St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton because the question I'm going to ask, both of you can answer.

Thank you for everything, again, that you're doing for your community, trying your best to keep them healthy. We know all hospitals across Ontario are facing huge and critical budget deficiencies. When you can have hospitals still opening—and we know there is a long wait-list for surgeries. Just last year, we had over 11,000 people that died waiting for surgeries. We know there is a long waiting list for people to even do their CT scan. Yesterday, one of the health care providers said his wife had to go across the border to do their test, just to get it done faster. I know even in my riding, there are people that are actually doing that as well. I can go on and on, but I want to spend my time talking about your budget pressures.

How can we continue to operate quality care for the people in our community with the budget shortfalls that you're facing now? If you don't get the budget—let's be frank here because you're here doing your presentation and you need funding now. How can you keep up?

**Dr. Mike Heenan:** Thanks for the question. I'm going to tackle the question in two ways. The first one is to say that this city is extremely well planned. If you have a heart issue, you go to Hamilton Health Sciences. If you have a kidney issue, you come to me. If you have a brain issue, you come to me if it's mental health; if it's neurology, you go to Keith.

That is not like any other city. In Toronto, there are five or six hospitals that do what these two do. In Ottawa, there's five or six hospitals that do what these two do. For us, we've gone to the efficiency level where we are extremely efficient. I have one vice-president of mental health. That's it. If you go to a stand-alone health centre for mental health, they're going to have five or six vice-presidents.

We are now at a point where we will support the OHA submission to you, but we're also recognizing that the funding formula needs to be updated. I will give you an example. There is a set of ICU beds in this province that are base funding. We take that base funding, and we take care of an intensive care unit. But there's a set of ICU beds

that are red-circled, and if you do not use that funding, you send it back to the province of Ontario. So, you allocate the money, and if we don't use those ICU beds, we send it back. In theory, it makes sense.

In both of our institutions, we do robotic surgery. What does robotic surgery do? It avoids an ICU admission. This government has invested in three of the 10—thank you very much for the investment in three of the 10 robotic surgeries. On the one hand, we are innovating and creating an opportunity not to go to the ICU, and then when I do that, the money that Ontario Health gives me has to be clawed back.

Part of it, we will support the OHA—at least I will—on their submission, but we need funding flexibility. When we go around this province and we talk about red tape commissions, we often talk about business. We don't talk about public hospitals.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Dr. Mike Heenan:** We need funding flexibility in addition to what the OHA has submitted. That's also part of my earlier submission around while we do funding formulas that look at it as a hospital is a hospital is a hospital, that is not true. Keith does everything.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Can we hear a bit from Keith? I have less than one minute. Can you sum it up in less than a minute?

**Mr. Keith Monrose:** Yes. Just to put the point on the table, we, as the board of directors, have instructed and asked our senior leadership team to develop a long-range sustainability plan over five years to move to a balanced budget. How we get there is a question of, what do we need to do? What are the puts and takes in terms of the services we provide? We are not there right now, but ultimately to fit—you cannot fit 20 pounds of potatoes into a 10-pound bag. That's the trajectory we are on right now. So we've asked management to come back to us with a sustainable budget over the next five years.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** We will now go to the government side. MPP Smith.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** I'm going to come back to St. Joseph's. I'm the parliamentary assistant to finance. I'm going to take a look at things slightly differently than everyone else is on this. In the budget process, we are looking at ways that we can modify what we are already doing, increase funding in certain areas, perhaps move money from one area to another.

You touched on something that I think is really important, and that is in the funding formula itself. When all of this budget process has been set up over the last 150-plus years, they've looked at where the need was on it, and wanted to make sure the money was being spent on those specific things. But as you point out, your hospital is one of two in the province that is integrated with mental health and with primary care, for lack of a better term on it. So you are a square peg trying to fit into a round hole on our funding formula.

If I was to adjust that funding formula for you then, how would we do it in a way that doesn't give you a theoretical advantage over another hospital that isn't integrated, because perhaps they're not big enough to do it? But how do I also do it in a way that doesn't disadvantage you because

of the efficiencies that you have? When someone presents to your ER with a mental health episode, I will refer to it as, in all likelihood, a dual diagnosis. They almost always have some other kind of physical health challenge.

We are not capturing that in the formula on it. We're looking at it saying, "A mental health patient gets treated this way. It's a different person who is a physical health challenge." But in reality, when they are coming to your ER, it is the same person, and we're not capturing that. How would we adjust it in a way that gives you what you need, but we don't create an imbalance for someone in a different community that doesn't have the ability to have the sheer size to have an integrated system?

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**Dr. Mike Heenan:** Thank you, MPP Smith.

A couple of thoughts: The first one is, in our particular case as the second-largest mental health and addictions program, we have an acute medicine unit that's tied to the general hospital, as you've described, and then we have a specialty service. My recommendation would be that we treat it like cancer. So if you have a cancer centre in Mississauga, it's tied to Trillium Health Partners. If you have a cancer centre in Ottawa, it's tied to the Ottawa Hospital.

I'm not here to decide what the governance models are, but we treat cancer as a separate envelope of funding, and we treat all of those centres within that one. Whereas in the St. Joe's and North Bay models, we are meshed with all these other stand-alones. But I would be pulling mental health funding out of the GEM calculation.

The second one I'd say is that the funding formula has something called procedure-based funding called quality-based procedures, and so we'll get 500 units of this or 200 units of that. They were decided 10 years ago, so we have to do two things:

(1) To your point, recognize that the calculation that went into that was 10 years ago, when there weren't as many comorbidities—that dual diagnosis that you're talking about.

(2) To reset it. You asked me to buy milk, and I am now drinking orange juice. So while I might have been doing procedure A 10 years ago, I am now doing procedure B. We need to re-baseline those procedure types.

Again, to go to the red tape issue: When I don't have enough fractures because people slip and fall, allow me to get that allocation and put it into robotic surgery, or allow me to put it somewhere else. Because we've got a lot of administration moving money between Ontario Health and me, and I am constantly going to Ontario Health and saying, "Help me with procedure A", and they say, "No, your allocation is this." And then at the end of the year, they say, "Take away that." In the meantime, I've convinced the ministry to give me another set of money over here.

So while I will support the OHA's ask for some more funding—we always would—we also need a redesignation of the funding formula like the government did for medium-sized hospitals in 2019.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

I am going to turn the time over.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** MPP Gallagher Murphy.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Thank you very much for being here today. Your deputations are greatly appreciated.

My question will be specifically for Hamilton Health Sciences. First off, I want to thank you. I believe that Hamilton Health Sciences is a great facility, and you truly have one of the best cardiac and stroke units. Unfortunately, I visited there when my brother was there just before Christmas, and you took such good care of him. So number one: Thank you to the entire team at Hamilton Health Sciences.

A couple of things I wanted to address as far as capital is concerned—capital funding for the hospital. As you probably know, our plan to build in Ontario includes more than \$48 billion over the next 10 years, specifically in health infrastructure. That is approximately \$32 billion in capital grants, and this will support about 50 hospitals in Ontario. We're looking to add 3,000 additional beds.

My question would be, how do you see this investment helping? What type of impact would it be on health sciences here in Hamilton, knowing the age of your hospital as well?

**Mr. Keith Monrose:** Certainly, investment in hospitals and HHS in particular is welcomed. I mentioned the benefits to West Lincoln Memorial Hospital and, similarly, the benefits to the rest of the HHS system—indeed, to the Hamilton community—will be important.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Keith Monrose:** As Mike mentioned earlier, from a financial perspective, we have outdated modes in terms of financing, and the capital will really help improve the delivery of care. When we talk about your loved one in cardiac care or stroke care and we look at the facilities that we have in Hamilton and we compare them, for example, to facilities in Toronto, there are differences, and we need to address those gaps.

Those are some of the benefits that we could see, because the standard of care, the mode of care and the way in which care is delivered in these units is quite different today than it was 20 years ago, but we're operating in a 20-year-old facility providing 2024 care.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** I know that, in late 2023, there was \$30 million for pediatric care services for here in Hamilton, between Hamilton Health Sciences and St. Joe's as well—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

We'll now go to the opposition: MPP Taylor.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Good morning, everyone. Thank you so much for being here today. I wish we had more time to be able to hear from you and to be able to hear the challenges that each one of you face—important challenges—and that you had more of the government's ear regarding these important issues.

Jan and TOGA, thank you for always being there. We've met several times over my years at Queen's Park because you continue to advocate on behalf of greenhouses in Ontario. The stormwater tax issue that you've brought forward today, which you didn't have much time to talk about, really goes back to, again, the same ratepayer paying the brunt of taxes from the city of Hamilton and the down-

loads that have contributed to those from the province, once again putting hardships on your farmers, on your people in rural Hamilton. I wish I had more time to focus on that issue. Unfortunately, I don't, as you know.

I'm grateful to see both Hamilton Health Sciences and St. Joe's here. Thanks, Michael, for the tour that you provided New Democrats at St. Joe's in the mental health unit. It was really hard to be there, to see the state of our mental health facility and the construction that it's undergoing—thank goodness for that—but hearing that, every two hours, someone is released back on to the street after having a mental health episode, after having probably an ambulance called—

*Interjections.*

**Miss Monique Taylor:** It's really unfortunate that the government isn't listening and talking to themselves, but I'll try to talk over them.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Chair, we can't hear.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Order.

*Interjections.*

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Seriously.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** We're trying to hear and you're really loud over there right now.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** The crisis that we see in our city for mental health and homelessness is an important issue, and you're supposed to be here listening to the presenters.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Why don't you ask your question?

**Miss Monique Taylor:** I'm trying.

*Interjections.*

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Order.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** This is the state of the province of Ontario, when our most vulnerable constituents are ignored, when our hospital systems are in deficits, when we see people having to be released into the streets, into tents in our communities, and the government just refuses to listen. That is the unfortunate state that we see.

To know that the only safe consumption site in our city is being closed that saved hundreds of lives since it was brought into place—were there concerns, possibly, of locations? Sure. Should we have moved it? Sure. But to close it down?

The HART centres will, I'm sure, be fantastic. I'm happy to hear that St. Joe's is partnering with the HART hubs. But it should be just one more tool, more tools in the box, instead of removing tools, putting further pressure on the hospital system, which we will definitely see.

I know you're going to be involved in the HART system; that's a positive. But can you tell us the problems and the increase for visits that we're going to see with the closure of the safe consumption sites?

**Dr. Mike Heenan:** St. Joe's is, like a good operator, preparing and noting there could be risk. We do not have a policy position on the closing of the injection site, but we are preparing for that. That's why we have an emergency response unit, and we are preparing, like any sort of program, for that.

The point of me being here today is to let you know that, if someone shows up in that emergency room, I'm going

to get \$282 for that visit, compared to \$1,400, because of the integrated model we had.

So to MPP Smith's point, please look at the funding formula that allows people to respond in an emergency manner, and that's the reason why I'm here. I'll leave the politics to you today, but from a health policy perspective, we are the second-largest mental health and addictions program. We do have mobile services in the city that we partner with the city of Hamilton on, and we'll be a responsive partner. We're asking you today as the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs to look at the funding formula to give fairness so that that response is safe in the city of Hamilton.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Absolutely, and I'm truly grateful for your presentation today. They're definitely linked, because when you're already facing deficits, to have further burdens put on the hospital system is just truly not going to help your current funding situation.

I hope that the government was hearing you when you're asking for those funding changes. It definitely makes sense. Hamilton is leading when it comes to our health facilities for both networks, shall we call them, and so I'm grateful for the opportunity to have you here today.

I also want to mention quickly, to Hamilton Health Sciences: We are hearing about the staffing shortages. Quite frankly, unfortunately, CUPE and the Ontario Health Coalition are downstairs at the front doors right now—against the government and their shortfalls to our health care system. Could you comment again, possibly, on what it is that you need to ensure that our health care system is strong in the city of Hamilton, and we don't constantly have our staff protesting this current government?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Keith Monrose:** I'll turn it over to my colleague Aaron.

This is a health human resources question, Aaron.

**Mr. Aaron Levo:** Just to put it succinctly, I think, as Keith mentioned, we would support the OHA's requested increase for the sector overall. It would be a great benefit to HHS and many hospitals.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** That concludes the time for the presentations. We want to thank all the presenters for taking the time to prepare for the presentation and doing such an able job at presenting it to us, so thank you again.

We now stand recessed until 1 o'clock.

*The committee recessed from 1203 to 1300.*

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY HAMILTON  
ONTARIO FRUIT AND VEGETABLE  
GROWERS' ASSOCIATION  
HAMILTON ROUNDTABLE  
FOR POVERTY REDUCTION

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Welcome back this afternoon. We will now resume public hearings on pre-budget consultation 2025.

Our first panel is Habitat for Humanity Hamilton, the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association—and for the committee's information, there's a change in the presenter on that. The presenter will be Stefan Larrass, senior policy adviser. He will be presenting instead of Gordon Stock. Having said that, the third one will be the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction.

As we are at the table, the presenters will have seven minutes to make a presentation. At six minutes, I will say, "One minute." At seven minutes, I will say, "Thank you," and as I said this morning, that's thank you for stopping.

I will also ask you to state your name as you start to make sure that we can record on Hansard the right name to the presentation.

With that, we will start with Habitat for Humanity Hamilton. The floor is yours.

**Ms. Maritza Orozco:** Hello. My name is Maritza Orozco, director of finance and administration at Habitat for Humanity Hamilton. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. It's much appreciated.

Habitat for Humanity Hamilton is an independent not-for-profit organization that builds affordable housing and promotes home ownership. We mobilize local volunteers, community members and corporate partners seeking to build strength, stability and self-reliance through shelter.

We implement an ongoing development model called the Home Build Program. Within this program, we build homes and provide interest-free and geared-to-income mortgages to people who will not be able to secure a conventional mortgage.

Our service area encompasses the city of Hamilton, Haldimand county and the territories of the Six Nations of the Grand River and the Mississaugas of the New Credit. This service area is comprised of the total population of approximately 800,000 people.

We believe that access to safe, decent and affordable housing is a basic human right that should be available to all. Habitat for Humanity Hamilton reflects the diversity of the province, serving a range of communities from large urban centres and smaller communities, giving us a unique understanding and ability to deliver affordable housing opportunities.

Let's start with the definition of unaffordable housing. A home is unaffordable when the rent or mortgage exceeds 30% of the household annual income. The challenge now is that Hamiltonians are facing an unprecedented housing crisis, with housing affordability ranking among inflation and health care as their top concerns. The average market rent in Hamilton has almost doubled since 2010 while inflation has increased by 36% during that time. Between 2016 and 2021, the number of renter households in Hamilton increased by 11.5%, which is higher than the provincial average, not to mention the lack of housing supply due to increased demand in the last few years tied to the lack of control on immigration policies. Raising property values and interest rates has made home ownership more difficult for many Hamiltonians.

Let me mention other stats. In spring 2024, 38% of Canadians were very concerned about housing affordability.

Unaffordable housing rates are higher for newcomers, visible minorities and those living below the poverty line. Young Canadians are dissatisfied with the government's response to the housing crisis.

So Hamilton, like every municipality across the province, faces a pressing need for enhanced infrastructure for housing to accommodate its growing population. While the full impact of provincial investment will be seen down the road, it's critical to invest in infrastructure today in order to facilitate the construction of housing in the future.

Our two requests today are, first: HST relief for non-profit, affordable home ownership. Since September 2023, the government has given 100% GST/HST relief to purpose-built rental apartments, student housing, seniors' long-term rentals and co-op housing, but not to affordable home ownership units provided by non-profits.

As the costs of land, construction, labour and other fees have increased drastically, the additional burden of GST and HST can impact whether an affordable housing project is financially feasible. This additional cost prevents us from partnering with more low- and middle-income families on a pathway to owning their own home. For every 100 Habitat homes, we could deliver up to 13 additional homes to working Canadian families. The dollars that will have gone to paying GST and HST will instead be invested in affordable homes.

The HST costs for Habitat for Humanity are up to \$80,000 per home, and up to \$25,000 in rural areas. HST relief to non-profit builders like Habitat for Humanity could represent less than 0.1% of the total government revenue from home sales, yet have a significant impact on the number of families we can serve.

The second request is to cut municipalities' processing times, which includes expediting permits and ensuring that approvals are done efficiently. We need to have an efficient and consistent development application process across the city.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Maritza Orozco:** Delays on permits increase cost, extend construction timelines and reduce the productivity of home builders. Our proposals today, budgetary and regulatory, illustrate the scope of measures that can be utilized to support the construction of more housing, and make housing more affordable.

Summarizing, we are not asking the different levels of government for more resources. In this time of scarcity, we are asking for barriers to be removed so we can better serve our community. Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

Our next presenter will be the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association.

**Mr. Mike Chromczak:** Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for the opportunity to present to you today. I'm joined by our chair at OFVGA, Shawn Brenn, on the screen, as well as our senior policy adviser, Stefan Larrass. My name is Mike Chromczak and first and foremost, I'm an asparagus and watermelon farmer from Oxford county. I serve as the vice-chair of the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable

Growers' Association, where I specialize in safety net programs.

The OFVGA represents 3,500 farming families that grow over 125 different crops across Ontario. We generate more than \$3.2 billion in annual farm gate sales. Our sector employs more than 30,000 people directly on our farms, and we create an additional 66,000 jobs along the value chain.

I also chair the Ontario sustainability coalition that represents the interests of approximately 50,000 non-supply-managed beef, grain, pork, veal, sheep, fruit and vegetable farmers in Ontario. We have been jointly advocating for an increase in the annual risk management and self-directed risk management budget of \$100 million since early 2021. We have recognized the government's fiscal realities and constraints in our discussions over the past four years, but we are at the point where unsustainable production cost increases and competitive disadvantages with growers outside of Ontario, particularly in the US, have made delaying this investment any longer untenable.

Since the last investment in RMP and SDRM in 2020, the inflationary impact of the pandemic is still a heavy burden on our farmers. Many aspects of life have returned to normal, but we are still facing unprecedented production costs and extremely tight, or even negative, returns on our farms. Despite high prices at the grocery store, retailers are rigidly holding the line on prices to growers due to imports and a ceiling imposed to maintain and even boost profits. We're seeing cracks in the financial sustainability of many of our operations, putting stress on farm families and leading to very difficult decisions for growers.

**1310**

Competitiveness is another critical challenge: Just last month, the USDA announced an emergency market assistance program for fruit and vegetable crops across the United States. This US\$2.65-billion program, which equals C\$3.81 billion, was designed to address the exact same issues we have identified on our side of the border with a maximum payout of US\$900,000 to a farm that simply applies with last year's farm-gate sales numbers. Recognizing the immediate need and impact of this program, it was designed to be administered in just one month. The threat of this program to the viability of Ontario fresh fruits and vegetable production is very real, but when we combine it with the threat of a potential 25% tariff on the over \$1 billion in produce we export to the US, we are risking our domestic food sovereignty. We face competitive disadvantages domestically as well, with Quebec growers receiving more than double what we have access to here in Ontario.

As industry representatives and political leaders, we presently face a call to action from our grassroots farmers. They are yearning for a strong signal from this government that they continue to have their backs. The language in the spring budget pertaining to agriculture was positive but rather vague, and the fall economic statement, although positive again, has not added any clarity. We ask that we continue to move forward with the sense of urgency to get this investment approved for the spring budget and be delivered in 2025. Growers are struggling and are already



making financial decisions about if, and how, to proceed with next season's crops and livestock.

So in the ongoing spirit of collaboration, we will continue to work closely with all members of government, stakeholders and decision-makers to raise awareness of the urgency for this investment. We will continue to demonstrate the win-win nature of this proposal for farmers and taxpayers as we grow jobs in our agrifood value chain while protecting the high-quality, safe, healthy and reliable domestic food supply. Thank you sincerely for your consideration. I look forward to further discussion.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

We now will hear from the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction.

**Mr. Tom Cooper:** Good afternoon, members of the standing committee. My name is Tom Cooper. I'm the director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. Thanks for the opportunity to speak today. The round table is a collaborative initiative that brings together community leaders, organizations and individuals with lived experience of poverty to address the root causes of poverty in Hamilton through advocacy, systemic change and research, as well as community engagement. We are focusing on issues like housing, income security and equity.

But I'm here to emphasize the urgent need for income security improvements in Ontario today, particularly through increasing rates for Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program, strengthening tenant protections to prevent homelessness and enhancing supports for mental health and addiction services. These interconnected issues demand bold action to address the root causes of poverty, housing and security, and the growing mental health crisis.

So let's start with income security: Ontario's social assistance rates are grossly inadequate to meet even the most basic of needs. Currently, a single individual on Ontario Works receives \$733 a month, a rate that has been frozen since July 2018. While a person on ODSP receives \$1,368 a month, and that has been increased to the cost of living over the last couple of years—still, these amounts fall far below the poverty line. For context, the Market Basket Measure estimates that a single individual in Ontario needs \$2,200 a month to meet basic needs. These rates force recipients into impossible choices between rent, food and other essentials. It was highlighted recently in a Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton report called *Indecent Social Assistance in Hamilton and Ontario*. The report underscores that these low rates deepen poverty and create barriers to stability and self-sufficiency.

Without adequate income supports, individuals are at heightened risk of homelessness. Preventing homelessness is a far more cost-effective way than dealing with the aftermath. A single shelter bed, for example, costs society \$2,100 a month. A correctional bed in a correctional institution is \$4,300 a month, while a hospital bed is \$13,500 a month.

Raising OW and ODSP rates to align with the cost of living could reduce reliance on those other costly services while restoring dignity and stability to Ontarians. As the Social Planning and Research Council noted, increasing

these rates is both a moral imperative and sound economic decision.

Additionally, the upcoming Canada Disability Benefit is set to roll out in July and will provide \$200 a month to those who are eligible. That federal benefit must not be clawed back by the Ontario government. Allowing recipients to retain the benefit is essential for fostering financial stability and ensuring that this federal support reaches those who need it the most.

I'll move on to tenant protection. Housing stability is essential. The average rent for a one-bedroom apartment, as my colleague from Habitat mentioned, is now exceeding \$1,800 a month. It's consuming far more than the recommended 30% of income for many Ontarians. The city of Hamilton's new renoviction bylaw is a promising step to protect tenants from unjust evictions under the guise of renovations. Expanding this program provincially could significantly reduce homelessness and stabilize housing. In addition, greater investment is needed in legal clinics to ensure low-income citizens can access the legal supports necessary to protect their housing and prevent homelessness.

Delays in accessing justice are exacerbating the housing precarity that we've seen today. More resources must be allocated to reduce the backlog at the Landlord and Tenant Board and the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal, which currently takes more than a year for cases to be heard. These delays leave tenants vulnerable and without timely resolutions to critical disputes.

As Albert Einstein is often credited with saying, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Continuing to focus on temporary solutions rather than addressing systemic causes ensures this crisis will persist. Strengthening rent controls and limiting above-guideline rent increases are vital measures to ensure affordability and housing security.

I'm going to move on to employment services. As of December, Hamilton's Ontario Works caseload reached 12,667 households, encompassing a total of 22,600 beneficiaries. This figure marks the highest caseload since August 2012, reflecting significant increases reminiscent of a surge we saw following the 2010 financial crisis. Provincially, the Ontario Works caseload now stands at nearly 300,000 households, a number not seen in over a decade.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Tom Cooper:** These increases highlight the urgent need for more effective employment supports and systemic reforms to address the barriers keeping individuals reliant on social assistance.

Ontario caseloads are rising, with Hamilton seeing a 40% increase in the last three years. Despite five years of reforms, the province's employment services reorganization has failed to deliver meaningful results. Outsourcing to private sector organizations, like Fedcap here in Hamilton, has not met goals. Fedcap's oversight in Hamilton has been criticized for poor outcomes, highlighting the need for a comprehensive review and rethink of employment services.

I'll end there and thank the committee for your time and commitment to these critical issues. Of course, I would be happy to answer any questions.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much for the presentation. That ends the presentations.

We'll now go for the first round of questioning to the government side. MPP Gallagher Murphy.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Thank you for the deputations today.

My question is for the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association. I want to touch on something that you spoke about in your deputation. You referenced the US tariffs and what that could potentially mean for the fruit and vegetables that your members are growing and exporting into the US, which is our greatest trading partner. Obviously, there's a lot going on right now on that topic.

1320

I'm wondering if you can expand a bit as to what your members are saying to you specifically about the harm that this additional tariff could have on what they're doing—their businesses.

**Mr. Mike Chromczak:** Certainly, and I appreciate the question.

The level of uncertainty and concern is no different than many other sectors and industries. When I alluded to consider the fact that an inability to access that US market—our biggest concern as fresh fruit and vegetable producers is we need to operate at a scale. In order to supply a consistent product, consistent volume, domestically, there needs to be a surplus as well. That export market is critical to our growers in order to keep the value chain intact.

Putting a 25% tariff on our products will be devastating to our ability to access that US market. If some of our produce has to cross the border and is still subject to that tariff, we as growers will be the ones who will pay the ultimate price for it at a deep discount. We will most likely take that hit this year, but it means that most of us won't be in a position to grow next year. So that is a major concern.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Just to further elaborate on that, when you say they won't be able to grow next year—I'm not from the agricultural sector—what does that mean specifically? What could be the overall impact here in Ontario?

**Mr. Mike Chromczak:** It's not just the tariffs. There's a combination of pressures and issues—competitiveness issues, cost-of-production issues—that the tariff is, no doubt, the straw that will break the back of many of our growers.

I speak to my peers, my fellow growers; there's a level of anxiety and concern about the sustainability of our operations as it is right now. The addition of that tariff will force many farmers to make decisions about not being able to grow some of these specialty crops because they are so labour- and capital-intensive and require such an aggressive and consuming marketing strategy.

A lot of farmers, fortunately—however you interpret it—may be able to transition to other less intensive or commodity-style crops, but that doesn't help our growing economy and our Grow Ontario Strategy of increasing jobs. It's those high-value, healthy, fresh fruits and vegetables that we supply that we need as an economy, as a community.

When we are in season—and I'm sure that food affordability may come up in some questions as well. But when

we are in season, we are providing, despite all these challenges, the freshest, healthiest fruits and vegetables available at any other time of the year at typically the best prices. Right now, when you go into the grocery store, you'll see extremely expensive lower-quality products that aren't from our field-grown crops. Fortunately, we have greenhouse crops that supply year-round, but losing access or losing those in-season fresh crops would be devastating, certainly.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Thank you for that feedback.

Another question: I want to kind of switch over to the agri-food sector. I know from a sustainability perspective, at the end of November this past year, the government of Canada and Ontario noted the initiatives related to the agri-food sector through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership—the Sustainable CAP program.

Could you talk a bit to that? How does that help your members?

**Mr. Mike Chromczak:** It helps at a higher level with a lot of research components, research funding. Projects are funded through the Sustainable CAP program. There are some on-farm actions as well to help increase cover crop activities or soil protection, but typically, the biggest influence is on research. We've transitioned to more of a—instead of a public-private relationship, we are in a private-public balance relationship on research in agriculture, it seems. So those funds are crucially important.

When it comes to potential opportunities for grants and for opportunities to improve some sustainability practices, the farm itself needs to be sustainable to be able to afford to make that investment. Matching funds or components are certainly an incentive and very much appreciated, but the farm still needs to be able to make those investments.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Mike Chromczak:** And yes, with those competitiveness issues and with those cost-of-production challenges, it is often hard to find the justification or the finances to move forward with some of those projects, unfortunately.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** I believe there was \$330,000, I think, from the government that came through this specific one from Ontario. How do your members make use of those funds?

**Mr. Mike Chromczak:** There are funding clusters that are organized through our federal vegetable board, our representatives. An example would be a breeding program for a new type of apple that could come to market, or on a particular pest issue that, say, potato farmers are experiencing—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time for that question.

We'll now go to MPP Shaw.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you to the presenters here. I'm going to start, surprisingly—to myself, included—with some commentary from the Fraser Institute. The Fraser Institute had this to say about the Ontario government: “The Ontario government carries one of the largest debt burdens in Canada, which represents a significant drag on provincial finances,” and they went on to say, “Clearly, Ontario has one of the highest government debt

burdens in the country—but why does this matter?” That’s an excellent question.

We heard, this morning, from the city of Hamilton; Mayor Horwath was here. We heard from Hamilton Health Sciences and we heard from St. Joseph’s hospital. What we heard is a municipality struggling to address some of the health inequities, and the housing and homelessness issue. As you will know, Ontario is the only province where responsibility for social housing is downloaded to the municipalities, so municipal taxpayers bear the responsibility for the issue of housing in the province.

What we heard from the Hamilton Health Sciences and St. Joe’s was shocking. Every two hours, St. Joe’s releases a person onto the street. It’s shocking.

Hamilton Health Sciences talked about this additional cost to them to provide their basic services. We know people are on wait-lists. We know that hospitals are struggling. We know that Ontario spends the least per person across Canada on health care. This is going to show somewhere, and it’s clearly showing in our major institutions like our health care systems and also in the taxpayer’s pocket.

I’m going to get to my question. I’m going to focus my question to Mr. Cooper, because you talked about keeping people housed, if that’s one thing that we could do to help relieve the pressure on our municipal taxpayers and our Hamilton Health Sciences and St. Joe’s budgets.

The city of Hamilton has put forward a renoviction bylaw so that bad-faith renovictions will be addressed. I had the opportunity to visit people that were in a building that was being renovicted on Emerald Street South. It was before Christmas and these were seniors who had, some of them—Beverly had lived there over 50 years. They were being renovicted with absolutely no place to go. And so, this question of mine is: Where will Beverly end up if she’s renovicted from her home? And can you really paint a picture as to why the province needs to step up to give real rent protections and to give real funding and investment in not only health care but in our housing situation?

1330

**Mr. Tom Cooper:** Thank you for the question, through you, Chair. Absolutely, as I indicated in my presentation, it is far, far more cost-effective to keep somebody housed than to deal with homelessness, what has become a reality. If that octogenarian is evicted and is forced onto the street, it’s a very good chance they’re going to end up in the hospital, in the emergency room at some point. The cost to society, to taxpayers is so much higher than providing additional supports, additional income to keep those individuals housed.

I referenced \$13,500 to keep one person in a hospital bed for a month. If we look at the alternative of providing even what the Market Basket Measure says would be enough to sustain somebody in housing, it would be \$2,200 a month, and that still is almost \$1,000 above the current ODSP rate, and it’s hundreds and hundreds of dollars higher than the current frozen Ontario Works rate.

So, absolutely, we are biting off our nose to spite our face right now, because we’re not making effective or efficient decisions in how money is spent. By investing in people, by ensuring that people can stay housed, that they

have enough money to purchase nutritious food, that they can have some sort of semblance of social interaction in the community and stay healthier, we will be saving money, saving billions of dollars, in this province down the road. Spending a little bit up front to save much more down the road is, I think, a good call for any government.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Absolutely. It makes perfect fiscal sense, and it’s also a humane way to treat people. I would say people that are trying to operate businesses downtown struggle with what they see, with the kind of problem that ends up on our streets with mental health and addictions and housing and homelessness. So, really, it’s a win-win situation to keep people housed and that we work with willing partners to build affordable housing. I was surprised to hear that municipal taxpayers shoulder 67% of the burden of building housing. That’s a huge amount of money. It’s all on the property tax. Even people who own homes are struggling to pay the property tax, and the province is underfunding.

Again, I will say this: This government has the largest debt and deficit in the country—they have the biggest debt deficit. They’re spending big, but they have the lowest per capita—which means “per person”—investment in social programs, and that has got to show somewhere. It begs the question: They’re spending big. What are they spending it on? We know they’re going to spend freely \$2.2 billion to build a luxury spa in downtown Toronto that nobody asked for that’s going to cost taxpayers another \$400 per household.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** My question to you: If you’re able to talk to the government side, can you express, from your experience dealing with people not only from the human side, the human cost, the human capital, but the side continuing to build a Hamilton that we all can live in and be proud of, how their underinvestment, turning their backs on these problems, turning their backs on health care, hospitals and municipalities trying to build social housing—how this is so short-sighted and not sustainable?

**Mr. Tom Cooper:** Absolutely. Through you, Chair, I know we only have a few seconds left, but just quickly: We saw some of those impacts even recently, during the Ontario Basic Income Pilot project, which had a pilot site here in Hamilton, a pilot site in Lindsay. We saw, to a person, that people were better off. They were healthier. They were eating better. Physically and mentally, their health improved. They were able to maintain housing stability. Again, by investing in people, we see these outcomes. They cost far less to society down the road.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes that question.

We will go to MPP Hazell.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Thank you, guys, for coming in, and thank you for presenting.

I’m going to start off my questions with Habitat for Humanity Hamilton. I know your organization has been around for many moons. I just want to say thank you for helping the underserved people to get into the market.

But my question to you today is going to be around—we are living in a very challenged time right now, whereby the housing target was not met. We're going to see less and less of that. We have 1.7 million people renting in Ontario, which is 30% of the population of Ontario. We need housing to be more accessible and affordable than ever before because our salaries are not increasing, inflation is up, everything that is negative in Ontario is up. My question: Have you looked at your program? First of all, can you talk to me about your program? Then I'm going to follow up with my next question.

**Ms. Maritza Orozco:** Definitely. Thank you for the questions. Habitat for Humanity has the Home Build Program. Basically, our program focuses on offering home ownership: Working families, typically in the low- or middle-income bracket, will apply to be homeowners of the houses that we build. That has changed recently—in, I will say, three or four years. What we considered before low-income people are not able to afford even the mortgages that we are presenting. For example, we were offering interest-free mortgages to families with \$40,000-to-\$50,000 income; that was three years ago. But now, that bracket is not even able to pay the interest-free mortgage that we offer. Now, we're moving to the next bracket, which is between \$50,000 and \$80,000 in annual income, because the families are not able to afford—

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Can I just chime in here? This is why I need you to detail your program because right now we have forgotten about those with lower income that you have talked about, and this is so sad. This is really, really sad.

So home ownership, in Ontario, is for rich people. Income of over \$300,000, \$400,000—you're not going to get underserved Ontarians, with that financial threshold, purchasing a home, and it's really sad.

I have three kids. I don't know if they're going to ever be able to afford a home, but they're going to get their education. I came to this country. I was able to purchase a home, more than one home. It was accessible. It was affordable.

What are we going to do with 1.7 million renters in Ontario? They are paying more than 30% to 40% of their income in rent.

**Ms. Maritza Orozco:** I hear your concerns. Let me tell you, we work with families, day to day, struggling. And they're renting; they want to be homeowners.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Maritza Orozco:** So definitely it's the reduction of construction costs because if our costs are high, we cannot offer a mortgage that is affordable because we're paying extra fees. Lumber has tripled in the last three years. All the construction costs for Habitat or any other builder have increased tremendously, so the impact is on the families who are trying to apply for a mortgage, because their income is not going to be enough.

We have to reduce costs, definitely, and hopefully the province, the government can give us some rebates and also try to find other ways on the construction site. For example, I heard in the States they're implementing 3-D printing for small, tiny homes. If we want to explore that option, it's also an opportunity to offer that.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the answer.

MPP Saunderson.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Thank you to each of our presenters this afternoon. There has been a lot of discussion about Ontario's economic health. We are, by far, the largest province in Canada, with about 40% of the population. Our budget of \$215 billion a year—40% of that is earmarked for health care, at \$85 billion. And that, in fact, is probably larger than half the provincial budgets of this country, so we invest a lot of money in these areas. At the same time—

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Per capita, Brian. Per capita.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** At the same time—thank you—during the 15 years prior to our government coming in, our credit rating was lowered on six occasions, and since this government has come in, we have been upgraded on four separate occasions, and in fact, we have one of the lowest interest rates of any of the provincial debtors because of the standing of our overall economic health.

**1340**

My question is for Ms. Orozco and Habitat for Humanity Hamilton. Habitat is very active in my community as well. They do wonderful work, and I notice that you have been averaging about one house a year over the 35 years you've been in operation, so congratulations for that.

Just to start off with a quick question: You talked about having several builds under way as well. How many builds do you have under way?

**Ms. Maritza Orozco:** We are finalizing five homes in Hamilton on Sherman Avenue. If you see, close to Cathedral High School—we just finalized five homes there. We're wrapping up all the mortgage and documentation with the lawyers, but we are in the process of a new build on Dawson Street that's going to be 10 additional affordable homes that hopefully are going to be built in the next one or two years depending on the budget and the available resources, but we have 10 on the go.

We understand the challenges and we hear that families are struggling, especially the young generations like young couples, that are just building a family, trying to get the dream of owning a home, and they don't have the opportunity because their income is not enough and they're working couples. So the struggle is real, not just for younger generations but for people that are under \$50,000 a year. I don't see how in the next year or two they can afford home ownership.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** That's a very difficult issue, and I have three sons as well who will be looking at that. I applaud the work you're doing. I applaud you also for having very specific recommendations. The first that you talked about was HST relief for non-profit-built housing. As you know, in Bill 23, we were lowering development charges on specific homes, one of them being purpose-built rentals. I'm wondering if you think there would be value added in looking at reducing DCs for an organization like yours. And I'm wondering, how much DCs have you paid, for example, on those 10 units that you're going to be building. Have you had any breaks on the DCs from the municipality, and what will those DCs come to?

**Ms. Maritza Orozco:** Definitely, we have the opportunity to reduce and cut costs, and DCs are a great opportunity. As I mentioned in my presentation, we pay an average of \$80,000 on just HST per house. Some construction is more expensive than another, but it depends also on how supportive the government is with us. Just give us an option to reduce the pricing and the cost to offer those houses to more people, and they become affordable. But right now, if we have the DCs, that will be great. That will be a great, great opportunity for us to keep building and provide more opportunities for Hamiltonians, for sure.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** We've also been working very hard on red tape reduction and trying to get homes built faster. I think you have single-tier planning here in Hamilton, it's a single-tier municipality. So do you have any specific recommendations based on your experience in Hamilton of ways that we can streamline the planning processes to keep costs and delays down?

**Ms. Maritza Orozco:** Definitely. The city of Hamilton, I know they have certain processes already developed, but the permits take so long to get. Sometimes we need to get the houses ready as soon as possible. Our construction crew is working with volunteers day and night, even weekends. Maybe some of you are volunteers with Habitat. They put their hearts in helping building those homes. And then we come to a wall when we're trying to put in the application for the permits, because it can take up to six months. Or if you are lucky, maybe you get it in four months, but if we can get support from the municipality and say, okay, let's help us build faster, but also, all the admin and the permits are very impactful on how fast we can give those houses to the families. The reduction in times is definitely key. It's not only for Habitat; other builders are struggling, because we have contact with other builders, and they said, "We have the same problem. We've been waiting for a permit for six months." And then they have to do different visits, and then this other department does other visits, and then this—it's a lot of steps. So if we can maybe streamline those processes, it will help us a lot.

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

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute left. MPP Smith.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** I will be as brief as possible. Thank you all for being here.

My question is for Mr. Cooper. You talked about some of the indexing that has happened just recently, which is positive. Our government works very ambitiously, and we've actually doubled and indexed ODSP—17% over the last couple of years, when you consider everything.

Right now, Ontarians can earn up to \$1,000 a month when they receive ODSP without it affecting their cheque. How do you see that working within the people that you serve?

**Mr. Tom Cooper:** Through you, Chair: Thanks for the question. Certainly, there are significant additional costs to living with a disability. And although we have seen that indexing and ODSP rates have gone up, it's still coming nowhere close to meeting the actual cost of living in com-

munities right across Ontario, particularly when you factor in rent. There may need to be additional supports in place for individuals with disabilities, and so we need—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time for that question.

We'll now go to MPP Taylor.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Thank you, presenters, for joining us today and bringing your very important voices to the table this morning, ensuring that the government hears the struggles that people are facing here in the city of Hamilton with increased homelessness, increased food bank usage, people continuing to need extra services.

Thank you for bringing up the cost of shelters, the cost of jail systems, the cost of hospitals compared to the cost of providing people an adequate income—it's so important. For the government to talk about the \$1,000—if they're able to earn money; not all people who are disabled are able to earn and go to work. But yet those same people are still left in legislated poverty. To know and understand the cost of rentals in our community—\$1,800 a month, on average, for a one-bedroom apartment, and yet a person on ODSP is bringing in \$1,368. For people to get evicted from a home that they've had for years, to now having to find a place to live—there is no wonder why we're seeing an increase in tents and food insecurity in our communities.

I'm happy to hear the number of homes that are being built by Habitat for Humanity. Yes, we need extra programming to ensure that more homes can be built. New Democrats have brought forward a Homes Ontario plan, and we put it forward to the government to bring together providers to provide a place where we could have the government ensuring that affordable houses are made and ensuring that we're bringing together partners and providing the relief of taxes to be able to do that. Unfortunately, this government voted that down; they didn't see the necessity of providing that support to supportive houses and affordable housing in our communities.

I'll ask Habitat for Humanity: Have you heard about the Homes Ontario program that we had brought forward? Did you think that it was a viable option? And should the government be relooking at the way that they think about the program and the suggestions that we're bringing forward, trying to help our communities build that affordable housing quicker?

**Ms. Maritza Orozco:** Yes, definitely. We heard about it. We are very grateful that you put that together, and we are concerned about the community and how we are building safe communities, because when people don't have a place to live, they are struggling. They could be in a home or they're living with their parents or their grandparents, but they don't have independence when they don't have a place to live.

**1350**

So we are definitely building bridges and especially in the last year: We built 10 houses with the Six Nations of the Grand River, and that's a great partnership, because part of our region are those communities that are struggling as well with housing, and we cannot forget about that. Habitat for Humanity built 10 houses for the Six Nations, and that

has been great. We have other plans in the next year to build another 10 houses, but they require funding, because construction costs, again, are very, very high right now.

So creating plans that bring communities together—and even if we are different groups, we can become one when we help each other. So using the resources that we have, especially, for example, the building opportunities that we have: the help with the volunteers; we have builders that compromise and volunteer and donate their labour time. That's crucial. And then we can use that. It reduces the cost for construction and for families so that they can have affordable housing or at least a decent place to live.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Thank you. I was caught off guard by the \$50,000 to \$80,000 annual income to be able to now qualify for Habitat for Humanity and what that means to the general public. And many folks who are on the system of Ontario Works or ODSP will never be able to reach those goals, which is what Habitat for Humanity was previously able to accomplish. Taking people off the system and providing them with safe, affordable homes is just no longer within your ability to do so, which is greatly concerning. So thank you for your presentation today.

I now want to ask the round table for poverty—Tom. We did have the basic income here in Hamilton. You were able to work with people first-hand who were privileged enough to be able to access that.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Maybe could you talk about some of those life experiences, why the government should be bringing that back to ensure that people do have the ability to get themselves out of poverty by having that basic income?

**Mr. Tom Cooper:** Through you, Chair: Thank you, MPP Taylor.

Certainly when we looked at the results of the Basic Income Pilot project with McMaster University, we were able to do an evaluation and survey with many pilot participants. Particularly the health outcomes really stood out for me and recognizing that having an adequate income significantly reduced the need to go to the doctor. It improved mental health. It enabled people to participate in community again, which improved their well-being. So these are both tangible and intangible results from the pilot, and if we were able to see it go for the full three years, I'm sure it would have sustained those sorts of outcomes.

Also, when people were provided with CERB, the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit, in 2020-21, we saw similar outcomes, and we saw a lot of these numbers that we're concerned about today, including Ontario Works and ODSP caseloads, go down during that time because people had more sustainable income, they were able to eat healthier, they were able to maintain their housing and not end up in situations of homelessness. So certainly having those sorts of income supports, a guaranteed livable basic income, I think would be something that we need to strive for in this province.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Thanks. I also hope that the government will not claw back the \$200 disability—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time.

MPP Jama.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** My question is for Mr. Cooper. I was hoping you would take a little bit of time to explain some of the reasoning that exists in terms of why there are disabled people who won't be able to go to work that exist, or who just won't be able to ever get off of ODSP. I grew up on ODSP, and I had the luck of becoming an executive director prior to being elected, but even then, I struggled with the concept of leaving ODSP because they fund assistive devices which cost thousands upon thousands of dollars. So if your equipment breaks, you're risking not having those supports. And there are lots of reasons why people stay on ODSP, or who just might not be able to go work full-time, especially if your disability is episodic or develops over time as you age.

Developing and funding a system in ODSP where we're saying, "You have to have a very particular type of disability or else your livelihood is between you and God" is not the way that we should be funding social assistance. I just wanted you to break down a little bit more for people who may not have a lot of disabled people in their life: Why are some of the cases out there that some disabled people just won't get off ODSP or go find a job, as the rhetoric seems to be increasing over the last few years—that people should just go to work?

**Mr. Tom Cooper:** Through you, Chair: Thank you, MPP Jama. I think you've said it perfectly and outlined the situation exactly as it exists for many people on the Ontario Disability Support Program.

As you referenced, many disabilities are episodic and may not enable individuals to find work that is within that normal—what we think of as a typical nine-to-five-hour day. Some individuals may only be able to work two or three hours a day. I think in those cases, employers need to, and should, be flexible in order to ensure that there's opportunities for people.

But I think the larger point you're referencing is that we need an income security system in this province that is flexible, that is portable, that recognizes that there are people with different needs in society. Some may be able to work some times and not others; others may be able to work limited hours. Should we relegate a significant percentage of people in society to low incomes and the depths of poverty? I would argue no. We need to think of this from a human rights perspective and ensure that everybody has the opportunity to live with dignity, no matter what their ability is or not. And that's one of the reasons I did like the Basic Income Pilot program, because it recognized that there were additional costs for people with disabilities.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** Can you also talk a little bit about how our failure as a government to meet AODA deadlines is contributing to an environment where disabled people just literally cannot go out and find a job? I met with Fedcap earlier this week and they're also saying they're having a lot of difficulty placing disabled people in accessible places.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** Can you answer?

**Mr. Tom Cooper:** Absolutely. Again, I think you are certainly better equipped to speak to some of these issues, as our local MPP, than I am. But that's been my observation

as well, that oftentimes employers are not flexible and they're not willing to make the commitment to ensure that there are spaces and positions available for persons with disabilities.

I can speak as an employer myself. At the round table, we try to make those accommodations as much as we can. I'm thrilled that one of our most valued employees is in that position to be able to work flexible hours, even though she has a disability. So I think employers can make the effort when there's a willingness to do so.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** And then my last question would be, in terms of—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time, not only for that question, but for this panel.

We thank all the participants in this panel for the time you took to prepare and the able way you came and presented it. The committee appreciates your assistance in coming to making recommendations, so thank you very much.

YMCA OF  
HAMILTON/BURLINGTON/BRANTFORD  
MARKLAND PROPERTY  
MANAGEMENT INC.  
MOHAWK COLLEGE

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** The next group will be the YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford, Markland Property Management Inc. and Mohawk College.

As you're coming forward, the directions will be the same. You will have seven minutes to make your presentation. At six minutes, I will say, "One minute." At seven minutes, I will say, "Thank you," and it's the end of the presentation.

With that, we ask each presenter to make sure to identify yourself as you start your presentation to make sure Hansard can attribute the presentation to the right person.

**1400**

We will start off with the YMCA of Hamilton, Burlington, Brantford.

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** Good afternoon. I am Manny Figueiredo. I'm privileged to be the president and CEO of the YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford the past three years.

In 2024, our association served almost 100,000 citizens, including children, youth, families and seniors in challenging times. YMCA has also been a beacon of hope and resilience, empowering individuals to overcome obstacles and thrive. With a 17% increase in the number of people we supported from 2023 to 2024 and a 12% increase of those who require some type of financial assistance, we remain committed to creating opportunities, fostering growth and saving lives through the programs and services we offer in our ecosystem.

Today, I will focus on two provincial priorities: the impact of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care program, known as CWELCC or any other acronym people use, and the importance of continued investment of the Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund to

address aging infrastructure and sustain vital programs and services.

The YMCA is Canada's leading child care provider, proudly serving thousands of children annually. CWELCC has significantly improved child care affordability for families. At the same time, CWELCC serves as a critical economic driver by enabling parents to rejoin the workforce, addressing labour shortages and contributing to overall economic growth.

However, the barriers do remain. The demand for child care services in our communities far exceeds our capacity. Currently, Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford serves almost 5,200 children in child care and before- and after-school care. But to operate at fully licensed capacity, we would need to hire an additional 244 early childhood educators. The staffing shortage directly limits our ability to meet the growing needs of our community, further compounded by a wait-list of 10,680 children across the three regions.

Although compensation inequities have begun to be addressed, there are still barriers, especially for internationally trained professionals who experience great challenges. Despite their critical role, early childhood educators are often underpaid relative to their education experience and unbelievable responsibilities they have. Meanwhile, many newcomers to Canada who are qualified ECEs face significant delays in having their credentials recognized, preventing them from entering the workforce at a time when they are desperately needed.

We believe these challenges can be addressed with the right interventions.

(1) We would look for a standardized compensation grid for early childhood educators that ensures their wages reflect their education and experience. This ensures we can recruit and retain the professionals who make child care possible. We must also ensure that early childhood educator assistants, who are critical, receive compensation increases as well that reflect the critical role they play in delivering quality care and supporting young people and families with inclusion.

(2) We urge the prioritization of early childhood educators as a high-demand profession, with streamlined pathways for internationally trained ECEs to enter the workforce.

(3) Funding must be expanded to provide additional one-to-one support for children with special needs—this is critical—creating inclusive new environments for our families.

(4) Reducing the administrative burden on operators by streamlining reporting requirements would also allow for more time and resources to focus on delivering quality child care programming.

(5) Investment in not-for-profit child care infrastructure is essential to add the spaces needed to meet growing demand.

Together, these measures would reduce wait-lists, attract and retain skilled staff and provide families with the confidence to return to the workforce, knowing their children are receiving high-quality care in safe, inclusive environments.

Turning now to the Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund, this grant is essential for addressing the critical need to modernize aging infrastructure and

sustain vital programs and services. Continued investment in this fund is crucial to support facilities like the downtown Hamilton YMCA, a trusted cornerstone of our community for over a century. This facility has provided vital programs and services for children, families and seniors, but has now reached almost the end of its life cycle. Its major systems—including roofing, mechanical, electrical—have long surpassed their lifespan. With \$11.5 million in repairs needed over the next two years, it is clear that the building no longer can meet the needs of our growing and diverse population, and the families in the downtown core deserve a state-of-the-art facility.

To address these challenges, we've applied for support through the Community Support and Recreation Infrastructure Fund to build a new YMCA centre in the community of Hamilton. It is more than replacing an old building, it is reimagining how we serve our community.

A new purpose-built facility would allow us to expand our programs, providing family-friendly services like child care, spaces that build connection and foster inclusion and welcoming accessible services that promote health equity. By focusing on the needs of all ages, particularly by addressing social isolation among young people and seniors, this facility would not only meet the needs of Hamilton residents, but also across our entire association. Beyond this, it would become a vibrant hub for recreation, wellness and other community services, revitalizing the downtown core, driving economic activity and strengthening Hamilton's social fabric.

We are calling on the government to expand and extend the Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund with an additional \$200-million investment this year, enabling transformative projects like the downtown Hamilton YMCA to become a reality.

Before concluding, I want to highlight a broader issue affecting not-for-profits like ours. Rising operational costs and increasing demand for services are pushing resources to their limit. In 2024, the need for financial assistance grew significantly, yet funding agreements often failed to account for inflation.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** This makes it harder to retain skilled staff, maintain infrastructure and deliver essential programs, like employment services, immigration settlement services, housing support and so on.

Embedding inflationary adjustments into funding agreements is a straightforward but vital step to ensure organizations like the YMCA can continue serving communities without compromising quality or accessibility. The YMCA supports families, empowers individuals and revitalizes communities. Achieving this requires investments in child care, infrastructure and sustainability.

Thank you for your time and for considering these critical issues. I look forward to answering any questions you may have later.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much for that.

The next presentation is Markland Property Management Inc.

**Ms. Michelle Blanchard:** Good afternoon. Thank you to the Chair and members of the committee. I appreciate the opportunity to make this presentation.

My name is Michelle Blanchard. I'm a managing partner and property manager at Markland Property Management—also a lifelong Hamilton resident. I am a business owner, employer and commercial property manager. Markland manages over 3.6 million square feet of office, industrial and retail space across Ontario. My management portfolio consists of over 600,000 square feet of office space in downtown Hamilton's core. The landlords I represent have been investing in downtown Hamilton for almost three decades.

I am here today to discuss the ongoing homelessness, open drug use and safety crisis that plagues downtown Hamilton. To begin, I understand and agree that every Canadian has the right to be housed. I understand that years of political neglect on all levels is how we got to our current day realities, and it is not lost on me that this crisis is a country-wide problem and that it's very complex.

Speaking from my own lived experience, downtown Hamilton does not offer a welcoming environment to those in the business world. Open drug use, erratic behaviour, garbage, vandalism, public defecation and violence is completely ordinary in the city's core. Businesses cannot thrive in this environment. Not only are clients refusing to come downtown to visit their lawyers, accountants, whom-ever, but staff retention is becoming a big problem for these business operators. Their staff are scared to go to their cars at the end of the day. That's a problem.

They will relocate—these businesses—out of the city, if things don't change. The current path is not good, and it has gotten progressively worse over the years. I have been doing this for seven years and each year it is getting worse and worse. The security costs increase, all of that.

Downtown Hamilton's current vacancy rate for office space sits at 25%, with many looming lease expiry dates on the horizon. This is not only a problem for office tenancies, but also storefront, hospitality, retail. The downtown BIA reported a 29% vacancy in storefronts this past summer. The impacts for hospitality and retail include businesses needing to install intercoms and buzzers, because they can't have their doors open to the public during business hours, and that is not conducive to a thriving downtown.

I manage two office buildings on one block in Hamilton. The property taxes on this block are over \$700,000 a year. This same block has had the federal Tax Court close its doors in the summer, and on this same block, we have to employ a private security company 10 hours a day, five days a week, so the tenants feel safe in the building, in the lobbies, in the parking lots around.

My recommendations are as follows:

Implement robust mental health and addiction support programs: Hamilton is privileged to have many existing health care facilities in its jurisdiction. These supports need to be accessible to all and include long-term in-patient care as required. If Hamilton is going to be a major hub for mental health and addiction services, the influx of patients from neighbouring municipalities must be taken into con-



sideration. I understand Ontario presently spends less per person on health care in comparison to other provinces.

1410

**Affordable housing:** This city is in dire need of affordable housing options. Whether it's new buildings or subsidized units in existing buildings, the supply needs to increase. This has been stated by previous delegates. This is the affordability crisis in this country too. Citizens need to have access to affordable housing.

**Finally, law and order:** Laws need to be followed, and there need to be consequences for actions. We cannot pick and choose who the rules apply to. People need to feel safe. The safety concerns stemming from the homelessness and drug addiction crisis are at a breaking point. The constituents in the lower city deserve a safe space to live and work, and those living rough deserve care and support.

The status quo is not helping anyone. We need to do better for everyone. A society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable members. Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** We now will hear from Mohawk College.

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for this opportunity to present to the standing committee. My name is Paul Armstrong, and I have the honour and privilege of serving as the president of Mohawk College.

Just a bit of background: Mohawk College provides educational opportunities for about 30,000 full-time students a year, with a specific focus in the areas of health care, education, skilled trades and apprenticeship, with about 4,500 of those enrolments being in skilled trades and apprenticeship. We serve primarily the Hamilton community, but more broadly into areas of Niagara, into Brant county and into Burlington, Halton, with recent expansions in areas of program need. Mohawk is also one of the 24 publicly assisted colleges in Ontario.

Overall, Ontario's college graduates are essential to this province's success, providing the skills needed to drive economic growth in housing, health care, transportation and more. We are the backbone of Ontario's economy. We hear again and again that the only way to build the economy, attract new businesses and drive the economy is by having a workforce that supports it in the right priority areas. We graduate individuals who train workers who build homes, hospitals, highways and transit while supporting the infrastructure that is vital to our communities.

The Ontario government has taken a positive first step by investing \$1.3 billion in public colleges and universities over three years. However, the college sector alone faces a funding gap of up to \$1 billion by 2026 for a number of reasons. Without action of the government, most public colleges in Ontario are going to face deficits—for sure by 2026, but as early as 2024-25. In order to grapple with this, colleges—and Mohawk College is no exception—are already being forced to make very difficult decisions on potential campus and program closures that could hurt local communities and labour markets.

Ontario must work with colleges to stabilize funding and protect high-demand programs in sectors like skilled trades, health care and technology, which are essential for

this province's economic growth. Colleges provide exceptional value by delivering accessible, affordable education that equips students with skills to succeed in critical sectors facing worker shortages, especially in rural and northern regions.

I want to underscore that Mohawk College in particular—as we've been dealing with some of the challenges through reduced tuition due to changing international programs that have highlighted and brought to the forefront the chronic underfunding and the issues we've had with tuition freeze and reduction over the past number of years—has had to make a number of very difficult decisions around program suspensions. We've suspended 18 different programs, but we've done it because we know that is the only mechanism we have to ensure that we have the right programs serving the economic needs of this community.

I want to underscore that Mohawk and our college partners across Ontario are focused on government priorities. We are committed to producing a workforce that is going to ensure that people have access to high-quality health care. We are committed to ensuring that we have the right programs to support infrastructure growth in construction and skilled trades, and we're committed to doing more, which is one of the challenges we have around some of our ability to not grow in these program areas.

At Mohawk College, as I mentioned, skilled trades and apprenticeship is a foundation on which this college has been built, and we remain a key contributor to the development of skilled trades and apprentices in Ontario. Overall, 80% of all apprentices' in-class training happens at publicly assisted colleges, and at Mohawk, that is about 4,500 a year overall to the total of the province of 30,000.

In addition to the recognized apprenticeship programs, we remain focused to deliver programs focused on job-ready trades and tech.

The ask we have to you as this committee is: To ensure continued success, we urge the Ontario government to strengthen Ontario's public post-secondary sector by taking a first step by integrating the Postsecondary Education Sustainability Fund, which was announced in 2024 as a three-year fund into ongoing base funding.

We ask you to boost operating grants to help colleges fulfill their mandate and maintain access to labour market-aligned domestic programs in key regions.

We would ask you to consider an opportunity to increase student funding for domestic students in areas of high demand and high need, such as health, education, community programming and skilled trades and apprenticeship.

And we would ask you to remove the cap on domestic tuition in high-demand programs to ensure that we can drive recruitment and growth.

Given the larger global economic context and the uncertainty that the new US government carries, investing in education that produces a local labour force that is going to be needed in our communities and economies can't be ignored. Without college graduates, Ontario will be seriously impacted by tariffs even greater than we potentially are now, and this is a huge threat to our economy. By

investing in Ontario's public colleges, the province can meet labour market demands, strengthen our communities and build a workforce ready for the future.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the presentations.

We'll start now with the first round of questions. MPP Shaw.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you for being here. There's a lot here. Honestly, we have such a short time in between what you represent here, these important institutions in the province and a perspective from an important investor and business in our city. We should have so much more time, but we don't, and I apologize for that. So, I'm going to be really quick with my questions, hopefully.

I'm going to start with Ms. Blanchard. I think what you brought here is a perspective that we needed to hear. We know there is a mental health crisis in the province and certainly in Hamilton. We don't hear clearly the impact that it has on people wanting to work in our downtown. You mentioned a stat that I've been saying, so I'm happy to hear you say that, that Ontario has the lowest per-person funding—in the country, in the OECD—so we don't invest in health care. We are a rich province, and it's shameful the way we address health care.

We heard earlier from St. Joseph's hospital here in Hamilton, which is a regional hospital and has an integrated program to address mental health and addictions. A shocking stat was that every two hours, they have to release a psychiatric patient out onto the street into homelessness, and they are doing this because they are underfunded. They have no way to address this.

I just want you to know that as the official opposition NDP, we put forward in the Legislature a bill that would understand that mental health is health care, that we needed to see and we would think everyone would agree that we need to bring addressing mental health under our OHIP system. We need to build the capacity not just in Hamilton, not just in hospitals—and I'm going to bring this up in education and child care—but in all of our sectors because addressing mental health and addictions doesn't just happen in one place, it has to happen all across our systems where people interact.

So, Ms. Blanchard, I really appreciate what you've brought here. When you talk about addressing mental health as a key component of a resilient and prosperous downtown, beyond—I guess I would ask you if you would feel disappointed that when we put forward this bill to address mental health as part of health care, the government used their majority to vote it down, and they still do not have a fully invested strategy to address mental health.

My question to you is, would you be surprised to hear that they shot that down, and would you again like to explain a little bit more about how the government finally investing in mental health care would have a bottom-line impact on the businesses that you operate and manage and the ones that we see in downtown Hamilton?

1420

**Ms. Michelle Blanchard:** Through the Chair: Yes, it's discouraging that it's been shot down, of course. I understand quite a few years ago there was in-patient mental

health care in the province, but that was shut down. I don't really know the details around all of that, but clearly that was not a good choice. People need support. People need support for more than 48 hours. People sometimes need support for six months. Outpatient, in-patient—it's different per person. At the end of the day, we need to be able to help people, and if people aren't able to get that help, there's a problem. And if their only other choice is to be roaming around the downtowns and various neighbourhoods, it's not helping the locals, it's not helping themselves. It's a do-nothing approach, and that's not a good approach.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you for that answer. Again, we're short on time, but I would, if you are amenable, be happy to speak to you about this offline another time to really understand your perspective. I think you bring a lot here that we need to understand, so thank you for that.

**Ms. Michelle Blanchard:** Thank you.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** I'm going to turn now to the YMCA and your discussion, essentially, that we need a true universal child care system in Ontario and certainly in Hamilton, and I'm going to connect this to the mental health crisis that we see in the province. We know that child care is important for families. It's important for our economic development. It's important for healthy outcomes; the early learning for kids is proven to show that they have better outcomes down the road when they're adults. Maybe this is a stretch for what you do, but I think we need to understand that you could play a role in helping identify and helping provide some mental health supports to kids. We know, in Ontario, children accessing mental health wait two or two and a half years for treatment.

So, my question to you is, do you see a way that, if we were to truly invest in universal child care, that if we were a government that was investing, as you described, in our staff so that they have a truly decent wage so that they come to work in those homes and that there was a fair playing field between for-profit and not-for-profit when they actually build facilities—having to do that, a side benefit to this would be kids are in caring and enriching environments more often and it might—might—help to address the mental health crisis that we're seeing later on in kids and teens and adults. Complicated question, I know, but you're a systems guy, so I know you can handle it.

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** Yes, not complicated, not a stretch for me—my previous role was director of education for the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board.

Early intervention, prevention is critical. You see outcomes. When young people can read and are literate by the age of one, their trajectory is incredibly improved in terms of graduation outcomes.

The Y was a partner in my previous role, and now I'm leading the Y. When we see young people in these child care spaces that transition to full-day kindergarten, it's seamless. But when we see parents very anxious, wait-lists sometimes a year or two, it creates a problem. But one of the things we're seeing even in the current space is funding that actually reflects the needs.

There was an article—in New Brunswick, in 2000, one in every 2,500 young people were on the spectrum.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** Currently, in 2024, one in 32 are identified. So true universal child care also needs to fund that one-to-one needed support, and that's what we're finding very challenging in our spaces right now. We don't say no—we try—to anyone, but there are times we just don't have the resource to wrap around.

But investing not only in the workforce but also in spaces, infrastructure, when building schools, to continue to invest in those child care spaces—when you're not building schools, where else can you continue to build these spaces in partnership with municipalities?

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** It's very important, and I'm glad you acknowledged that. The early identification that happens—a lot of times it will happen when kids go to JK, but if this could happen earlier, if and when they were in good, not-for-profit-delivered child care, this is a savings, so I just want to say that we fully understand that this is an important role that you're playing in this community.

Very specifically, can you talk about what the government could be doing right now?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

We will go to MPP Hazell.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Good afternoon. Thank you for coming in and presenting to us; I really appreciate that.

I'm going to start off my questions with YMCA Hamilton. What's in your presentation today, what you've presented to us, it's not new. We're hearing the shortage of staff, the payment of ECE assistants, lack of space. We've got young couples planning two years ahead when they're going to have their kids and waiting for space to get their kids in. A lot of women are now leaving their careers to stay at home because of lack of child care spaces. But what alarmed me the most—and maybe I hear this wrong, and I'm hoping I hear it wrong—your wait-list. Can you talk to me about your wait-list? Please tell me that number is not correct.

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** We operate over 100 locations. That's child care and before- and after-school care. In those 100 locations, we have a wait-list of—across Hamilton, Burlington and Brantford—10,680 children who need to get into either full-time child care or before- and after-school care.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** It's a lot. It's a lot. Any way you slice it or dice it, it's horrible. When a woman in particular drops out of the workplace, there's no contribution to the economy. Now they've got to stay at home with one salary to support that household. It's just really, really getting worse, and as a mother, I'm sitting here and it hurts just to be hearing that long of a wait-list.

Can you talk to me about your infrastructure? The building that you need to get, and what this is going to provide. This, you need to sell to the government.

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** As you said, YMCA will be celebrating almost 170 years in this city. But that building's 100 years old. We see when communities lose a Y, then they say, "Wow." If people want to live, work and play in a city, the Y ecosystem is massive. From child care to employment services to immigration services to youth intervention like Y Minds, altered suspension programs, youth newcomer centres: It just goes on and on in terms of

what we provide. Summer day camps, which is another version of child care during the summer. But when we look at some of our facilities, they are thriving in other areas, but downtown it's struggling now because of the infrastructure, but some of it around the safety in terms of people feeling safe. We just re-opened the child care in this location with 11 young people so far. We're committed to trying to grow it, but some of the parents find it just not safe to bring them down here.

But when I look at that building and look at other facilities, families deserve it in this core. They deserve it so much. So we see that the YMCA building is an investment in the revitalization of the city. We've had the city mayor come, we've had city councillors, we've had donors who are really interested in this being part of the revitalization of the core. We've talked to MPPs, MPs. We've put grants in for the provincial and to the federal around the green inclusive.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** You're doing the work.

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** And we've worked with Mohawk College to make sure that our portion of this is—speaking of climate change—is a zero-carbon building.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Thank you for putting that in.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** I want to go to Markland Property Management. You said 29% vacancy rate in storefronts. That is alarming. That is really alarming. And thank you for being here today and presenting that because businesses are already suffering from coming off COVID, and now you're saying that they're experiencing a high-risk situation. And so how can they continue to make their revenue, to pay their rents, to pay their employees. Can you talk to me about that situation?

**Ms. Michelle Blanchard:** Through the Chair, thank you for your question.

I operate for a large landlord. They are lucky enough to have the funds to hire private security and all the rest of it. Small business owners do not have that luxury. They're paying their rent basically and then they're hoping they're getting customers walking through the door. But if customers aren't walking through the door because they don't want to come downtown, they're going to leave.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much, that concludes the time.

We now go to MPP Smith.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** Through you, Chair, I want to thank everyone for being here today. Once again, we're talking about subjects that are near and dear to my heart. I'm just going to focus my questions on Mr. Manny Figueiredo. You talked about so many important issues that are quite relevant to me, including helping kids stay active and healthy, and the after-school program, also known as the ASP. And the YMCA is a partner with the provincial government in that area, and I believe there was not too long ago recent funding that provided for that, along with different organizations.

1430

Can you talk about the after-school program and seeing how this program could be improved or if there's a new

funding formula that could assist with the after-school program?

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** Sorry, you're talking about the before- and after-school program, not the Alternative Suspension program?

**Ms. Laura Smith:** The ASP, yes.

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** Absolutely. One of the things we hear from families who leave the CWELCC program after the age of six—who then say, “Jeez, I can’t afford the before- and after-school program.” As a charity, not-for-profit, we’re trying to just recover our costs and we’re trying to pay our work staff a living wage also. So not being under the funding formula, we see families who have two or three children say, “I’d love to send my kid, but I can’t afford it.” So a funding formula that could actually expand up to grade 6, age of 12, would actually be helpful for providers to then have a sustainable way of approaching this.

Families, we hear over and over, sometimes leave after age of six because they just can’t afford it, so they decide to stay home and leave the workforce. We hear that over and over again.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** You also talked about something that is fairly relevant: the Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund. Can you talk about how relevant that would be for the YMCA and what we could do to possibly adjust so that it would be more beneficial to your programming?

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** We’ve applied, under the new stream, for a new build. It is critical, not just for our Y, but all Ys. We hope that it’s sustainable and that the \$200 million is not a lot for the entire province. However, we hope that it continues to grow and is there for future years. We are fully dependent. When we built the Laurier Brantford Y, we received \$17 million from the province, \$17 million from the feds, and then locally, from municipalities and fundraising. We were able to build that in 2018.

We’re at a critical point at the downtown Hamilton Y. We’ve been looking for over 20 years. We found a site that’s so critical, in the centre, that’s not public yet but will be soon, we hope, based on hopefully results from funding. So we cannot sustain it without the funding of the province and the feds to build a new Y.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** You foresee this being a great benefit, this fund—this Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund being a beneficial thing for your community?

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** Critical.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** Okay. Thank you very much. I’m now going to pass my time to MPP Pierre.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** MPP Pierre.

**Ms. Natalie Pierre:** Good afternoon. It’s nice to see some familiar faces here this afternoon.

My first couple of questions will be for the YMCA—to you, Manny. Thanks for coming in today. I just wanted to ask you about—you talked about the CSRIF funding and that you’d like to see it continue. You also mentioned that you had applied for it for the rebuild of your downtown Hamilton Y location. So I’m just really curious: If we were

to expand it, what would you do differently and what would you like to see?

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** One thing that’s always a challenge is that we don’t want to have competition between municipalities and not-for-profits like the Y, but more of a collaboration. Sometimes our rec centres and Ys do need to exist in different locations, but many times when a partnership can be created, it’s making sure that there’s sort of a priority around partnerships because we are talking to the municipality about what a partnership agreement would look like for this facility.

Secondly: To understand that not-for-profits do not have other funding sources, and sometimes municipalities do for that. So when it’s open to both, sometimes that’s challenging for not-for-profits.

**Ms. Natalie Pierre:** Thank you.

It’s interesting that you should talk about—I know in Burlington, where the downtown Burlington Y is located kind of complements some of the other community facilities that are available. That’s actually, I think, a good model of what works well for the community and what works well for the municipality.

I just actually had another question for you around child care. Recently, the province changed the funding model for child care, where we’ve gone from a revenue replacement model to a cost-based model. First of all, I just wanted to thank you and the folks at the Y for the good work that you do in the community, not only in terms of the facilities that you provide for recreation for seniors, but for everyone, really, in the community.

But specifically around child care, if you could just comment on how those changes have impacted you and if you see them as beneficial.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** Yes. Early days, because implementation is now, but I’ll give you context: In 2024, our budget was a \$1.3-million deficit that our board of directors approved, and \$900,000 of that was child care. The question became, if the new funding formula doesn’t reflect the reality, what will be the local Y’s position? We can’t operate at \$1-million deficit every year. Right now, it looks like we will be presenting a balanced budget to our board at the end of this month, and the funding formula seems to reflect true operating costs.

One of the challenges I keep on asking is around the support for inclusion, because the needs of young people—the complexity is becoming greater, so we’re watching that closely and advocating more for that funding formula to reflect that kind of one-to-one support.

Secondly, the bureaucracy around it is a lot of work. In other words, we have 100 locations. We have to create 100 different audits and scrutiny of 100 different—even though we’re one association, the people power around that from an auditing and finance perspective is pretty intense.

If you could ask me a year from now, I’ll let you know what 2025 looks like. But early stages, it looks like it will cover our true operating costs, minus support we need for inclusion.

**Ms. Natalie Pierre:** Then, just briefly, you talked about the audits, and it sounds like it's a bit of an administrative burden. Is there a solution that you would like to propose?

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** I'm not close enough to it, but what I hear from my managers is that it would be great if—we straddle three municipalities, so interpretation of any funding formula across municipalities gets interpreted slightly differently at times. But when you're a Y and you operate 100 locations, how could it be streamlined—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time for that question.

We now go to MPP Taylor.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you so much for your presentations today. I wish we had more time to be able to delve into each and every one of you because you brought such important pieces. So I'm just going to make a couple of quick comments.

Manny, YMCA: You're so right about the cost of inclusion. When we have 73,000 kids on wait-lists for autism services, and those kids are ending up in your child care providers and they just don't have the supports or the abilities to be able to do that work is just another mounted cost onto the work that you're needing to do. It makes absolute sense that after-school programs need to include kids over six. How many parents are just struggling to not be able to afford child care—it happens very close to my world.

So thank you for everything you do. I hope the government hears you and provides you that new facility that we so desperately need. I was there touring. I see the need. I hope the government will do the same.

Michelle: Thank you for bringing your perspective today. It was so important for the government members to hear what the cost of our poverty levels, our housing crisis, our mental health crisis in Hamilton is doing to small businesses in the downtown core. It's absolutely horrifying. Hopefully they're taking the time to take a walk down through the James Street BIA today while they're here to see how many closed doors there are and to see what's happening in our downtown corridor. Truly, across the city, we see it, but it's exacerbated down here.

So thank you for bringing that perspective. I hope, as a small business owner, that they're hearing that voice because they don't listen to the voices of our poverty folks who come here to talk to us, and we've heard from health care.

Paul from Mohawk: Thank you so much for your presentation and for the work that you do at Mohawk College. It's horrifying to hear the deficits that we're seeing colleges and universities run into in the last year and the year coming up and those further cuts. I mean, we've seen now, what, a 20% elimination of administrative costs just in December, probably more to come? You're looking at a huge deficit coming up.

We've seen 18 programs suspended, one of those being the City School program, which actually tackles the issue of people who are on social assistance, who are in underserved communities, who struggled through the education system. We're getting those people off the system by pro-

viding them this school that you've been providing, and now you're going to have to see that program cut. Could you talk about that City School program? Hopefully, the government will hear.

**1440**

I believe that there was actually a promise that the program would be able to be self-sufficient and would be funded until 2026 or 2027. I'm not sure which date it was, but I believe there was that promise from the government for that program specifically, so maybe you could talk a bit about that program.

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** Thank you very much. Through you, Chair, to the question: Certainly, the funding challenges have had an impact on programs that we've had to suspend related to the core business of what we are funded to do through current funding mechanisms, which is to meet the employer needs.

The City School program was one commitment that we make around a lot of different ways to try and reduce barriers and provide access to education. This was a program in which we would take a course to the community to give an individual an opportunity to access an education without any cost and hopefully get them on a path to employment or further education.

This was a program that was fully funded through Mohawk College resources. There was no sustainable funding through any enrolment pots that are currently available to support this type of work. We had a lot of philanthropy.

The one thing that was helpful at times was, we were able to access some funding through the Skills Development Fund for some of the programming, which is no longer an option as publicly assisted colleges are not allowed to apply for any funding directly through skills development.

So we have presented a number of proposals to multiple governments over time around support and core funding to help as a way to continue to provide access, but with the financial realities that we find ourselves in, we are not able to sustain it from our own operations and, without a sustainable funding source, need to suspend that.

Our focus is again now on, how do we ensure other opportunities to reduce barriers through scholarships and different partnerships? But it has been a challenge on that program.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** For sure. Do you happen to have some of the numbers of success rates for young people who were able to access that program and have now found their way off of social services and into the workforce? Do you have any of those success rate numbers?

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** I don't have any of those numbers with me in front of me right now. We do know that we had about 1,700 or 1,800 individuals—I think it was—over a period of four to five years, access an educational program. How that translated directly into their ability to come off social services—we don't have that follow-through yet because of the timelines. It may not have been long-tudinally long enough to track that.

We do know that the program was a success, but we also know that right now, we need to ensure that we're focused on building enrolment in the programs that will

get people not just into the education but all the way through to the formal credential and hopefully into employment.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** It's absolutely heartbreaking to see that program go because I know—like the 1,700 people who utilized that—what a life-changing measure that is for people to have that opportunity in a place where they do have the ability to learn and to get the education that they need to get off of social assistance, which is typically the government's goal. It's allowing people to pick themselves up by their own bootstraps.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** To see the program go is unfortunate.

Could you talk about other programs that our community will lose that actually had several other benefits for us?

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** The program areas that we're seeing having been suspended are primarily in the area of the creative arts.

We know that we did a lot of work around labour market needs to assess where employment opportunities are, but I want to stress that we're dealing with it in a way at Mohawk right now that is going to ensure that we continue to build capacity in programs where we know we can get people into great jobs in the area of health care, health and community programs. So all of our programs' partnerships—like with Manny, trying to build capacity for early childhood educators—continue to be a high area of demand for us. It's a wide range of programs, but all of the decisions were made primarily on our industry needs—employment opportunities, enrolment—because we know that the best indicator of whether a program can be viable is the enrolment, and the enrolment is always attached to the labour market opportunities at the end.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time for that question.

We'll now go to the independents. MPP Jama.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** My question is for Manny. Thank you, everyone, for presenting today. Can you go into a bit more detail, just for folks who are not familiar with the Hamilton Centre area where you're located, on what we're risking losing with potentially not seeing investments that you're requesting into the YMCA, and can you attach it a bit to what was shared today in terms of the needs in the downtown core? I think that a lot of non-profits and business owners are taking responsibility that should be properly funded and supported for the mental health crises in our community. What are we risking losing in our communities, and where will that burden be placed if the YMCA is not properly funded?

**Mr. Manny Figueiredo:** Through the Chair, I thank you for the question.

Context, again: Out of the 100,000 people we served across Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford, more than half of that was in Hamilton and about 32,000 people last year needed some form of subsidy. The Y raised over \$2.5 million last year through donors and foundations to offset the costs, but if the Y ecosystem were to disappear from the downtown core—that includes, as you know, the men's residence where we house, currently, 130 men; our health

and wellness; youth newcomer centre; the aquatics, because right now, we're one of the only pools in the downtown core and it's a life-saving skill, as we know; summer day camps; the list goes on and on.

We see it as a centre of community. When Ys exist and are thriving with new facilities, I don't have to go far when I've gone to some friends south of the border. When there wasn't funding or support, the voices only got loud when the Y actually disappeared. People didn't realize all the social services that they provided and what was missing and the gap they were filling, so it's huge.

We play in the space of mental health prevention and wellness. Early intervention is key. To give an example: We know how important before- and after-school care is above the age of six—so much so that we run programs for free because of the generous donations of donors and foundations. We run Beyond the Bell at no cost in high-priority neighbourhoods on Six Nations and Mississaugas of the Credit. Those kinds of programs are because of the generosity of donors and foundations, but more communities need it than what we're providing it for.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** Thank you.

Another question for Michelle specifically: Thank you so much for sharing the experiences that business owners are experiencing in the downtown core, and particularly for pushing for more mental health supports. I think, oftentimes, the situation gets framed as businesses versus everybody else, but that's not true. So many business owners I know are opening their doors again and again for people in crisis, and they're not equipped to do so, so it's putting themselves at risk over and over again. We need to see an end to that. What are some ways that you think the provincial government should be supporting business owners?

I've heard, through my office, a rapid response pool of funding for businesses that have become damaged on top of things like mental health supports that are needed. You talked a lot about mental health supports, but are there supports businesses are looking for in terms of funding from the province, a sort of response to the crisis we're seeing in our communities on the ground?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Michelle Blanchard:** Through the Chair, thank you for your question. I believe, honestly, the quickest and easiest way to deal with it without getting into the weeds with mental health, because I'm not an expert on that, is policing, safe streets, not-blocked sidewalks and not people using drugs in the open all over the place. People want to feel safe walking down the street at 2 p.m. in the afternoon.

There was recently an article in the Spec about a woman from Burlington coming to Hamilton for a concert, and she was like, "I'm never coming back here." That's a problem.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

We'll now go to MPP Saunderson.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Thank you to each of our presenters this afternoon. I'm going to focus in on you, Mr. Armstrong. In my riding, Georgian College is a huge driver for education and making sure that we keep our local kids in the area, working in the area and planning

their future in the area. I taught at Georgian College for a number of years, and my son is actually going there now in precision machining, so one of the skilled trades.

I want to get a sense from you of your financial situation. How much of that has changed dramatically since the federal government limited foreign students?

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** The acute nature of the financial crisis has been primarily driven by the changes at the federal level around opportunities to support and attract international students. I think going a little deeper, some of the chronic challenges we've had around funding freezes for domestic tuition over the past eight to nine years as well as the reduction by 10% and then the freezing of tuition has really been the chronic underfunding. As we have inflationary costs around domestic programming, we've been able to offset some of that through internationals.

The challenge right now has been that we're losing our mechanisms to continue to grow our revenue base, which supports all programs, domestic and international enrolments, and so that's been the work that we've needed to focus on as we've managed that decrease in revenue over time.

1450

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** I spoke with President Weaver of Georgian College about this very issue, and he indicated to me that over 50% of the students at Georgian College are foreign students. What's the percentage at your college?

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** Mohawk College has a slightly lower percentage. We're about 30% to 35% international. With the reduction in enrolments next year, our domestic enrolments continue to grow, but they're at a point now, because of where we are in the corridor funding model, that we can't. We have tremendous demand for more domestic students. We have about 1,500 students sitting on health care waiting lists for practical nursing. We have a need to expand that, but we can't do that because we don't have the financial mechanism to get increased funding for domestic tuition in high-demand programs to do that. Domestic is strong, but we are about 30% international next year based on enrolment projections.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** And when you talked about the 18 programs that you are expanding, has that been since the announcement about the restrictions on foreign students or was that being planned in advance?

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** We have a regular cadence to ensuring and looking at labour market needs around program focus. We bring on new programs based on new and emerging needs, and we have an ongoing process to suspend programs. So we've suspended programs over the years, but the higher number this year is primarily changing the threshold for what we can afford to continue to support when there's not a strong labour market need. The majority of the program suspensions that we've just announced are in response to meeting our financial challenges, ensuring that we continue to meet the domestic need in the programs with the high employment opportunities.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** And since the decision about those 18 programs, have you updated, enhanced or introduced any new programs?

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** Yes, we have. We have, over the last two to three years, and we will continue to do so. We have increased enrolment in practical nursing by almost 500 semester-one students. We've introduced three new programs in diagnostic imaging that are going to be portable and meet the needs. We're working on a proposal to expand and create new health care training opportunities in the Burlington-Halton region because we are trying to meet the capacity to allow local students in that community to get trained, stay, live and then help to drive the economy. It builds capacity here in Hamilton.

We've introduced a new suite of degree programs, applied degree programs, competency-based focus programs in the area of cyber security and AI, and we continue to look at every opportunity to expand capacity. We've doubled the number of plumbing apprentices by investments we've made in capital.

So, yes, we've continued to do what we can within the restrictions, but to do that and continue to invest in the program areas where there are needs that are really aligned to the high economic needs in our community, we've had to suspend programs at a much greater level than we would have anticipated or have done in the past.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** And we have the Learn and Stay program for the training of nurses. Are you familiar with that?

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** Yes.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Have you seen an impact in the registration in the nurses' program as a result of that?

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** I don't know if I can attribute it directly to the Learn and Stay program. However, we do know that of the number of investments that your government has made around health care expansion, there has been the PSW program, in which we saw our personal support worker program enrolment grow tremendously over that time.

We got some specific funding around imaging. We've had some interesting opportunities and partnership where we created an integrated imaging centre that both creates research opportunities and clinical care funded through the Ministries of Health and Education. Mohawk College actually trained more MRI technologists through an innovative new program of accelerated educational delivery in one year than the entire province has done in the last history of MRI education.

That's the type of investment we're looking for, but we can't do it within our current corridor funding because it's not flexible enough and it won't allow us to meet the needs of a community like Burlington or Halton where we could envision a campus of 1,500 health care students meeting local demand.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Do you see a correlation? Because I certainly heard from President Weaver the correlation between the students that are educated and are actually staying and working in that area. Do you keep tabs of those types of statistics?

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** Absolutely. We track where all of our registrations and enrolments come from, geographically. We know that for domestic students in Ontario, that 85% of them, at least in the case of Mohawk, come to us

from less than an hour's commute. We know that they almost all stay in their community, and we know, for our highly specialized programs, where we attract more broadly geographically, that the majority of them do actually end up staying in the community where they complete their education. I'm a perfect example.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** I came to Mohawk for my own education 38 years ago, and I've lived here ever since.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Thank you for that.

Go ahead, Natalie.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** MPP Pierre.

**Ms. Natalie Pierre:** Just one final quick question, Paul: Thanks for your deputation this afternoon. I'm curious about the MRI program and some of the other health care programs that you offer. Do you happen to know or track the average age of students when they enter those programs?

**Mr. Paul Armstrong:** For the medical imaging suite of programs, which are advanced diploma degree programs, most of them, their average age would be probably between high school, 18 to 20, coming into them. However, in a number of the advanced credentials like the MRI program, almost all of these are people already in a career, and the program was actually designed to build on prior learning, and so we were able to accelerate delivery. So the age range there could be anywhere from 25—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time for that question, and it also concludes the time for this panel.

We want to thank all the presenters for taking the time to prepare to come here and to so ably put your position before us. I am sure it will be of great assistance as we move forward in formulating our report. Thank you very much.

HAMILTON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE  
SMALL BUSINESS CENTRES ONTARIO  
CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH  
ASSOCIATION, HAMILTON

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** The next panel is the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce, Small Business Centres Ontario and the Canadian Mental Health Association, Hamilton.

While they're coming forward, I would say it's seven minutes for the presentation. I will say, "One minute," at the six-minute point. At that point, don't stop, because at seven minutes, I will say, "Thank you," and you will stop.

With that, we thank you very much, and we start the presentations with the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. The floor belongs to the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce.

Don't mess with the mikes. We have people that do that. If you turn it on, they turn it—

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** Okay, I won't touch anything. Starting to feel at home now all of a sudden. I've got the same rules with my wife.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** We ask each one, as you start your presentation, to make sure you introduce

yourself, so we get the right name for Hansard. With that, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** Good afternoon, members of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. My name is Greg Dunnett. I am the president and CEO of the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. I'm going to put myself on the clock here because I'm going to give you guys our top three things and if we have extra time, I will utilize them there.

I have the honour and privilege of representing over 1,000 businesses and 75,000 employees working at one of, if not Hamilton's oldest, institutions, at the chamber of commerce. It's a great privilege as someone who was born and raised in this community to have the opportunity to celebrate Hamilton, a city that is on the rise, that has a dynamic mix of industry and business and one that is positioned very well for growth and innovation. We represent a diverse sector of our economy, and on behalf of all our membership, thank you for the opportunity to share our priorities and recommendations and ensure that Hamilton's business community can thrive during these uncertain times.

The province of Ontario has made significant investments across sectors and must continue to prioritize creating the right environment for businesses, one that fosters predictability, competitiveness and growth. However, there is uncertainty, and the combined impacts of inflation, post-pandemic debt, supply chain disruptions, labour challenges and rising costs associated with affordability all come together and contribute to a difficult situation for our business community.

The size and scope of the businesses we represent lead to it being difficult to pinpoint our key talking points, and I can imagine, as you have all sat here today and do this across the province, you can appreciate prioritizing what is going to create the largest leverage for change.

#### 1500

I will start with our three largest levers that we believe will help support Hamilton's business community, and then if we have time for others, I'll throw them in. Those are tariff impacts and the threat thereof, access to talent and capital and community safety in downtown. We believe that addressing these issues with deliberate and targeted actions will be key to unlocking Hamilton's full potential as a hub of economic activity and believe that by prioritizing these opportunities, we can position Hamilton, as well as all of Ontario, as a leader for innovation, connectivity and sustainable growth.

Trade and supply chain uncertainty: This jumped to the top of the to-do list in November—I don't know, something happened that led to it. I did not watch Home Alone 2 over the break in response to it. I can just tell you that Hamilton businesses are key players in Ontario's trade and export economy, from advanced manufacturing to agri-business. Yet, global supply chain disruptions and trade uncertainties continue to challenge our economic momentum. Hamilton exporters are bracing for impact. Manufacturing supports over 28,000 jobs here in Hamilton. While our economy has diversified, that's 20% higher than the national benchmark.



Six years ago, when US tariffs on steel jeopardized millions of dollars in investments and put approximately 9,000 steel manufacturing and production jobs at risk, we sprung into action. Today, our entire manufacturing sector is under threat, and that's 25,000 here in Hamilton and over half a million here in Ontario. So we are pleased to hear Premier Ford's plans to stand up for Ontario's businesses and jobs. Those targeted supports to businesses that rely on cross-border trade for employment investments and supply chain resilience are all critical to our long-term economic stability.

We would also urge the government to:

- invest in critical infrastructure, such as modernizing port facilities, rail connections and intermodal hubs to increase efficiency and resiliency;

- work with our federal counterparts to streamline cross-border trade processes; and

- expand programs that support diversification of export markets, particularly for SMEs, through trade missions and market intelligence.

We believe that by bolstering trade networks and modernizing supply chain infrastructure, we can secure Hamilton's position as a cornerstone of Ontario's economy.

Affordability remains a top concern for all Hamilton businesses. It impacts our ability to attract talent, and it impacts our ability to access finances for growth. Rising housing costs, combined with talent shortages, put our business communities at a competitive disadvantage. We recommend:

- implementing targeted affordable housing policies, including increased investments in workforce housing near major employment hubs;

- expanding training and apprenticeship programs in high-demand industries to address skill shortages while ensuring these programs are inclusive and accessible;

- partnering with financial institutions to enhance funding streams for small businesses, including low-interest loans and grant programs for innovation and sustainable projects; and

- creating a targeted program that increases access to expansion loans, enabling small businesses to seize growth opportunities such as scaling production, entering new markets or acquiring advanced equipment.

When businesses have those tools, they have the ability to attract and retain top talent, and it allows them to access the capital that will allow them to grow.

Finally, at the chamber, we hold firm that a safe and vibrant downtown is the foundation for economic activity and success in our community and that rising concerns around public safety in Hamilton's core and many cores across our province undermine business confidence as well as community growth. We call on our government to:

- increase funding for mental health and addiction services to address the root causes of homelessness and crime;

- partner with municipalities to launch urban revitalization initiatives to focus on small business incentives, streetscape improvements and public safety enhancements; and

- support community policing models that foster collaboration between businesses, residents and law enforcement to build trust and reduce crime.

By creating a downtown that is safe and welcoming, Hamilton can attract visitors, investment and new opportunities for growth.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** I didn't rush today, so I'm just going to quickly say my six other things so that maybe I'll plant a seed for later: transportation and infrastructure investment; innovation funding; workforce development and incentives; energy costs and savings; investing in energy harvesting projects; and supporting tourism and events to make sure our communities are great places to live, work and play.

With that, I thank you all for your time and energy today. I know it's a long day and hopefully we can keep the conversation enjoyable and support you guys in having a good day. We appreciate your dedication to listening to all of Hamilton's and our province's businesses as we look to create this economic prosperity in our province.

Thank you very much and I look forward to the rest of the afternoon.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much for that presentation.

We now will hear from Small Business Centres Ontario.

**Ms. Kristin Huigenbos:** Hello. Can you hear me?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Don't touch the mike.

**Ms. Kristin Huigenbos:** Sorry—broke the first rule.

We're good?

**Mr. Dave Smith:** We're good.

**Ms. Kristin Huigenbos:** Thank you for having me. My name is Kristin Huigenbos, and today, coming here, I actually have two hats. It's great to sit with my colleague Greg Dunnett. I work just across the road at the city of Hamilton for the economic development division with the small business enterprise centre, which is the Hamilton Business Centre. Today, though, I'm representing some of my colleagues from across Ontario who can't be here because there are 47 offices strong supporting small business centres.

In front of you, you have a presentation deck, and I'm just going to talk about some of the key highlights and things that we want to have on the radar going into this year. They probably echo some of the themes.

But for those of you that are not aware, Small Business Centres Ontario is a relatively new not-for-profit organization that came about during the pandemic and the recognition for the need to support small businesses. I've been here listening for half an hour, and I've heard some recurring themes, some challenges, some stress, some impact and what that's doing to our communities.

That is all why we've united, all 47 centres across Ontario, to say, how do we, united as enterprise centres, come together to have resources to support our network and to help others? I think that's going to be very pivotal because we have the reach, we have the scope, but understanding that, across Ontario, our network is different, and

the unique needs here in Hamilton are very different from those in Windsor and Timiskaming and Sudbury. So it's very important that we have those voices across the table.

I'm just giving some quick background there. In terms of some numbers, our reach is vast. We have some tremendous impact across the network. Together with my 47 centres, we've hit 30,000 businesses this year and connected one-to-one in times of challenge, in times of need, in times of stress, in good times and in celebration as they scale and grow, but we are always there to support their needs as they grow.

Together we've helped create 89,000 new jobs in Ontario, so our work is tremendous, but we have more to do, as we're hearing today. There are many more things that can be accomplished. Together, again, that network has helped start 6,100 new businesses in this province this year, to date, so very important work and, again, how we accomplish that is through that united approach.

In terms of the information in front of you, you've got some background and some vision. Some of the things that we are going to be talking about and asking for and working and advocating for this year is really around financial stability in terms of that network. We've been very thankful for those around this table and your support and continuous support at a provincial level to increase funding in our Starter Company Program. This year, the Starter Company Program, through our provincial partnerships, saw a \$6.8-million increase, and you just heard the numbers in terms of what we are able to do with that number. That created new jobs, that helped those in need and that helped those that had no other opportunity but saw entrepreneurship as a way forward to go ahead and have that leverage.

We also work with the youth in our Summer Company program, and this government committed, this year, \$1.5 million in additional funding to help our young people—our young students, 15 to 29, in any academic curriculum here in Ontario had the opportunity to start and run their own business. I now work with one of those entrepreneurs, 15 years later, who was vulnerable, new to Canada, started a business and now has 27 trucks in a plumbing business on the road, five locations across Ontario and employs 65 people.

That small, minute investment in our young people, giving them that opportunity to see that there's opportunity to grow, develop and start a business and have a passion and be vibrant here in Ontario, remains pivotal. Those programs are impactful, and together, we will continue to grow. But that ask is to continue to support those programs and continue to help us reach our youth and give them that dream and let them have that opportunity.

Some of the other asks that you'll see is to have representation across Ontario. My unique needs here in Hamilton are very different than my friends in Sudbury, and that geographic scope across Ontario is tremendous. Having that regional opportunity to identify what the needs are in our individual communities is going to remain paramount to the success of supporting Ontario. One solution will not fit all but, together, united, 47 centres have a solution and resources to leverage through our expertise and continue to grow and develop across Ontario.

Some of the things that we will continue to do is a social media campaign—small businesses, big business—and we are going to celebrate that loudly starting next week with success stories, of all ages, of all small business faces in Ontario, and we will continue to unitedly do that, to push that work forward. It's very important we continue to have that opportunity.

**1510**

Some of the things that are also very important and we are passionate about—and in our asks will be received and that conversation opened to—is our ability to implement innovative programming and development. That remains paramount. For 20 years now, working with a network, we have had some amazing program success, but there is more we can do. You are hearing from my colleagues here on this panel today of the importance for that innovative programming.

Very specifically, we want to expand into innovation. We want to expand in supporting women in entrepreneurship. Our needs are different and unique. We want to work with those that are reliant on different systems of support, whether it be through EI streams, Ontario disability and Ontario Works, to give them that opportunity to start and see a dream in entrepreneurship. We have examples of those provincially, in terms of those success programs, and we have the ability to continue to deliver those.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Kristin Huigenbos:** Beyond that, we want to and continue to be the data portal for Ontario to feed that information, put that information forward, and through this support and this leverage and this opportunity to grow, Small Business Centres Ontario will do exactly that and continue to support business through your continued support and opportunities going forward.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Our next presenter is the Canadian Mental Health Association, Hamilton. Welcome.

**Ms. Sue Phipps:** Good afternoon, committee members. My name is Sue Phipps. I am the chief executive officer of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Hamilton branch, and co-chair of the Greater Hamilton Health Network mental health and addictions adult secretariat. I have worked in this field for over 20 years. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee.

CMHA, Hamilton provides recovery-focused mental health and addictions programs and services for people of all ages and their families. We are a core part of the health and social service infrastructure within our community and have been here in Hamilton for 58 years. As part of the community mental health and addictions sector, our work keeps people in recovery and diverts them from hospitals and correctional facilities, one of the most expensive, costliest forms of care. CMHA, Hamilton's programs address issues such as homelessness, poverty, criminalization and food insecurity, all of which exacerbate the decline of mental health.

However, as an integral part of the health system, we are starting to crack under the increased strain on our sector. The elevated urgency, complexity and severity of our clients' needs are nearly impossible to manage with our

current inadequate funding. For the province to effectively improve mental health and addictions care for Ontarians, it must provide adequate funding to service providers like CMHA, Hamilton. That is why CMHA is asking for an investment of \$113 million in 2025-26 budget to stabilize our sector and expand critically needed supportive housing and crisis services.

By now, you have heard from many of my colleagues across the province that our communities are in crisis. In April 2023, Hamilton declared a state of emergency to address the escalating crisis of homelessness, mental health and substance use—issues that are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The increase in harms related to opioid toxicity means we are losing close to 10 people every day because of drug poisoning or overdose. Aside from the grief and loss this is causing our community, it is putting further strain on our health system, as emergency department visits due to opioids have risen by 24% since 2019.

CMHA, Hamilton has the solutions to address these challenges. A common misconception I see in our region is that community mental health sectors serve individuals with mild-to-moderate mental health and addictions needs. This is a myth. In reality, the clients of CMHA need more support than those who have sought services in the past, as they face complex challenges like psychosis, concurrent disorders, homelessness and food insecurity.

At the same time, our staff are paid 20% to 30% less than their peers in other areas of health care. We pride ourselves on providing quality, evidence-based care delivered by professionals in the field, but we need adequate funding to continue providing quality care to the people in need in Hamilton. Otherwise, our community will face even longer wait-lists and programs may run on reduced hours if we continue to lose staff to burnout or higher paid work.

The emotional well-being of our front-line staff and our senior leadership team is a constant concern at the top of our minds. Without the ability to offer a fair wage, we are unable to recruit or retain the talent we need. For instance, at CMHA, Hamilton several of our nurses with tenure and expertise working with a specialized population have left the community sector to take positions at the local hospital where they earn double the salary for performing the same work.

We are observing similar trends among our leadership positions as well. These trends cause significant knowledge drain in our community mental health and addictions sector. The continuity of care for the people we serve is interrupted. This is happening across the province, some CMHA branches are being forced to reduce positions and alter their service delivery due to the budget deficits. For some in Hamilton, these pressures have meant folding their services down entirely, and this has also led to increased demand for CMHA services in our community.

With an incredibly tight budget and marginal increases over the last five years, numbers served by CMHA, Hamilton jumped from 10,577 annually to 19,803 last fiscal, and still we cannot meet the demand. While programmatic investments made by the government acknowledge the need

for mental health and addictions care, they do little to address the core issues and increased administrative burden faced by our sector.

For example, CMHA, Hamilton has received just one 5% budget increase over the past 11 years. CMHA, Hamilton staff unionized in 2019 because pay parity disparity was their key issue. As you can imagine, this also increased administrative costs for us. With inflation at about 30% since 2013, it's easy to imagine our precarious economic situation. We ask that the government invest \$33 million per year for four years to ensure CMHAs have the staff to meet the increased demands for services.

Additionally, there are currently more than 1,500 people actively homeless in the Hamilton region. With many of the working poor now unhoused, people who were well now find themselves on the street, struggling with their mental health. We work with our municipal partners in supporting people facing housing instability alongside other mental health and addictions challenges, and we provide affordable housing with supports and are positioned to increase our housing stock this fiscal year, but we need more resources to address homelessness, mental health and addictions. Across the province, CMHAs are requesting an investment of \$16 million per year for two years to operate 5,000 more supportive housing units. Building and operating more supportive housing is the only way to ensure that this crisis does not continue to escalate.

Investments in our sector also serve to stabilize and strengthen the health and social service infrastructure as a whole. Our system reduces emergency and hospital care costs and decreases the burden on the legal and criminal justice system. We are often the first to step in and support our communities when a crisis arises, as noted in our pandemic response, partnering to provide intensive multi-disciplinary supports to people experiencing chronic homelessness in encampments and once housed and partnering with our local hospitals to provide mental health supports to front-line health care providers.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Sue Phipps:** But to ensure that we can continue to be nimble in our crisis response while maintaining our quality of care, we need additional support. That's why we are recommending an additional \$20-million investment to expand our crisis services.

As you can see, we are doing our best to maintain the quality of care for our clients, but we are facing significant challenges. We need immediate and significant investments in our sector to ensure workers are paid fair and competitive wages, or there will not be anyone to adequately staff these essential services, already under significant strain or over capacity.

I appreciate the opportunity to share the challenges and needs of our community during these dedicated consultations. Thank you for making time to hear from us. I'd be happy to take your questions.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much for that presentation. That concludes the presentations.

We will now start with the independents. MPP Hazell.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Good afternoon to all three of you, and thank you for showing up and presenting.

I'm going to start off my question with Hamilton Chamber of Commerce and Small Business Centres Ontario. I listened to your presentations. Hamilton Chamber of Commerce, I know what all the chambers of commerce do for their small businesses, but I'm trying to understand how you differentiate yourself. Or are you doing the same services? And what is your clientele? Is it large enterprises, or is it just small, medium enterprises? Any one of you can go first.

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** Kristin, why don't you go first and then I can fill in the gaps?

**Ms. Kristin Huigenbos:** Sure.

The small business enterprise centre network is typically a partnership with the local municipality and our provincial government, and it is a fifty-fifty partnership. My centre here in Hamilton, we are integrated within economic development. Economic development supports all businesses across Hamilton.

Specifically, the small business enterprise centre model works with our small businesses—so everybody from that solopreneur working from home to the ideation stage, commercialization, innovation, scale-up and growth up to 25 persons in population. We often work with the chambers—and Hamilton has three—in terms of our collaboration, co-operation and education. We are a free service, delivering those free opportunities as well as financial incentives to stimulate the growth of our local economies and partner therefore with the chambers to support some of those continued efforts.

1520

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** I always defer back on this one to when I interviewed for the role. I had to make it easy for myself to remember, so I always point to chambers of commerce.

Joining the chamber is as easy as ABC. We advocate for you in creating a positive business environment. We provide benefits and resources to help you grow and expand your business and then seize community connections. We connect across our community and build the relationships that often lead to not only a stronger business community but also a stronger community as a whole.

I will point out something that we do, and I appreciate the support of the office of tourism at the provincial level. We run Hamilton Day the first weekend of every November, and it is a shop-local campaign that came out of pandemic funding. We now generate over \$6 million in economic activity here because we do a full day of programming. We not only drive in traffic here in Hamilton from our local shopping, but also bring in people through partnerships with Metrolinx and others to bring people to Hamilton to experience Hamilton and to support that small business community. It's a great kickoff going into the holiday season.

We pride ourselves at the Hamilton chamber, and the chamber network as a whole is trying to come up with creative and new programming. Especially coming out of the pandemic, we can't do the same thing anymore.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** I was just going to follow up with that. Coming out of the pandemic, I know we've got businesses that are still carrying loans coming off the pandemic. We've got businesses that are struggling to innovate technology-wise. We've got the technology—AI, the increase of scams that are making our businesses lose a lot of money. And commercial rent is through the roof. How are you assisting your members through this really weird, challenging time that we're facing in this economy—as businesses?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** Lots of hours at work and then an alcoholic beverage in the evening is probably the correct answer.

Listen, sometimes part of it is building through community. We can point to the conversation around tariffs. If we're not going to be able to interact with the US in the same way, then we need to work across provinces to make sure we maintain growth in our communities.

We do the same thing here. We try and connect, whether you are in Dundas, Ancaster, Stoney Creek, Burlington, Guelph. We connect and we build relationships that often lead to positivity and support. And we do: We speak on behalf of the business community here at all levels of government to ensure that we create the resources they need to be successful because the funding models have to change—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time for this question.

We now go to the government. MPP Hogarth.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** Thank you to all our presenters for being here today. It's tougher as the day gets on.

I want to say to Sue: Thank you very much for the work you do. But I am going to concentrate my questions with Kristin and Greg with regard to business and business development.

I want to talk a little bit about red tape reduction, something that's very important to this government. We've been saving businesses over 1.5 million hours—I guess it's since 2018, when we took office—and you know time is money when it comes to business and more than \$1 billion every year for our small businesses.

First, for Kristin: Since we are looking at saving hours, time and money for businesses, what measures do you believe the government should take? What could be improved? Is there something that you see that we're missing? Please share.

**Ms. Kristin Huigenbos:** Through you, Chair: Thank you for that question.

Happily—and I think you're on the road to doing some great things—we've been collaborating with provincial partners, and red tape reduction is one of those ways that I have seen.

Strategically, here in Hamilton, we have what we call One Stop for Business. To echo your comments, time is money. So integrating all of the business services in one co-location, where we have zoning, licensing, building—our small business centre, which has financial incentives and growth to help businesses in one location. You can come in and have one consultation, one idea, one concept

at one time. You're not getting a shuffle to another department, to another entity; you are getting the answers at the table in real time.

As we both said, time is money, and that is a service that businesses are asking for and your government continues to support. We continue to make those resources available through the online platforms through SBC Ontario as well. That is one tremendous step forward.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** Wonderful, thank you. And thank you for sharing that in case people weren't aware of that.

We had a lady here earlier today from the Stoney Creek Chamber of Commerce. Her name was Brenda. We were talking about the red tape portal and she commented that she really didn't have the time to look up all these different funds for small businesses such as—I guess it might be municipal, they could be federal, they could be provincial. Are there some synergies with your organization and our chambers of commerce to share that information, to help our chambers out?

**Ms. Kristin Huigenbos:** Through you, Chair: Yes, to address that question, very much so. Hamilton is fortunate, we have three chambers. But as a network across Ontario with 47 centres, all 47 centres have relationships with their chambers. We have developed a tool and resource specifically through our Hamilton centre that lists over 150 funding resources for small business owners, and that tool is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in over 120 languages to support small business. That is the tool that we are looking to scale and take across Ontario. So we have the tools, and again, through that investment and that continued support, we can bring them together, continuing to save time, money and resources. So it does exist. We have it and we are sharing it.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** Wonderful and thank you very much. I think anybody who is watching and who is a small business owner now knows where they can go and see you to get some help.

Over to Greg and your business: Thank you very much for what you do for our chambers. I think our chambers do amazing work in our communities. Our small businesses are our lifeblood of our community. Thank you for the work. I know it's tough, especially in smaller communities—I wouldn't say Hamilton is that small. Our downtowns have changed quite a bit, but Hamilton's has been a tough go for some time now. It's tough for some of our businesses.

Ontario has added over 200,000 jobs since 2024. We're just wondering, how do we keep that momentum going and if you have any suggestions for the government on how to keep our small businesses alive and how to keep those jobs coming to Ontario?

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** It's interesting. Just to connect on the point you made there about getting the messaging out about grants and stuff, it's definitely a core aspect of what we aim to do at the chamber, in partnership with Kristin and her team here in Hamilton, and with Brenda and Matteo at our other chambers of commerce. It's a huge part of it because I think those are the things—often, when people

get into a crisis mode, they are focused on making their next rent, paying their staff, and they don't have the time to go out and peruse a grant program or go across three levels of government for grants and programs. So the more that we can get that message out—and that's what we try to do, is take in all that information and compile and share it out.

Listen, I'm going to try and be very creative and tie this into the red tape reduction, too. I think we do have to be very cognizant. If we want to continue to grow jobs in this community, we need to reduce the red tape because when it comes to bringing in large organizations with roles that will have an impact on our community, we're not just competing with London; like, we're competing with the United States. If it's easier to build there than it is here to expand your operation, that's where we'll go—if the talent is in Calgary and not in Hamilton because it is easier to afford housing there.

Anything we can do to remove the red tape, to allow people to build better, to help support the community and affordability here in Hamilton and throughout Ontario as a whole—I think those are the first steps we take to ensure that we have that growth. I know Paul was touching on it, and our partners at Mohawk do great work—it's that ability to create an environment where people are comfortable taking the risk to go out on their own.

I had lunch with a small business owner today, and he's going through the math right now of, "Do I want to grow? Is the risk worth the reward to grow?" That's what I would point to. We need to make it worth someone—remove some of those friction points so that they can go, "I don't want to be a 15-person company. I want to be a 1,500-person company." That's how we will get that growth that will create the high-paying jobs that we all want.

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** You're speaking the words of Doug Ford, our Premier. Under his leadership, we will continue this. We've been trying to advertise our province to get more people to come and invest in Ontario. With both of your help, we can certainly grow our province.

Thank you. I'll pass my time off to my colleagues.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand):** One minute. MPP Smith.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** I'm going to be really tight on this. I'm going to go to the chamber of commerce, following up a little bit on some of the comments from my colleague. One of the things we heard today is that it is difficult to get the word out on some of those grants. Can you give us any specifics on what we would do to get that message out to people so that it's not a challenge for them to find out about supports we have for them?

1530

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** I think it's a great question, and it's actually something that's being worked through in the chamber network right now. There's an interesting idea at the Ontario Chamber of Commerce; maybe we'll talk offline about what they're trying to do because I think that ability to get that messaging out to every community and having a streamlined process of getting that information into one body and spreading it out—those are the key

things. I think chambers are a perfect communication hub to get those messages out, because we've got 1,000 members, but we've got 10,000 to 12,000 people on our newsletter—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand):** Thank you so much. That's the time allocated to the government side.

Now we're moving over to the official opposition, with MPP Shaw.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you, all of you, for being here.

I'm going to start with, I guess, the chamber of commerce. Some of the points that you made here, your key points that you wanted to make—you talked about affordability in the downtown core, housing; you talked about expanding training programs; and you talked about the safety downtown. And I would say that that's the story that we've been hearing from presenters from different areas in our community—not just from business people but service providers as well. Certainly, we've heard from—we're going to talk to the Canadian Mental Health Association.

Hamilton is struggling with a housing affordability crisis, a homelessness crisis, a mental health crisis, and it's manifesting in downtown, where many of your businesses operate, in a way that people are feeling unsafe in the downtown core. So I would like, maybe, if you could talk about the fact that this is a government that has under-invested in mental health supports. There's not a core mental health program from the government; they do piecemeal grants here and there. We, as the opposition, have asked that the government bring mental health and addictions into OHIP so it's a core part of our health care system. Can you talk about how you think—you've said it, but expand on how the lack of supports, the lack of access to services when it comes to mental health and addictions is contributing to what has been described by you and others as a safety issue, or perceived safety issue, in our downtown core?

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** I think she could probably speak more to the best ways, but I think what I want to point to on all of this is, it's a very difficult problem that does not have a single solution. We have a shortage of affordable housing here in Hamilton. Every area of the housing spectrum is in need of growth if we're going to improve community affordability, because as mortgages come up in the next few years, we're going to see a larger impact on those. I think making sure that owning a house can still be a dream for my two teenagers is something that we all have to look at and have a future-focused look on that.

I think there is a need for policing and to allow our police and other support services to help those in need. We don't have the affordable housing right now that the police can actually move people into the supportive housing. I think that is the nuance of all of this. I have the privilege of living in downtown Dundas, which is a beautiful neighbourhood on the outskirts of our town. I'm a 200-pound male, and I can tell you there is a difference in safety levels from being in our downtown and walking down James Street than there is walking down King Street in Dundas, and that is the honest-to-goodness truth of it. And if I'm feeling that, there are a lot of people in our community

who are feeling much more unsafe than I do. Honestly, I think one of the biggest things that I would point to is we need collaboration from all levels of government to get those houses started being built so we can move people who have needs into those houses so that we can then start to address it.

We can do amazing things like Hamilton Day, and those create the level of traffic in our downtown core where people feel safe and they come into our downtown. But on a normal Tuesday or on a Friday evening, they may not feel that. So there are positive aspects when you host a thing like Supercrawl—or we had the privilege of hosting two Grey Cups here in the last five years—that does create that scale that allow people to come down. I think it's about having a concentrated approach to create the supports we need but also to create the atmosphere that people want to come into.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you for that.

You talked about building supportive housing and everyone coming together. The municipality, the city of Hamilton, taxpayers pay 67% of the cost of that housing. So that's an incredible burden on both residential and commercial taxpayers. We think that burden should be shared equally.

I'm going to now move to Ms. Phipps to talk about what we've been hearing all day from businesses, from hospitals, from schools: that this mental health crisis needs to be addressed head on, that it's impacting people's ability to be housed and stay housed—like a housing-first approach, which I think is what you were talking about, Mr. Dunnett—and that it's impacting the cost to our health care system, to our hospitals. It's impacting people that are homeless. It's impacting their health outcomes. They end up in hospitals. We're hearing that it's impacting the perception of safety in our downtown and people's willingness to want to expand or invest in downtown.

So you've made a really good case here about why mental health touches on all these sectors. You've made the case. We've been hearing that all day. I just want you to know that Ontario's official opposition, our leader Marit Stiles and the MPPs put forward an opposition day motion that said that mental health needed to be funded as part of our health care system and that we must deliver mental health as part of OHIP. The government used their majority to vote this down with no other options. They didn't present an alternative. They just voted it down.

Can you talk a little bit about what you have, but expand on how mental health and addressing this is one of the key features to addressing some of the other concerns that we have in all of these other areas across Hamilton?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Sue Phipps:** I couldn't agree more—through the Chair—you're absolutely right. Community mental health is funded at 3% of the health care budget, which is absolutely a pittance when you think about the fact that every single person in this room has mental health and, at some point, will likely experience a mental illness in their lifetime or at least a mental health concern that needs to be addressed.

Mental health is, of course, on a continuum, and these factors that are presenting this affordability crisis impact the mental health of everyone. If you don't have housing, you're likely to have a significant mental health concern. Of course, yes, once you're out on the street, what is available to you? Who are your comrades? Who are the people that are in your court that aren't stigmatizing you? They're people who are already on the street, and that becomes your community, and you begin to be exposed to things like toxic substances that then escalate behaviours—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time for that question.

We will now go to MPP Jama.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** Thank you to for the presentations that you all gave today. Over and over again, we continue to hear about the housing crisis and how that's impacting our communities in the downtown core but also the mental health crisis that's not being addressed provincially.

In your presentation, Sue, you asked for funding, and you particularly said that more funding would decrease interactions with the justice system. I just wanted you to get into that a little bit, because many presenters—while we all align on the fact that there is a cost-of-living crisis, a mental health crisis and just a lack of investment in Hamilton's downtown core—have mentioned needing an increase in law enforcement as a potential solution. So I just wanted you to talk a little bit about how the investments that you're asking for would reduce interactions with the justice system and why that's important in this context.

**Ms. Sue Phipps:** Through the Chair, criminal involvement is a symptom of a much bigger issue. If you think about living in poverty, you sometimes are forced into crime solely to survive. So I think to address some of these other major key issues would reduce the burden on the criminal justice system.

We are very involved at CMHA, Hamilton in the court system. We have strong partnerships with the John Sopinka Courthouse, the Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre. We support releases from custody. We have a comprehensive plan to coordinate releases so that people are able to get the supports they need if they do present with serious mental illness or addiction. However, the resources are not there in order to support them.

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The other thing too is that, when we have injections of short-term funding, those programs—we finally get them up and running, the funding runs out, the staff leave—you may have incredible successes, and yet those successes are not acknowledged and the funding is not continued, so I think we need to recognize mental health as being a long-term chronic illness or situation that requires continuity of care. It requires a full wraparound support from the entire health care system because even when you have mental illness, it affects your physical health as well, as we've seen.

Food insecurity is a huge matter in our city and so theft and the hopelessness that comes with living in poverty leads to criminal behaviour as well, right? Because if you don't have a future, who cares? You're going to do what you need to do to survive, and that's what we're seeing on

the street. I think this is what we really need to address, is all of these issues that are at the core of this rather than just law enforcement; that's a band-aid solution that isn't going to have long-term impact for us—although we certainly have great partnerships with our Hamilton Police Service, so by no means do I want to say that their work is not very important. It's just maybe not where the emphasis has to be right now.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** Thank you.

My next question is for Greg. Thank you for your presentation today. I just wanted to ask you about your points on the need for investment in workforce development. Over the last year, I've heard a lot of rhetoric in terms of immigrants taking jobs and I just wanted you to paint a picture of what it's like here in Hamilton with community working together and how addressing the cost of living helps bring everybody up, including in the workforce sector, for all backgrounds.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** It's a lot—pressure cooker on the timing here.

I would say the need for workforce investment—again, I think Paul probably did a better job in speaking about what Mohawk does, but what I would say is we need to continue investing in that, because as AI becomes more and more prominent, it's going to make—the ability to be adaptable and adjust to rapidly changing work environments for everybody is going to be key. Making those investments now so people are capable of transitioning what their skill sets are is going to be so important if we want to have a workforce that continues to support the needs as we transition and create a new economy, because there's going to be massive impacts on jobs across the board in sectors.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

We'll now go to MPP Anand.

**Mr. Deepak Anand:** Thank you, Chair—  
*Interruption.*

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Don't mess with the mike.

**Mr. Deepak Anand:** I don't know which one—

**Ms. Christine Hogarth:** You're there.

**Mr. Deepak Anand:** Now it's the one. Yes. Let's reset the time.

Thank you again. Before I start, I want to take a moment to thank each one of you for your advocacy. You had the choice, but you chose to be here for your residents, for your community members, and especially Canadian Mental Health Association in the Peel region. We appreciate you. We appreciate you all across the province—especially the mobile crisis team that we have. You've done wonders, so thank you for those wonders.

I'm in the ministry of small business and I see two chamber guys here, so I sincerely apologize. I'm going to focus on them.

A vicious cycle—something which we learned at the Schulich School of Business when I was studying for my master's. If bad things happen, it will turn more bad things

in the turn. For example, if you're not feeling well, you stop eating. When you don't eat, you become even more sick.

Same way, a positive vicious cycle: When you're doing good things, good things happen, something which Hamilton has shown, when we look at the number of people, which has increased, look at the GDP. It has gone up by 11% to 15% in the last six, seven years. So you're definitely doing something good.

Poverty: I was worried about the poverty rate, but looking at the data, which shows, actually—not its greatest, but somewhat okay. In 2020, 11% of residents were living with low income; it was 15% in 2015, so there's an improvement. There's an improvement in the overall poverty rate: 6.7% compared to Ontario at 8.3%. But much more needs to be done. I always say, when we talk about 6%, it's six in 100. But for that person, for that family, it is not 6%, it's 100%.

With the passage of time, as we know, our population is growing, and there is a need for succession planning. What are you both doing about succession planning? And I want a quick answer, but I would like to have a fulsome conversation, maybe offline. Thanks so much.

**Ms. Kristin Huigenbos:** Do you want me to take it?

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** Yes, you fire away.

**Ms. Kristin Huigenbos:** As a network and in small business centres across Ontario, 47 centres serving all of Ontario, that is the priority. When we ask to expand programming, that is specifically one area that we've identified for growth. Succession planning is a great opportunity. There are workshops. There are seminars. We have a module that we've actually already made automated. It is public-based. It is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in 120 languages.

So we're doing the work, but we need to do more, and we need to have more proactive conversations in that space. We are purposely doing that work, and with your support, we are accomplishing and we're seeing those numbers. They are increasing.

**Mr. Deepak Anand:** Thanks so much.

Greg, over to you.

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** My answer is going to be very similar: The answer is not enough because it's going to become more and more of a priority. We do work with all three of our post-secondary education partners in terms of starting to discuss and look at how we prepare people for that transition, and also, how we prepare people to want to take on that business because there are going to be opportunities.

But the answer is, we need to do more, probably at both the local and provincial level, to help support those transitions because they're going to come fast and furious pretty soon.

**Mr. Deepak Anand:** Perfect. Now, again, thank you for supporting those who are supporting the communities, those who are job creators.

When we get a job—and I'm only talking about me, and I know that goes with almost everyone—it's not just a job where we can earn money to run the family, it is the way to give back to the community. It is the way to meet other people. And talking about mental health, it actually reduces

the mental health: When you're at work, you're meeting other people—those kinds of things.

Anything specific—I know I talked about the vicious cycle. What are one, two or three things we can do to grow our economy, to give job creators the ability to create more jobs quickly?

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** I would say, on a high level, to continue to make and ensure the continued investment in our LRT because that will connect our city in a way that is incredibly important. And then, again, I think the work that has been done and the continued advancement of creating opportunities for business owners to grow and expand their businesses—to kind of flip the old thing, it's easier to retain a customer than to find a new one. So if we can support people in growing their businesses rather than getting people to decide to want to launch one, that's a very strong way to do it. Those would be my two high-end recommendations.

**Mr. Deepak Anand:** Your opinion about the Skills Development Fund: What do you think of that? Should we keep going? Should we stop? Should we keep investing into the people?

**Mr. Greg Dunnett:** We have to invest in the people, and again, we're going to have to invest more, because—and this is probably my opinion as much as the chamber's—I think AI is going to just completely and utterly transform our job market in the next decade. We need to be prepared for that and prepare people to have the skills required to be successful in new roles. Otherwise, it creates a whole other challenge around the social issues we're currently facing.

**Mr. Deepak Anand:** Kristin, you talked about those investments and the impact of those investments, and through you, I want to ask this question, because it actually helps us. Getting those funds and distributing those funds are giving us the ability to help, through you, more and more job creators—so the start-up program or the future entrepreneur program. What's your suggestion on how we can expand or how we can make it even better?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Kristin Huigenbos:** I think continuing to streamline service and getting it into the hands of the front line is pivotal. The adaptation to recognize geographic regional needs is imperative. Success in Hamilton is very different than others. And I think the cohesiveness of this panel and understanding that all of these sectors are important to collaborate together for that ultimate success—the more that is in a funding model, the better it is, and we can leverage more together.

1550

**Mr. Deepak Anand:** Again, thank you so much. I look at a small business or a start-up business or a new business—it's like a small plant. It needs a lot more care. Once those become big trees, they can take care of themselves. But thank you to both of you for taking care of those small businesses, especially the new businesses and the newcomer businesses or the youth businesses. We can't thank you enough. Thank you so much.

That's it for me.



**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** MPP Taylor.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you very much for your presentations and for taking the time to come here to showcase the work that Hamilton is doing with small businesses, but also bringing forward the concerns that small businesses face, and with the current theme of mental health and addictions that is definitely what we've been hearing today. We've heard from the Stoney Creek chamber, we've heard now from the Hamilton chamber, we've heard from another provider, Markland Property Management, of concerns of small businesses due to mental health and addictions and the homeless crisis that we've seen in our communities.

A 29% vacancy rate in the downtown core of small businesses due to the lack of safety, the concern for consumers and customers to come to the office or to business—it's something that I'm terribly concerned about. We've heard the cost of poverty and health to our municipality and what that has done to our taxbase for our residential tax system. We've heard from the hospital system and their concern with mental health and addictions and homelessness. I hope that the government members are hearing the theme and rolling this together to realize that bringing people out of poverty, ensuring that we have safe, affordable housing will help our entire network of small businesses, of health care, of people's quality of life—something that we've definitely heard.

The lack of investment into our mental health care system and the 5% increase that you talked about, Sue, which was the first increase in over a decade, takes it back to the Liberals as well as to the Conservatives for the lack of investment in our mental health and addictions and our lack of investment into housing. We're seeing that crisis just blooming today in every direction.

You talked about the stabilized funding that is necessary. You talked about the shortage of wages, like 20% to 30% less for someone who is working in the community, maybe, compared to somebody who is working in the hospital. Maybe you want to have a little bit more time to elaborate and to really focus the government on the need in our community and what it truly needs to provide these services. The lack of rehabs, the lack of detoxes—all of this is a snowball effect which this government has completely ignored. So how about just taking some more time to talk about the needs in our community and how much those extra dollars will mean?

**Ms. Sue Phipps:** Through the Chair: I think we see it on the street, but it's not just on the street, it's behind closed doors too.

I think that the challenge with losing our knowledge experts to the hospital is very concerning. We invest a lot of time and energy into the professional development of our staff at the agency. We pride ourselves on the quality of work we do. It is a very specialized service to work in the community. It requires a great deal of autonomy. People need to be out there. They need to be able to assess risk ongoingly, independently.

The pressures on the staff and the moral distress that they encounter when they are working within a system that

is not functioning, that is not funded adequately—that leads to burnout, and this is what we see. We worry about the mental health leaves that our staff experience and the pressures that then puts on other staff who have to then take up their caseloads and support people so that their caseloads have doubled suddenly. How do they provide the same time that people need?

And people do need time. I think that's the misconception also: You meet with somebody once; you're not better, right? There is a readiness piece with that. There is a therapeutic relationship that has to be developed. There is a trust that has to be developed with that worker. So when you have high turnover, you lose the trust, you lose the relationship, you need to start over again, you have to tell your story over again. People are not moving forward in the way that they could because of the structure of our system and because of this lack of investment.

I think also it's very costly to the system, as we have noted. It is very costly to incarcerate people: It is about \$300 a day versus \$72 if we were to look after them in the community. In the hospital, it's about \$400 a day, compared to \$72 a day in the community. This is a huge cost to our system overall, a huge cost to the province that isn't being adequately analyzed. I think largely it has to do with the fact that we haven't had infrastructure investment in technology so that we do not have the ability to draw the data and create the arguments enforced by the data to tell our story effectively. There is some work that's happening at the centre of excellence that we're really quite grateful for that is helping to support data infrastructure for our community mental health and addictions sector so that we can collect the data, show the story, indicate the outcomes in the ways that we need to demonstrate that more investment is needed.

But that said, having these pilots to prove our worth is very frustrating when we are doing evidence-based, high-quality work every day and we know it works, we see it works, and when we're not trusted in that sense, it feels we're not valued. That also takes a toll on staff morale, and they move to positions where they feel better valued. They feel that they are valued better because of the pay, and that's unfortunate. People come into this work because they have a passion for it, and we lose that when we're not showing our value.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** No, absolutely. People who are working in the sector who are now leaving because of their own mental health is absolutely telltale to what our communities are facing.

I'm extremely grateful for the work that you do. I hope that we can encourage the government to invest in people to see the benefits of investing in our communities and to really see the circle of what is created and the picture that has been created today, from business, to college, to university, to health care systems, to the tax base, to every part of our sector that is affected by their lack of funding, by their lack of involvement through people—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time for the presentations, and it also concludes the time for the panel.

We want to say thank you to all the presenters for a great job, the time you took to prepare and the time you delivered it here. We thank you very much for that, and I'm sure it will be of great benefit to the committee.

### GOOD ROADS

MR. PJ MERCANTI

#### ONTARIO DENTAL ASSOCIATION

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Next we will be hearing from Good Roads, PJ Mercanti and the Ontario Dental Association.

As they're coming forward, as with the other delegations, you will have a seven-minute presentation. At six minutes, I will say, "One minute," and at seven minutes, I will say, "Thank you." We also ask all the presenters to present their name first so we can make sure we have the right name attributed to the comments that are being made.

With that, we start with the presentation from Good Roads.

**Mr. Thomas Barakat:** My name is Thomas Barakat. I'm the manager of public policy and government relations with Good Roads. Thank you to the committee for holding these consultations and for choosing to hear from Good Roads.

I'm here to discuss a pressing issue affecting rural Ontario, and that's road safety. Good Roads has developed a comprehensive plan to build safer rural roads while addressing municipal liability, and we need the province's support to make this vision a reality.

I'll just delve into the issue here: Rural Ontario is disproportionately impacted by road fatalities. Despite housing only 17% of Ontario's population, rural areas account for 61% of municipal road traffic deaths. In 2021 alone, 259 out of the 426 municipal road fatalities occurred in rural communities. Many municipalities in rural, northern and remote areas face some unique challenges. They have extensive road networks a lot of the time; limited tax bases to fund necessary improvements; and aging infrastructure that often lacks basic safety features like guardrails, signs or modern lighting.

1600

The flipside of this is the municipal liability issue. Anyone who's been to a municipal conference in the past five—maybe even 10—years has probably heard municipal leaders talk about liability, liability, liability. Premiums keep going up every year, and reform has been a bit—it's seemed to be elusive, and it costs municipalities millions of dollars each year. So what we figured we'd try to do is actually address the root cause of this, or one of the root causes of this, rather than a symptom.

Our solution and our proposal is a provincial-municipal partnership, and we're proposing \$183 million over five years with the government of Ontario, and this initiative will enhance road safety through a three-pronged approach. One is through road safety audit grants. We're estimating about \$50,000 per municipality to address these problem areas. Infrastructure grants, which would be about \$315,000

per municipality—this would actually implement the improvements that these audits would identify. And it would be really simple things, actually, like guardrails, crash cushions—could be signage, could be paint. It could even be just trimming a tree, even, just to clear the sightline.

And then the third part of that would be \$30,000 for analysis grants—\$30,000 per municipality, I should say, or per site—just to monitor the effectiveness of these interventions, to see if it's actually making that difference so we're not just wasting money on pointless endeavours.

And there are a lot of benefits to be had. I'll just name a few. The first is that each dollar spent on a road safety audit yields a return of \$36 in savings. So that's a huge, huge amount of savings. And reducing fatalities directly lowers health care costs. I've heard a lot of conversations here today about health care and the lack of funding for other initiatives. This is something that would help reduce pressures on health care. There is obviously an initial investment, but in the long run there would be some savings there. And then as I mentioned, it would also stop the upward pressure on municipal liability costs.

Lastly, I'll just say, in terms of the benefits, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration actually estimates each traffic fatality costs society \$1.6 million. So there is very much a moral obligation to prevent these deaths, but there's also a fiscal motivation as well. It's very fiscally prudent to stop people from getting hurt and dying.

We're hoping that the province will commit to exploring the feasibility of this initiative in the upcoming budget. You might be asking, why now? We've actually laid some of the groundwork for this already. We've trained over 70 professionals in the province in road safety audits. So the province is equipped with the road safety auditors needed to do this sort of thing. We've received strong support from other key sectoral organizations such as ROMA, the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, FONOM, NOMA and both the western and eastern Ontario wardens' caucuses. We've actually received endorsements from over 70 municipalities already. They passed resolutions backing this program, and just with the province's support we can build momentum and save lives.

As I mentioned, investing in safer rural roads, it's a moral and fiscal responsibility. Together, we can significantly reduce traffic fatalities and strengthen the quality of life in rural communities. Thank you for considering this critical initiative. I look forward to answering your questions in the question period.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much for the presentation.

We now will hear from PJ Mercanti.

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** Thank you very much for this opportunity. If it's okay, I'm going to share my screen and provide a brief presentation to the group. I am speaking on behalf of a few organizations: Carmens Group is a hospitality company in Hamilton that I am proud to serve as CEO of. I also serve as the president of the Hamilton Urban Precinct Entertainment Group, the organization leading the revitalization of downtown Hamilton's sports and entertainment assets, as well as wearing a hat with the

Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford YMCA and specifically speaking to the downtown YMCA vision that I'll be speaking to shortly.

I wanted to provide a quick update, first, with regard to the downtown arena renovation project in Hamilton. It's a joint venture between HUPEG, the entity that I'm a part of, as well as the Oak View Group and Live Nation. It's a \$290-million private sector renovation that will serve as a spark for the refurbishments of the downtown core in Hamilton. We're proud to say there's been a lot of progress made to date. EllisDon is our general contractor and construction partner, and at present there are 250 crew members that are working towards a complete head-to-toe refurbishment of this historic Hamilton asset. The vision is to completely transform it into a state-of-the-art sport and entertainment destination.

We're proud that we have officially onboarded Live Nation as a major partner in the pursuit, and the vision of the arena is to also house other tenants. We have been proud to have the Toronto Rock from the National Lacrosse League as a tenant in the venue. We are also hopeful to have major hockey back in the arena, and our partners from Oak View Group are committed to bringing major hockey back into the arena. As part of the activation strategy of the arena, with our partners at Tourism Hamilton, we'll be looking at bringing major sporting events such as the World Junior Hockey Championships and future Brier Cup curling championships back to the arena as they are a major economic driver for downtown Hamilton that fill hotel rooms, fill the restaurants and bring vibrancy and vitality to not only the downtown core but the entire region as well.

We will also be working with our partners at Oak View Group, Live Nation and Tourism Hamilton in bringing other major music events. We have historically hosted events, like the Canadian Country Music Awards and Junos, in Hamilton that have been wonderful in profiling the city, and we look forward to working with our partners in those pursuits.

This is all part of a major reinvestment into the downtown core in Hamilton. There are currently many other projects that HUPEG is a part of with regard to new residential developments that will bring new residents into the core. As part of our vision, we will be adding a new boutique hotel as part of the amenity offering for people visiting the city. This is all part of a narrative around really focusing on investing in downtown Hamilton and making it a destination for many people.

With the new residents that will be here, we are also looking at supporting the downtown YMCA with their vision of a brand new Y that will be a centre of community and part of a health and wellness narrative for Hamilton. I have been a part of the Y community as a person that works out there regularly and enjoys their programming, and I've recently joined their capital campaign and have learned a lot about the Y and the tentacles they have in the community and the various constituencies that they serve. It was shocking to me that there's a number of folks that could use their services that currently cannot access them.

The Y has a vision for moving out of their current facility and into a state-of-the-art new property that would be

adjacent to their current location. They are really innovative in their current structure and are working with a lot of great partners and developers that will help them see this vision come to life. One of the great features is that there will not be a transition that will see a downtime in the programming they offer. The vision would see a new Y built that would allow for the current Y to stay open while the new one is built. This would be a true centre of community.

**1610**

I was at the YMCA this morning—I play a dinosaur sport called handball. It's squash with your hands. I was there this morning for a match at 6:15 a.m. and I'll be going there for a sauna session a little bit later today, and there were people of all ages that were there this morning.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** There were swimmers that were there and seniors also there. It was wonderful to see this true community coming together at this wonderful facility. I know that with the new Y, there will be a new opportunity to invite more people there. The ecosystem of the Y is truly impressive, and there is a focus on the youth and on seniors.

There is a grant, we understand, in hands that is being presented to the province. We look to the province to leverage the private sector contributions in sport and housing that are creating a health and wellness focus in the community of Hamilton. We look forward to the province engaging with like-minded partners and community leaders in all levels of government to support the strengthening of the heartbeat of Ontario's third-largest city. Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much for the presentation.

Our next presentation is from the Ontario Dental Association.

**Dr. Kelvin Fung:** Hello, Mr. Chair and committee members. My name is Dr. Kelvin Fung, and I'm here representing the Ontario Dental Association. I'm a practising periodontist in Oakville and serve as the chair of the ODA's political action committee. The Ontario Dental Association is the voluntary professional organization that represents the dentists of Ontario, promotes the highest standards of dental care and advocates for sustainable and accessible care for all Ontarians.

Our message is clear: Budget 2025 must fulfill the responsibility of the Ontario government to ensure access to high-quality, timely dental care for all Ontarians. As someone who treats patients and engages with dentists all across the province, I can tell you that the public dental programs designed to help vulnerable Ontarians who need them the most are in serious trouble. Ontario's public dental programs, including Healthy Smiles Ontario, the Ontario Disability Support Program, Ontario Works and the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program are chronically underfunded, impacting the accessibility of necessary dental care.

For the last 15 years, there's been steady erosion of reimbursement to far below the cost of care. Average reimbursement currently stands at only 33%, which is the lowest in Canada. For comparison the federal Canadian Dental

Care Plan reimburses at 84.5%. In fact, Ontario spends the lowest per capita on oral health care in all of Canada at only \$4.99 per person, which is less than one third of the national average. Children from low-income families, seniors and individuals with disabilities are suffering from this inequity.

As dentists, we are committed to our patients and our communities, but we are asking for your help to improve care for those who rely on provincial dental programs. Dentists cannot continue to bear the financial burden of these programs, and we estimate that dentists have subsidized Ontario programs by at least \$150 million a year.

I urge you to think about the local dentists that you know from your own communities. These health care professionals, as well as being small business owners, need your help to ensure that dental care is accessible and sustainable. After decades of hard work, including many presentations to this committee, there are signs of the possibility of progress towards fixing these programs through negotiations with the province.

I can assure you that Ontario's dentists are committed to working collaboratively with you to make Ontario a leader in dental health care. For example, when the Ontario Dental Association last presented to the committee almost a year ago, we spoke about the new Canadian Dental Care Plan, or CDCP, which at that time had yet to launch. We stress the importance of federal and provincial dental programs working in conjunction to improve access to dental care for those who do not have private insurance coverage.

I would like to thank you for highlighting our recommendation in your report to the Legislature, and so the Ontario government subsequently announced an interim approach to coordinate benefits between the CDCP, Healthy Smiles Ontario and ODSP. This is a positive development, and it means that many of the 200,000 children from low-income families that we treat under Healthy Smiles Ontario, and a similar number of patients under ODSP, will have access to greater coverage. This means that children from Woodstock, Waterloo, Hamilton and across the province have access to dental coverage under both the CDCP and Healthy Smiles Ontario with no out-of-pocket expenses for families. The combined coverage in many cases covers the full cost of treatment, making the oral health system more sustainable and accessible.

This coordination-of-benefits approach stands to benefit many individuals in our communities. We strongly recommend that it be made long-term and lasting.

To be a leader in dental health care, Ontario must also address the shortage of dental hygienists and dental assistants, which will further increase when the CDCP further expands later this year. This shortage has real impacts for patients, including delayed treatments, cancelled appointments, reduced hours of service. Ontario has introduced changes that made it easier for medical doctors and nurses to come to practise here, and budget 2025 can implement similar solutions to address dental staff shortages. For example, policy changes can be made to streamline the process for out-of-province dental hygienists and dental assistants to practise in Ontario.

There is also opportunities to reduce red tape and reduce barriers that made it needlessly difficult for dental assistants to become certified. These recommendations are further detailed in the written submission that you will be seeing from the ODA.

Now is the time for meaningful action to:

(1) Fix Ontario's dental programs.

(2) Make the coordination-of-benefits approach between the CDCP and the provincial dental programs long-term and lasting. This means making sure that patients can benefit from both streams of funding so that costs of care are covered and the Ontario government saves money. This is a win for patients, taxpayers and providers.

(3) Reduce red tape to make it easier for dental hygienists and assistants to practise in Ontario.

The Ontario Dental Association is your partner in achieving an accessible and sustainable oral health system for all Ontarians and we have solutions to accomplish this important goal.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Dr. Kelvin Fung:** I look forward to working together on meaningful progress in budget 2025 and beyond. Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much for that. That concludes the presentations.

We'll now start the questions. First round to the government: MPP Smith.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** Through you, Chair, I want to thank all the presenters for coming in today, some albeit virtual. It's Dr. Fung, is it?

**Dr. Kelvin Fung:** Yes.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** I want to thank you for some of the information that you provided. You actually provided something to me that was very interesting. You talked about policy changes. Our government has attempted to make it easier for professionals to practise, whether it's in the skilled trades, or doctors or nurses, to jump into—from different provinces, which has led to hopefully more jobs in that sector. You talked about red tape with respect to dental hygienists. Can you elaborate a bit on that? Because that's some interesting information.

**Dr. Kelvin Fung:** One of the most important barriers actually relates a lot to dental assistants as well because dental assistants have to go through a certification course to be able to take X-rays. For out-of-province assistants who have already gone through a course, they, at this point, still have to go through the whole course once again instead of just recertifying the X-ray portion of things. That's one large barrier.

David, Sara, could you fill in any other information that you may have?

**Mr. David Gentili:** David Gentili, Ontario Dental Association.

That is correct, Dr. Fung. I think one of the barriers that we're encountering is dental assistants are not a regulated profession in Ontario, which means that they aren't captured by some of the legislation that the province has put into place.

Essentially, what Dr. Fung said is correct. We have a situation where we have dental assistants in Manitoba, for

example, that are fully trained and able to go, but they can't, say, practise in Kenora, which is nearer to them, and other parts of Ontario. We really do think we can work with the province on addressing that issue, potentially through micro-credentialing and, quite frankly, better recognition of training that is happening outside of the province.

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**Ms. Laura Smith:** So you believe this would obviously support—and I'm speaking to both of you right now—a better ecosystem for your industry, whether it's Ontario, or Canada, for that matter. Are you suggesting a regulation through colleges or universities? What would be your speculation on this kind of accreditation—or not?

**Mr. David Gentili:** There is a specific regulation under the Healing Arts Radiation Protection Act that could be changed or, quite frankly, reinterpreted by the Ministry of Health. We believe it's really that simple.

It comes down to some unfortunate language in the regulation that says training has to include—I'm paraphrasing—education on the statutes of the province. So that is being interpreted by some members within the ministry as, "Well, obviously education as provided in another province doesn't include Ontario education statutes. Therefore, the entire training doesn't work, and you have to retake the whole thing again in Ontario." We think that's very, very unfortunate.

We did make a submission to the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction and the Ministry of Health to address that specific regulation under the Healing Arts Radiation Protection Act.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** Can I ask when that was made? Recently?

**Mr. David Gentili:** Yes. I'll say we have made that submission a few times. We made a very comprehensive submission in, I believe, July of this year, and recently we did have an opportunity to meet with the Minister of Health and representatives of the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction in early December to speak about that. We're very hopeful we can address that. We really think this is a win-win for patients in Ontario and dentists looking desperately for [inaudible].

**Ms. Laura Smith:** Thank you very much.

How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Two point three.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** I will pass my time over to MPP Smith.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** MPP Smith.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** If I could, I'd like to go to Good Roads.

I'm interested in your road safety audit. I represent a riding that is the size of Prince Edward Island. We have a lot of rural municipal roads, and we do have some challenges on them. We've been working on one in particular which the Ministry of Transportation has come back and said is properly engineered for the traffic speeds that it's supposed to be using. It's an 80 kilometre/hour section of road.

The challenge I personally have with it is—I own a 1965 Corvair Corsa. "Corsa" is Italian for "race car," so it's considered a mid-1960s sports car. That road is fine for that car; it's 60 years old. But if I take a look at the most

recent Chevy Spark or a very inexpensive vehicle—a Honda Fit, for example—the suspension on those vehicles is much better than my 60-year-old car. Where I would not travel at a certain speed with my 60-year-old car, you could travel that speed with an entry-level vehicle today.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Should we actually be looking at what the engineering is, then, to accommodate what today's technology is for those vehicles instead of looking at what it was 60 or 70 years ago to say, "This is what was safe"?

**Mr. Thomas Barakat:** Yes. I don't know what standards MTO uses when they say that a road is safe at 80 kilometres an hour. I'm sure they take into account vehicle technology and the safety advancements over the past 60 years or so.

I don't really know what else to say about that, but I would assume—I don't know—that they take that into consideration, especially on provincial roads.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Thank you; I appreciate that.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** We will now go to MPP Taylor.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us, for bringing your concerns, for bringing your issues and highlighting the importance of tourism in our communities.

I want to start with the dental program. It's mind-blowing to me how the government thinks that the dentists should be providing health care to our communities. It is the government's responsibility to ensure that we have health care. Dental care is part of health care, a very important piece of health care and was always meant to be rolled into our health care system, from Tommy Douglas—that's where it began, right? It's really unfortunate that the government has decided that dentists are responsible for our community's health care and I hope they heard your concerns today in knowing that when we provide dental programs to our most vulnerable people and our constituents and our seniors, it's their responsibility to do that. And to hear that, once again, Ontario is bottom of the list at providing funding, out of all of Canada, is just a continuous theme we have definitely heard from today. Thank you for your presentation and for bringing your voice here today.

Good Roads: Thomas, thank you for your presentation. Something we heard from the city of Hamilton today is the cost of doing business, and roads are part of that. The single taxpayer, regardless of whether it's municipal, provincial or federal taxes, is the same taxpayer who pays for these services. We need the government to step up and ensure we have those supports to ensure that we have road safety in our communities and so I am grateful and thankful for you bringing that voice to us today also.

PJ, thanks for presenting today. The work that the several committees you're on do to our communities is really important. Health and wellness and fitness, tourism, are all affected by the work you do. I know if the members walk outside this door and look through that window, they will see the back space of the FirstOntario arena and auditorium that is being rebuilt for the city of Hamilton, creating that downtown tourism, income and industry, and will

brighten the needs of Hamiltonians. Taking some of that tax base and putting it onto users who are coming here to our city is really important.

I also want to talk briefly, PJ, about the Commonwealth Games, the 100th anniversary coming in 2030 of the Commonwealth Games that were born right here in the city of Hamilton and quite frankly, should have been here for that 100th anniversary—the provincial government who declined to help with that funding and make sure that we were able to host those games here in the city of Hamilton. I know you worked on the committee that worked really hard to bring that here to the city and I'm sorry we've missed out on that; hopefully, it's not completely dead.

But you've found other ways to bring commitment to the city. Do you want to possibly talk about some of the other work—with the YMCA, with all of those viable options of health, sport, wellness—that come into our community through all of the work with all of the boards you work on?

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** Thank you, MPP Taylor. Going back to the Commonwealth Games, certainly a proud Hamilton event, with the founding here and it gave birth to the world the very first podium, the first athletes' village—a lot of legacy coming out of that. It's not entirely dead in the sense that the Commonwealth Games Federation, based in the UK, are now relooking at 2030 and there's an opportunity to really innovate the model, where there is more of a reliance on private sector partners that makes the funding a little easier. I think there's an opportunity to reimagine it as a cultural festival, as a music festival, as well as looking at the sport programming. There could be a way that Ontario, as the birthplace of the games in Hamilton, could align with other neighbouring partners—Niagara Falls, Kitchener-Waterloo—to reinvent the games and make them relevant again. That would resonate with the public today.

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But speaking to all things health and wellness—the YMCA, the various programming opportunities at the new downtown arena—we're certainly looking forward to bringing more music into downtown with Live Nation as a partner, as well as bringing major sport back with the Toronto Rock and hopefully new forms of hockey in the arena, working with both the province of Ontario and the city of Hamilton tourism to bid on future Brier Cups and future World Junior Championships, as those are drivers of job creation. They get people to come into the city to spend their money and visit the various retailers, small businesses. There are ways of engaging with various schools that can bring volunteerism and students into the various programming elements.

Specifically, with the YMCA, this is all part of a rejuvenation of downtown Hamilton. The Y does so much for the city and for the greater community that a lot of people don't really appreciate and realize. I see students there. I see seniors there and people of all ages. It truly is a community.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** We certainly would be delighted to have the province's engagement with the rebuilding of the new downtown Y. It would serve the community for the next

generation and be a catalyst for job creation, for health and wellness. There's a robust community cabinet that is already in the process of raising millions of dollars for this initiative, so this would be a worthwhile investment for the province, through a grant, to support the downtown Y that's leveraging the private sector investments and other community investments that social service agencies in the downtown core are making to truly lift up the entire community of Hamilton.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Thank you so much. Is there a dollar figure that you would attach to the YMCA or to the actual tourism portion to rebuild Hamilton downtown?

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** I do know that the entirety—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. We'll have to wait for that for the next round.

We now go to the independent: MPP Jama.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** My question is for PJ. On the topic of community safety and well-being, because we've been hearing about the deep, deep poverty and struggles that are being experienced in the downtown core, are there any other anti-poverty organizations that you're currently working with? And can we get a commitment from you that this precinct, this entertainment district, won't exclude the most marginalized people in our downtown core?

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** Thank you for the question. I'm certainly proud to share that one of the HUPEG initiatives was the creation of the Commons. The Commons is a vision for downtown Hamilton that is specifically focused on aligning with many organizations in downtown Hamilton, including those in the social service sector. We have been working closely with the YMCA. We've been working closely with and engaging with other organizations, such as the YWCA, the Salvation Army, and the Commons is also working with many of the city's educational institutions: McMaster University and Mohawk College—two, specifically.

But the goal is and the aspiration is for this district to truly lift all in the community. There will be many jobs created out of this initiative, and we look forward to working with many other organizations. We are closely aligned with Community Living Hamilton, another wonderful organization. I had the privilege of presenting to their board of directors the vision and creating programming and various job opportunities with Community Living Hamilton within the entertainment precinct and the arena and concert hall specifically. So the aspiration is certainly to continue to forge relationships with many institutions and agencies in the downtown core.

Through an exercise where we've brought many other community stakeholders to the table, it led to an effort that is currently working towards the creation of an entertainment district BIA, business improvement area, that would see intentional programming and opportunities for various stakeholders in the downtown core to come together in the quest of making this core vibrant and really connecting with every stakeholder in the downtown community. So we look forward to engaging more.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** Thank you.

I have a follow-up question: How many subsidies does this precinct have already from the municipality and from the federal government? How much money from the private sector has been put into this project? From a financial perspective, what's the return on value for Hamilton residents concerned about affordability right now?

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** This initiative is obtaining zero subsidies from the municipality and, in fact, is going to save taxpayers, over the course of the next 30 years, \$155 million. That number was prepared via a 2019 Ernst and Young study that the city of Hamilton had commissioned. This is unprecedented, to have private sector partners step up to eliminate the operating subsidies of the various entertainment venues.

And so, we're proud that this initiative will allow Hamilton taxpayers to not spend \$155 million on the entertainment assets and instead be able to reallocate funds towards other important community programming needs.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** Thus far, this initiative will see, through our partnership with Oak View Group and Live Nation, \$290 million in private sector funds invested into public assets, taxpayer assets; as well as \$10 million of private funds into the Hamilton Convention Centre, which will remain a community asset; and a minimum of \$2.5 million into the FirstOntario Concert Hall, another private sector investment into a public community asset.

The private sector is investing over \$300 million, and the taxpayers will see savings of \$155 million over 30 years through this initiative.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you for that. We will now go to the government. MPP Anand.

**Mr. Deepak Anand:** Thank you to all the presenters for coming.

Dr. Fung, my good friend is Dr. Guzman, who is my dentist in Mississauga, and I want to say thank you to all the dentists so we can smile well.

I want to talk to PJ. PJ, you're a celebrity. I'm looking at my notes and it says: "Recognized as CEO of the Year by the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce in 2023, as one of Canada's Top 45 Entrepreneurs by the Globe and Mail in 2016 and as one of the 30 Most Influential People in Hamilton...."

I want to seek some advice from you. What do you think: How important is certainty for businesses, for communities—being certain?

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** Certainty is certainly extremely, extremely important. With any business initiative, there obviously sometimes is a risk of uncertainty given various market forces and political forces, social forces.

However, it is obviously very important to have greater certainty as projects move forward and working towards collaborating with the right partners and aligning with various stakeholders to deliver greater certainty and results-oriented outcomes that benefit as many stakeholders as possible.

**Mr. Deepak Anand:** Considering we have President Trump and the uncertainty that we see now, what is your

advice—as a business leader, as a community leader, as a person of influence—to the government and to the people as well?

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** That's a great question. I think the greatest thing that the province could do, given the uncertainty of the political dynamics in the United States, is to assess the value that we create for others as a province and to figure how we can best leverage what we offer to others across the world for our maximum benefit. Obviously, there is a lot that the province has in the form of natural resources, in the form of various manufacturing capabilities that are of value to others.

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And so, it's important that the province continues to assess the situation in the United States, given the shifting political situation, and continues to lean on the differentiators that we have that the rest of the world needs. We've got something in hand that others value and that is important for the functioning of North American society and a global society. I think we need to maximize that but also recognize that nurturing important relationships is going to ensure that we can maximize what we have to offer to the world. Obviously, maintaining strong diplomatic relationships and—

**Mr. Deepak Anand:** Thank you.

And two little sentences on leadership, the importance of leadership, and long-term versus short-term: What is usually better, looking at short-term vision or the long-term vision—and the importance of leadership.

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** I'm an advocate of, sometimes, we need to experience short-term pain for long-term gain. It is important that we keep the end in mind. Stephen Covey, a great author, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, has lesson number 1: Start with the end in mind. So we need to make sure that we have the North Star of what we'd like to achieve for our community and for our province front and centre, so that we don't lose sight of that. At the same time, we need to obviously ensure that the needs of today are managed and looked after.

It's difficult where we have to have one foot in the present, another foot in the future and, sometimes, there's a tug-of-war, but we need to do our best to nurture both the short term and the long term—keep an eye on the long term, but make sure that we're taking steps that don't compromise and have the rug pulled under our feet short term. Also, leadership-wise, we need to continue to ensure that the leadership at the table is talking to a lot of others around them and getting the best advice that they possibly can to ensure that our leadership is making the most informed actions as possible.

I'm an advocate for—in scenarios where we need to solicit wisdom from outside perspectives and voices, that we listen to others and that the leadership solicits great wisdom from everybody around them to make the most informed decision that they possibly can. Leaning on the perspectives of others sometimes—some may be divergent perspectives—could yield important insights that we otherwise wouldn't have thought. Carmens Group, our hospitality

company, has an advisory board. The purpose of the advisory board is to share with the leadership team and me, as the CEO, what our blind spots are and what we're not seeing. So sometimes soliciting that outside feedback and the input of subject-matter experts, depending on the issue or the lane, would yield the leadership tremendous benefits for both short-term and long-term decisions.

**Mr. Deepak Anand:** Thank you so much.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** MPP Saunderson.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** How much time do we have?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** I'm going to make it quick then. I want to thank all the presenters for your valuable insights today.

My question is to you, Dr. Fung, about the Healthy Smiles program. I was on the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit for a while, so I know the primary funding there comes through the province, through the health care unit and goes to the schools. Can you just talk about the interplay then between the Healthy Smiles program and the federal program that you were talking about?

**Dr. Kelvin Fung:** With the federal CDCP program, they have coordinated their benefits so that the CDCP is the first payer and then the dental office can thereafter apply for a balanced billing from the Ontario government programs. The CDCP has been really helpful in terms of increasing the total amount of funding available. The present solution is an interim solution, but it's one that the ODA sees as very workable. We would ask the Ontario government to make this a permanent solution. Now, with the change in the federal landscape, an election is coming, so we don't know if the—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the one minute.

We'll now move on to the opposition. MPP Shaw.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** I'm going to direct my questions to Mr. Mercanti. The context of my questions will be what we've been hearing today, all day long at committee, from all of the major players in our community. We've heard from the mayor and the municipality of Hamilton that they are struggling to address some of the basics, like being able to provide housing, to build roads. They're struggling with costs that have been downloaded from the province, and a lot of that's ending up on the backs of taxpayers locally. We heard from hospitals who are saying that they can't keep up with the cost of the influx of people who are homeless, people who are being discharged onto the street into homelessness. And we heard from businesses—we heard from chambers and we heard from Markland—saying that the conditions in downtown Hamilton, given this, are making it very difficult to continue to conduct business.

But what you have brought here today at the end of the day—and I'm grateful for that—is really a vision of hope. I like your expression of the North Star, the idea that we can rebuild Hamilton in a way that provides hope to everyone. And when we say hope to everyone, your partnerships—the kind of partnerships you have with Community Living, with the Y—are the kind of partnerships that will

allow us to be successful in all aspects, in all the ways we judge success, whether it's social impact or whether it's our economic impact. This, to me, really seems like a no-brainer, and I'm very happy to see that you've managed to put together a coalition of not just dreamers, but doers. That's what's really, really important.

So if you would like to, just a little bit further, talk very specifically about the way that you're bringing hope to downtown Hamilton and to all Hamiltonians: that you're going to rebuild it, but you are going to do it in a way that—in your vision, as you described it—will make sure that everyone benefits from this project. I think that would be something important for the government to hear when you're asking for an investment, which I think would be a sound and wise investment to make.

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** Thank you for the comments and the question, MPP Shaw.

We're advocates of the concept that a rising tide lifts all ships and can truly benefit all stakeholders in the community, and we recognize that one thing that the community of Hamilton has that gives us hope for the future is tremendous social capital. There are a lot of people in the community who care about Hamilton, who want to see Hamilton achieve its vision of being the Ambitious City. We had the moniker of being the Ambitious City, and we believe that this is the turning point, the inflection point, for the city of Hamilton where we fulfill that vision.

It's all about making sure that we align with the right partners. We were able to attract the world's biggest arena developer, Oak View Group, into Hamilton through long-standing relationships, as well as Live Nation, and we intend to work strategically with various community partners that will ensure that their constituents and the communities that they serve can benefit through jobs at the various entertainment venues, through volunteerism opportunities, through on-site learning for the various internships and other school programs there, and that this will be a genuine catalyst to see the community come together as one.

We recognize, too, that there is so much on all levels of government, that private sector and others in the community need to step up. So with the HUPEG initiative and the Commons initiative that we are fortunate to be part of and steering, we are ready to roll up our sleeves, so that that way it's not just on government. We also come to the table with ideas, with resources and with relationships that we think could help solve the various problems—and they're nuanced problems that every government is facing, that every community is facing; Hamilton certainly has its share of it.

But by having a world-class partnership that we have formed with Oak View Group and Live Nation—and these are organizations that care about their communities, so we're bringing people who care about the community, who are already forming relationships with the downtown YMCA, and we intend to forge even deeper relationships with these organizations. We're proud of the work that they do; we see the impacts of their work and we look forward to continuing to forge these strong relationships



because there is hope. Despite the challenging times, we see the hope and we see Hamilton's best days ahead. We are big fans of music and Frank Sinatra, and we believe that the best is yet to come.

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**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** There you go; I like that. No one here can carry a tune, I bet, so we won't sing that.

I want to just put again a little bit more context. Really, this provincial government has the highest debt burden in Canada, and it continues to climb. Every man, woman and child in Ontario owes \$19,500 to this government's debt and deficit.

As we've heard from Dr. Fung here, when it comes to investments in health care, Ontario has the lowest per capita investment in health care across the country. They are spending big. This government is spending big, but it doesn't seem to impact the things that people are counting on, the very basics.

I just want to draw your attention to the fact that this is a government that's planning to spend \$2.2 billion for a spa in downtown Toronto, a luxury spa that's really a subsidy, a taxpayer gift to a private international corporation.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** If the government can spend big on things like this that do not have a net benefit to the people of the province of Ontario, can you make a case as to why your project—it's almost like a triple bottom line—is something that this government could invest in? If they can invest in this, why can't they invest here in Hamilton?

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** We certainly believe that an investment in Hamilton through the downtown YMCA project would see a significant return on investment for the province, for the stakeholders of Hamilton. It's piggybacking on the already significant private sector investments that are being made into the entertainment assets.

We see a great uplift in ROI in multiple facets. The downtown YMCA specifically will create health and wellness for seniors, for—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes this presentation.

We will now go to the independent. MPP Jama.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** My question is for PJ again. You listed some groups that you are maybe working with, but with regard to the ask for funding for supporting our entertainment precinct, how are Community Living helping you out with this? I want some clarity. With the YMCA, sure, I understand how they are a partner, but you're asking for funding in one of the most marginalized places in Hamilton Centre.

So I understand why this could have some merit, but what are the real nuts and bolts of the partnerships with Community Living? You mentioned the YWCA, too, alongside the YMCA. How are we making sure that these groups are working together with you to not gentrify or push people with mental illnesses further out, away from services in the downtown core, with funding for this project?

I know this is something you've talked about for years, longer than my political career. I'm just looking for some answers in terms of, what are the deep-rooted community partnerships that you have to keep people safe, in the vein of talking about community safety with the introduction of an entertainment precinct in the core?

Then my other follow-up would be—I'm not a sports girl—I can't play sports—but we lost the Bulldogs. How do you know we are going to get a hockey team? That was kind of a joke.

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** No problem. Community Living Hamilton—we presented to their board of directors a multi-faceted partnership term sheet that includes many different lanes of engagement between HUPEG and their organization. We are working with their board through that process of what the partnership looks like.

Similarly, we've engaged with other organizations around collaboration and partnership. Part of the creation of the entertainment district BIA is for us to have a forum where we can more formally engage with the stakeholders in the community. We're in the process with the city of formalizing that business improvement area and connecting with others in a more formal setting. HUPEG is initiating that.

If you visit myhamiltoncommons.com, there is a wonderful website that we have built out that provides further information about the various community partnerships that we are spearheading.

To the follow-up comment about the Hamilton Bulldogs, we were certainly sad that they relocated to Brantford. Owing to our commitment to Hamilton taxpayers to renovate their prized entertainment asset, which is FirstOntario Centre, and by bringing on the world's biggest arena developer, it unfortunately led to a full shutdown that forced a relocation of the Bulldogs, but we recognize that they're doing well.

The good thing is that Oak View Group, our partner in the arena renovation, have wonderful connections with many NHL teams and AHL teams and hockey organizations. The founder, Tim Leiweke, was the former CEO of Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, and he has made a commitment to bringing hockey back. A lot of the former Oak View Group leadership team members are former Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment team members so there are a lot of connections in the world of hockey. And many of our other HUPEG partners are partners and owners in NHL teams and other hockey teams.

We're very confident that we will be in a position to announce, within the next year or two, some of those various hockey partnerships and what those could look like, as well as sharing with the public other partnerships that we intend to bring to the table. We've announced Live Nation as a major partner, so there will be a lot more concerts in Hamilton to ensure that that facility is appropriately activated.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** Thank you for that. I would just say it sounds a bit like cart before the horse, and the partnerships should definitely be more firmed up before this amount of money is given forward, in my opinion, but thank you for your time.

**Mr. PJ Mercanti:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you, and that concludes this panel.

We want to thank all the participants for all the time you took to prepare for this presentation and an able job of presenting it. I'm sure it will be a great benefit to this committee as we move forward. Thank you very much.

JAYS CARE FOUNDATION  
HOME CARE ONTARIO  
TASTEBUDS, HAMILTON'S STUDENT  
NUTRITION COLLABORATIVE

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** We now go to the next panel, and it consists of the Jays Care Foundation, Home Care Ontario and Tastebuds, Hamilton's Student Nutrition Collaborative. As they're coming forward to take their place at the table, we give the same instructions: You have seven minutes to make your presentation. At six minutes, I will say, "One minute." At seven minutes, I will say, "Thank you," and that will be the end of that presentation. We do ask, as you start the presentation, that you identify yourself to make sure we get the right name for Hansard.

With that, we start. Jays Care Foundation is the first presenter of this panel, and they're virtual.

**Ms. Susan Hallsworth:** Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Susan Hallsworth, and I'm the director of philanthropy with the Jays Care Foundation. We are the charitable arm of the Toronto Blue Jays, and we're here to advocate for critical investment in youth mental health and physical health in the 2025 Ontario provincial budget. This investment has the potential to help build more inclusive communities, enhance educational supports and improve child care and welfare for children and youth across the province.

If I can figure out how to do it, I'm going to quickly share my screen and keep going in a speedy fashion. Jays Care leverages the power of sport and play to create transformative opportunities for children and youth, specifically those facing barriers. From trauma-informed coaching initiatives to inclusive Field of Dreams infrastructure projects, we help young people thrive socially, emotionally and physically, while creating safer and more connected communities.

To date, the Ontario government has funded us in 2024 with \$300,000 in funding. With that support, we were able to turn every provincial dollar into six additional dollars through strategic partnerships and fundraising. This allowed us to train thousands of coaches and educators to deliver trauma-informed programming and to build inclusive play spaces that impacted more than 38 children in the province. The result: safer communities, more resilient children and increased access to critical development opportunities.

Looking ahead to 2025, the province's priorities for 2025 include building inclusive communities, enhancing educational supports, and investing in child welfare and infrastructure. Jays Care Foundation's work aligns with these

goals. Through increased investment, we can multiply the impact of provincial dollars, creating meaningful change for Ontario's most vulnerable children and youth.

As we move into a key recommendation for the 2025 budget, specifically for the region of Hamilton, we are seeking increased investment in innovative approaches to the mental health crisis for youth and children.

**1700**

The mental health crisis among children has reached unprecedented levels. Over 70% of mental health challenges begin during childhood or adolescence, and the current system cannot keep pace with the growing demand. Sport offers a powerful and scalable solution. Dr. Bruce Perry, a renowned trauma expert, highlights that if we make coaches 5% more trauma-informed or developmentally sensitive, we will have more therapeutic impact on children than if we trained an entire new cohort of trauma therapists.

At Jays Care, our trauma-informed coaching program equips educators with the skills to create safe and supportive environments with our affiliate school program. Take Hassan, for example, an 11-year-old who, until last September, had been living in a refugee camp in Syria: Hassan did not speak any English and did not have any friends when he arrived at his new school in Ontario. After joining one of our programs at his school, Hassan began speaking English, making friends and is now thriving in both the classroom and the gym.

Affiliate schools programming uses baseball as a tool to teach children core life skills inherent to the game of baseball, including communication, teamwork, courage, independence and resiliency. Specifically, in the region of Hamilton, Jays Care has identified the communities which will experience high population growth by 2028, specifically those with high population between the ages of five to 19 years of age. Those are the green areas on this map. Making sport more accessible and inclusive for youth, many of whom will be newcomers to Canada, will be vital for their mental, physical and social development.

With more funding, we can grow the affiliate school program from where it currently resides, where you'll see the Toronto Blue Jays logo, to even more schools across the province, but specifically the region of Hamilton. This will ease the strain on Ontario's mental health services and build safer, more inclusive communities.

The challenges for Ontario's children are urgent, but the solutions are clear. By supporting trauma-informed sports programming, the province can improve education, child welfare and community safety.

Thank you for your leadership and for considering this recommendation. Together, we can build a stronger, healthier Ontario where children of all backgrounds have the opportunity to thrive. Thank you for your support.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much for the presentation.

Our next presenter is Home Care Ontario.

**Ms. Sue VanderBent:** Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Sue VanderBent, and I'm the CEO of Home Care Ontario. Thank you for having this in Hamilton, where

I've proudly lived for the past 40 years. In fact, the offices of Home Care Ontario are at MIP.

The members of Home Care Ontario are truly the hearts and hands of the health care system. Together, they employ over 60,000 professional home care staff that provide over 50 million hours of front-line care to Ontarians, 24/7, each and every year. These staff are nursing, therapy and other supports critical to helping seniors and patients of all ages live with dignity and age with independence in communities across Ontario. It is through this lens that I share our recommendations with you.

Let me set the stage for the committee. Every year, as fall turns to winter, we hear the same story: hospitals overwhelmed by patients; our loved ones stuck in waiting rooms for hours or being treated in hallways where they languish. I'm sure everybody might know someone like that. Meanwhile, health care professionals continue to burn out and the wait-list for long-term-care beds gets longer. Every year, the same old solutions are used to buy us time until next winter comes and the pattern repeats.

Hallway health care keeps happening over and over again despite the largest increases in hospital capacity in decades. The simple truth is that the 3,500 hospital beds added since 2019 and the over 7,000 new long-term-care beds added to date cannot keep up with a population that is both growing and aging rapidly. We've all heard this.

New research shows that, regardless of age, Ontarians are getting sicker, with more people suffering from more chronic diseases like diabetes and cancer. These pressures have led my colleague Anthony Dale, CEO of the Ontario Hospital Association, to say that, unless something changes, "we're looking at a reality where the" publicly funded "system simply won't be able to cope." Ontario families deserve better, and it's time to break this cycle.

Following similar moves in European countries, for the past three years, Ontario has been purpose-building its home care system to deliver more care, and we do welcome and thank government for the foundation of a much-needed shift to occur.

From hospital hallways and long-term-care wait-lists to a home, the foundation is now in place, and Ontario home care has the immediate capacity with the staff in place to be able to do that. It's time for a home-first approach to care to become a real reality for Ontarians. Delivering more care at home will help patients and will actually reduce hospital wait times and long-term-care wait-lists by providing more patients at home with care where they want it, at home. As a former employee of St. Joseph's hospital here in Hamilton, I can attest to that, as a social worker.

To do this, we recommend the government significantly boost the amount of home care available to Ontarians through three steps.

First, we recommend that the government increase the number of home care visits and hours it funds by 10% a year for the next three years. Doing so would mean the home care sector could deliver 16.5 million more hours of care to people where they want their care, at home. Available research indicates that as many as 625 hospital beds across the province could be freed up if additional home care was available to these patients. In terms of the long-

term-care wait-list, CIHI estimates that one in 10 people admitted to long-term care could have been cared for at home with the right home care supports.

Depending on how the almost 16.5 million more hours of new care is delivered, this increased home care could result in moving approximately 4,500 people off the long-term-care wait-list and back to their own home. These are just two of the ways a substantial increase in the hours and visits the government funds can help reduce pressure on the rest of the health care system.

Second, we must continue to invest in the home care workforce to ensure that our wages can keep pace with the other parts of the system. Doing so will mean we will continue to have the staff in place to meet the increased demands of our rapidly aging population, which we know is coming. We recommend doing so by continuing to increase front-line wages to attract new workers and create a \$59.5-million mentorship fund and a specific skill development fund stream for health care workers to help retain them.

Third, we recommend the government modify the seniors tax credit at home by removing the disability certificate requirement to help more seniors access this credit while working to expand it by expanding eligibility and benefits of the credit to support more families and reach as many people as possible to help them age at home.

The government has made welcome investments in home care to stabilize and grow our workforce, and we thank you very much for that investment. We need to seize the opportunity before us to fund a home-first approach and greatly expand Ontario's home care system so we can meet the increased demand that we absolutely know is coming.

We know seniors want more home care, we know people of mid age with health problems want more home care and we know parents of seriously ill children want more home care. Everybody who needs it should get it. They deserve it, we are ready to deliver it and I'm very passionate that we can deliver it, given the resources.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Sue VanderBent:** Ontario's home care system is ready to step into an expanded role. We appreciate the investment. We have built capacity with your purpose-built support, and so we want to ensure that more seniors in Ontario, more people of mid age and more people with young children with severe illness can receive care at home and not in hallways. Thank you very much. I look very much forward to your questions.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much for that presentation.

Now we'll go to Tastebuds, Hamilton's Student Nutrition Collaborative.

**Ms. Bhairavi Kumar:** Good afternoon, members of the standing committee. My name is Bhairavi Kumar, and I'm the program manager of Tastebuds, Hamilton's Student Nutrition Collaborative. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about an issue that directly impacts Ontario's future: student nutrition.

To begin, I'd like to share Mia's story. Imagine a 12-year-old girl arriving at school with an empty stomach, trying to concentrate while dreaming of becoming a police officer.

Her only hope for a meal is the Tastebuds bin. Despite facing hunger daily, Mia is resilient and hopeful. Her story is not unique; it's the reality for over 30% of children in Ontario who experience food insecurity as food bank visits have doubled since the pandemic.

1710

Tastebuds operates under the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton and is overseen by Haldimand-Norfolk REACH, one of the 14 lead agencies in Ontario responsible for administering provincial funding for the Student Nutrition Program. While the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services provides partial funding and establishes guidelines, we rely heavily on donors, funders and community partnerships to meet the growing needs of our students and families.

Tastebuds supports 123 programs across 110 locations, serving over 23,000 students daily. These universal programs ensure participation without stigma and adapt to the needs of each school, offering options of breakfast, meals, lunch or snacks, with three flexible delivery models: sit-down meals, grab-and-go options or classroom food bins. Last year, we delivered over 3.2 million meals and snacks, powered primarily by volunteers who bring their time, care and energy to nourish students and build stronger communities.

One of Tastebuds' greatest strengths is its collaborative cost-sharing model. By working closely with donors, funders and local partners, we ensure accountability and shared ownership of our mission. Students themselves take great pride in their Tastebuds program, seeing it as an integral part of their school community. These programs don't just address hunger, they create spaces for students feel valued, supported and connected.

Student nutrition is a non-partisan issue. It transcends political divides, because the health and well-being of children are at the heart of every community. By investing in these programs, the government demonstrates its commitment to making citizens' lives healthier and happier, while building a brighter future for all Ontarians.

Our work extends beyond meals. The Great Big Crunch, one of our signature initiatives, celebrates local food and sustainability. Last year, 54,000 students from 112 Hamilton locations crunched into locally grown apples, fostering food literacy and pride in Ontario agriculture.

Yet food insecurity remains a critical issue. Ontario invests just \$37.6 million annually in school food programs, equivalent to 10 cents per student per day. In Hamilton, schools face a significant funding shortfall for student meals, receiving only 15 cents per student daily, despite the actual cost of a single meal being \$1.75. This disparity has been worsened by the rise in the cost of living, soaring food prices and ongoing inflation, which have further strained already limited resources. As a result, demand has surged by 30%, 35% of schools have had to reduce food quality or limit service days, and seven schools remain on wait-lists to start meal programs. These challenges underscore the urgent need for greater investment, to ensure all students have consistent access to high-quality nutrition amidst these economic pressures.

In 2023-24, the provincial government announced a one-time \$6.1-million investment for the Student Nutrition Program. Tastebuds received \$162,540, which was quickly exhausted. Meanwhile, core funding for school nutrition programs has remained stagnant for over a decade.

Without additional core program funding, programs such as Tastebuds are at risk of having to reduce the number of programs supported in our community. Each year, we receive less funding to coordinate this program, which threatens the program's ongoing sustainability. We urge the provincial government to allocate an additional \$115 million in budget 2025, as recommended by the Ontario Coalition for Healthy School Food. This funding would:

- expand program access to 600,000 more students;
- save families \$130 to \$190 per child each month; and
- raise Ontario's per capita contribution to 39 cents per student daily, eliminating wait-lists and stabilizing operations.

Investing in student nutrition benefits everyone. Strengthening local food procurement supports Ontario farmers and creates jobs, aligning with the Grow Ontario Strategy. Providing universal, stigma-free access to nutritious food enables students to focus, perform better academically and attend school more regularly. These programs are essential for health, equity and opportunity. Let's make sure no child like Mia goes hungry.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Bhairavi Kumar:** By investing \$115 million in the 2025 budget, we can unlock the potential of tomorrow's leaders, innovators and changemakers. Together, we can eliminate food insecurity, solidify Ontario's leadership in student nutrition and build a brighter, healthier future for our province. The time to act is now. Food insecurity is growing and schools are struggling to keep up. Your support can transform student nutrition in Ontario and make a direct difference in the lives of countless children.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much for the presentation.

We now start the first round of questioning with the official opposition. MPP Shaw.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** I'm going to start by questioning where we ended with Ms. Kumar. I just wanted to let you know that at one point in my life, I managed this program when I used to work for the Social Planning and Research Council, so I have intimate knowledge of the importance of this. Also, when I was with FirstOntario Credit Union, we managed to secure a generous annual donation to the Student Nutrition Program in Hamilton, so I am really, really well aware of this. It's something that I feel—I feel angry about all of the things, but the fact that children going to school are worrying about being hungry in this province, in a province as wealthy as Ontario? It's shameful. It's just shameful. You shouldn't have to be here talking about this. And the contribution that this government has made—well, you know, as our mayor has said that we're grateful for every dime, but we need more dimes. The contribution they have made really is pitiful and it does not

even come close to what corporations and individuals have donated to the importance of this program.

We know that it's tough times for people all across Ontario. The 2024 Hunger Report came out and said that more and more people are using food banks. As you said, food banks and school nutrition programs have to give out less food just to make ends meet. We know—as I said before this is the government that has the least amount of per-person funding in social programs across Canada. They underfund these programs. The facts do not lie. The per-person funding in health care in Ontario is the lowest in Canada and it's the lowest in all of these other programs.

It's the end of the day, and I've been hearing a lot of people coming very politely to say, "We're in a crisis," and that's what you're saying. And I would just say, this is the government that's spending \$2.2 billion of our tax dollars to build a spa in downtown Toronto when kids are going to school hungry. You can leave the ire to me, but I want to thank you for the work that you're continuing to do, and I thank you for having—hope springs eternal—thinking the government is going to hear this and make this a core part of their funding mandate.

But my question to you is: What keeps you going, when you see the huge, overwhelming need and a government that does not seem to understand how important this is?

**Ms. Bhairavi Kumar:** Through the Chair, what keeps me going is hope. I've been doing this for the last 18 years and I was one of the founding members of Tastebuds. When I first arrived in Canada 20 years ago, I didn't think a program like this existed, because I came here for opportunity and a better future for my own family. And as I stumbled upon this job opportunity, I saw the reality that existed in our city. One of the early visits to one of the schools—I can never forget the face of the child. I am a mother of two kids; back then, my kids were going to elementary school. I saw a girl waiting in the hallway for a teacher to open the daycare and give her some snacks. That's the reality. And when you find out the stories of day in and day out—because we are in the schools, doing our site visits and hearing first-hand from our teachers, from our parents, from our students, the impact of programs like ours—it gives us more energy and empowers us to keep fighting for them because I know they cannot, but we as adults can.

1720

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** I want to thank you for work. It's very emotional. I also volunteered directly in those programs as well, and saw how grateful the kids were and how needy they were. They would bring their parents and grandparents sometimes, too, because they were hungry as well, and no one was turned away and it was universal. It's an important program, so thank you for that.

Time is short, so I'm going to turn now, if you don't mind, to Ms. VanderBent. I want to focus specifically on one of the things that you talked about, which is caregivers in homes—and I'm talking about individuals because a lot of this care falls on individuals, as you would know. It's important. Your members are important. We need that professional care and we need to increase it. But 50% of caregivers are women, and they leave the workforce; they get burned out and they don't have the support.

We had our MPP Wayne Gates propose that Ontario would create a Ontario caregiver support benefit program so that a very little amount of financial support would be given to the family members who are picking up the slack, but this government used their majority to vote that down completely. What do you think about the idea of a caregiver support benefit to help so many families who are at home, often in acute circumstances that they didn't expect to be in, looking after their loved ones?

**Ms. Sue VanderBent:** I don't have an official board position on that. I could say personally, as a social worker and as somebody who has worked in home care, that we do heavily rely on caregivers in the home, and they are a manifestation of the humanity, really, of the system, because they bear a huge brunt. What I'm advocating is more help for them.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Absolutely, exactly. What you're talking about, the increase in the number of hours in visits, would already complement what they're already providing.

We have a very short period of time, and I just wanted to ask if you could help us understand what happened with the home care supply contract, because we heard horrific stories. My office, my staff, personally had to deliver some of the supplies. What happened there and how can we make sure that never happens again?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Sue VanderBent:** Thank you so much for the question. I thought you might have a question about it, so I do have some comments. Obviously, the focus of our members every day is high-quality services, and this issue has underscored the importance of home care. That's why it was front-page news for many days.

We look after a million people, and it demonstrated the resilience of our members, because they worked hard during that time. I want to make sure I acknowledge their contributions as we move forward to continue to try to get into a position where it's resolved. It's a difficult issue.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** You were in a hard spot for me to ask you this question, but from where we see it, it was rushed by the Minister of Health. The Minister of Health had no good answers when we asked questions in the House. There were horrific stories—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

We will now go to the independents. MPP Hazell.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Thank you to everyone for visiting and getting your presentations on the record.

My question is going to go towards Tastebuds, Hamilton's Student Nutrition Collaborative. There's so much I can say here. There is so much we can leave on the table. With my time, I really want to detail some facts that are happening throughout Ontario. We have right now over one million people who visited food banks in the last 12 months. We know our schools are underfunded; they're going through budget pressures. We know for a fact that rent is out of control—horribly out of control. We know families are paying 30% to 40% of their incomes in rent. Speaking to a lot of families, what they're left with at the end of the month is a decision to buy groceries or pay for medication.

The latest news that just came out of the food banks in Ontario is that now they have to ration their food. They've got to now decrease the food that they're now giving out to families. We're not getting better in the social space in this society. I know you talk about your going with hope. We cannot work and move with hope for our most vulnerable populations. When will you close your doors, or can you still keep your doors open?

**Ms. Bhairavi Kumar:** I hope we can. I know the government wants to do the best for their citizens, so I'm hopeful there. It is trying times, for sure. I recently met a student who comes to school and he shared that he eats Mr. Noodles—dried Mr. Noodles. He sandwiches them between two pieces of white bread and eats them and gulps water so that he can feel full. It breaks your heart when you hear that. We work at the ground level, so it's my responsibility to share what we see here first-hand so you can make the decision. Because ultimately, it's you who are going to make that decision, not me. I hope I don't close the doors. I'll keep fighting for this mission because this is close to my heart.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** But for the record, can you tell us what—because what you're doing is very important.

**Ms. Bhairavi Kumar:** Yes.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** And we need you to stay in the system. What specific funding are you asking for so you can continue to feed or you can continue to expand on your program?

**Ms. Bhairavi Kumar:** Like we've said there in the proposal, we're looking at \$115 million. I know it's a lot of money, but it's spread across Ontario, where the cost per child per day, per meal, varies from \$1.75 to \$4.75. I mean, the least we are asking for is some kind of additional funding that can keep us afloat, if not the whole bunch.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Your \$115 million that you're asking for, are you able to tell us how many kids that is going to be able to feed?

**Ms. Bhairavi Kumar:** It's going to feed an additional 600,000 students across Ontario.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Say it again for the record.

**Ms. Bhairavi Kumar:** So 600,000 additional students with that additional money.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Have you presented last year or this is your first year presenting?

**Ms. Bhairavi Kumar:** This is my first year because I'm very desperate to get your attention for this matter.

**MPP Andrea Hazell:** Thank you for putting everything on the record. I'm pretty sure they're going to follow up with questions for you.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** We'll now go to the government. MPP Pierre.

**Ms. Natalie Pierre:** Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for your time and effort to come in today and share your thoughts with us.

My questions will be for the Jays Care Foundation, to Susan. Again, thank you for your presentation and thank you for the work that you do in communities across the province to advance equitable access to sport and provide quality physical activity for youth across the province.

You've touched on two areas that I'm very passionate about. I'm very passionate about youth and sport, and I'm very passionate about youth mental health.

Before asking you some specific questions, I just wanted to go back. I know in the fall—in October—just recently, that the Jays Care Foundation received some funding from the government through the Ministry of Sport, I believe, to help with the Girls At Bat baseball program. I'm wondering if you can tell me how that funding has helped, how it was utilized and what were the results of that infusion of cash.

**Ms. Susan Hallsworth:** Thank you very much for your question. That funding allowed us to attract more girls to participate in our programs through schools as well as community partners, as well as local leagues, whether that's challenger baseball leagues run by volunteers, community programs run by YMCAs, girls and boys clubs, as well as the program we touched on today which is led by educators. I don't have handy the number of girls that specifically participated, but perhaps we can circle back on that specific data point afterwards.

1730

We are really proud of the work. Girls are often very shy and don't consider themselves athletes. What the Girls At Bat program does is the coach, the trained coach or the trained volunteer, educator, is trained to tap, meaning identify the girls who could find value in forming a friend group, who may be experiencing challenges at home and may not be able to think in the classroom. They encourage them to join Girls At Bat, and there they find a group of girls who are supportive. So 19,000 girls participated in Girls At Bat programming with thanks to the Ontario government, and that number has grown nicely in the last number of years with thanks to support, not only from the government of Ontario, but also some donors as well.

So we're very proud. We look forward to working with the Ontario government, should the opportunity continue to present itself, to not only grow our Girls At Bat program, which is offered through schools, but also Challenger Baseball, which is for young people who have physical and/or cognitive disabilities as well as young people who live at or below the poverty line, where we offer a baseball program specifically for them.

**Ms. Natalie Pierre:** And that intersection of sport and mental health, youth mental health specifically—I was just doing some Google searches and came up with the statistic that more than 75% of girls said that sport participation enhances their mental and emotional health. You touched on levels of confidence. We talked about building resiliency, those relationships that are critical, and sometimes students come to school and it's an escape for them, right? And so can sports, and it's an opportunity to build those connections, build community, build those relationships and have a chance to develop leadership skills that take them away from maybe not such a great experience at home. So thanks again for what you do.

A couple of things that I did want to mention to you: Starting in 2023 and in the classrooms in 2024, our government has introduced mental health literacy in the grade 7, 8 and 10 curricula as a mandatory requirement for edu-

cation. So that's something that's near and dear to my heart, and a motion that I brought forward in the Legislative Assembly, and probably one of the reasons why I decided to run for office. Because I think there are lots of things that we can do to help support youth mental health, whether that's educating students, providing those leadership and those positive experiences to build good mental health in sport.

I'm wondering if you can maybe just tell us a little bit more about these programs that you offer through Jays Care and what it means to young girls, their mental health; folks that maybe don't necessarily—young people, young students—have an opportunity to participate in these kinds of programs and how you see that intersecting with positive mental health outcomes.

**Ms. Susan Hallsworth:** Absolutely. We know through our programs—and Jays Care has been operating these programs in some form for the last 10 years, and we measure and evaluate all of our programs to make sure that they are accessible, that young people are reporting and/or educators or their parents are reporting on a positive sense of belonging, as well as that they are developing physical and mental health skills that they could take on through their lifetime.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Susan Hallsworth:** So we use baseball as the tool to hide the broccoli, and the broccoli is very much about the life skills that they may not realize that they are learning. So whether that is how to make friends, whether that's how to communicate, whether that's how to learn a new skill—and by sport, as you probably are aware, many kids today are thinking at the back of their brain, which is where they're really challenged, and dealing with whatever—on an empty tummy, as we've heard earlier—crisis at home. They're really thinking from the back of their head, and that isn't where you're most creative or ready to learn. Sport—when you participate in one of Jays Care programs, you are moving from a state of crisis or trauma, in which you tend to live at the back of your brain, to the front of your brain, which allows you to leave—hopefully, for a moment or three—what you are dealing with, your challenges personally, and think about learning something new in a fun way. By giving them that break through sport, through baseball, young people are then able to—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time for that question.

We will now go to the opposition. MPP Taylor.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Thank you to all of our presenters. The voices that you brought to the table today are so important. Youth mental health, youth hunger and home care are three top issues that are definitely on the top of most people's minds.

I want to thank Jays Care for your support of Challenger Baseball. Challenger Baseball was born right here in the city of Hamilton, and I attend all of their banquets and functions. It's just fantastic to see the supports that the Jays Care Foundation has provided them. Putting smiles on the faces of young people with disabilities is just absolutely wonderful. Thank you for doing that work.

I didn't understand or know all of the extra work, funding and programs you provided to other youth mental health, so thank you for that, because yes, when we can provide those supports, those sports and the physical health, it helps with mental health. Thank you for all of that work that you do. Please continue to keep up the good work, because our kids definitely need your help. They need the support to be able to start their lives in healthy ways.

The lack of funding of mental health supports that we see from this government is really critical. We're watching our young people fall through the cracks on a daily basis. The supports just are not there from the Ford government. Organizations like yourself are helping to pick up the pieces, and I hope that they will see to your challenge of making sure that you have those extra dollars to provide those supports and physical activities for young people to do better. Thank you.

Ms. Kumar, it's absolutely shameful to know that so many kids in our communities are hungry. We've heard from many organizations today—the Hamilton poverty round table—with people who are living in legislated poverty in this province, people who are working and not able to keep up with the cost of living. With the increased numbers to food banks—in the last year, we've had a 25% increase to our food banks. We've heard food banks are providing less food to families. To have kids with hungry bellies trying to learn in a school system that is already challenging is really unfortunate. It's a very wealthy province that we live in, and they spend billions of dollars on everything else and their pet projects, but continuously fail to meet the needs of our children, to meet the needs of our vulnerable residents. It's just a continuous thing that goes on with this government, day after day after day.

So I'm grateful for the programs that you provide. Providing that extra food to families, to kids through our school system, is a wonderful initiative, and I hope that they hear you today and provide that extra funding. You know, \$150 million is truly a drop in the bucket to what they waste and to who they provide the funding to. It's billions of dollars that gets shipped out the door. They're sending out \$200 a person, which is \$3.3 billion, and yet programs like this go underfunded, and it's shameful, because kids will continue to stay hungry, and the \$200 is going to be gone in the snap of a hat. So priorities—unfortunately, it's not where we see it. It's necessary.

Sue, thank you for being here today and talking about keeping people at home safe. My colleague here did raise the issue of the providers who had the supply contract and what that did to the community. We've seen that it went from Calea. We don't know why it left there and why it was given to Bayshore, but we see a lot given to Bayshore, so that for-profit industry continues to eat up the desperately needed, taxpayer-funded dollars that go into it. Maybe you can expand a little further on what exactly happened there, why that contract was taken away from Calea and given to Bayshore, who completely failed.

1740

**Ms. Sue VanderBent:** Thank you so much for your question.

Again, the focus of my members is the delivery of high-quality care to people every day. We see how important the home care sector is, and the medical equipment and supplies that are needed for people. It has also underscored the importance of the sector and the resilience and the strength because there was tremendous work that was expended in terms of trying to get medical equipment and supplies out to people.

I applaud our front-line nurses—and I know you do—and our PSWs and our other care professionals. I think the best thing I can do is to encourage you to speak to Ontario Health atHome to get the latest update on where that issue sits and ask your very important question, which I think is good to ask.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Right, so I will ask you this question though: Before the government made these changes, was your organization consulted? Were your members consulted about what was necessary on the lists for supplies and what wasn't necessary, or did they just decide to write it on the back of a napkin and make their own decisions about what medical supplies were necessary for home visits?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Sue VanderBent:** I appreciate—

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Were you consulted?

**Ms. Sue VanderBent:** Do you want me to answer?

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Yes, of course.

**Ms. Sue VanderBent:** I appreciate your question. Once again, I would ask you to speak to Ontario Health atHome because I think that's where you might find some of the answers that you're seeking.

**Miss Monique Taylor:** Okay. Thank you for that.

I also applaud the hard-working folks who work throughout our home care system—the PSWs, the nurses who do home visits—because they are really what holds up a big portion of our health care system.

I think that PSWs need to be treated better in this province. We see many who don't get paid for their travel time. They're running from place to place. They definitely don't have enough time to be able to do the necessary hours that are required—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you.

We'll now go to MPP Jama.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** Hi. Thank you for your presentation. I'm going to start off with a question for Sue.

I think health is one of those things that a lot of folks take for granted until you have a health scare or a disability. The leading cause of disability in Canada is actually aging, and so it's not a fixed category like race or other identities in the sense that every single person in this room will have a disability in their lifetime if they don't already. So funding services like home care is not just a question of supporting a separate identity group, it's actually investing in health care for all of us.

Something that I don't think a lot of people are aware of is the staggering, growing numbers of young people with developmental disabilities that are stuck in long-term care simply because they don't have the option of having home care. My disability, cerebral palsy, is on a spectrum, but so many people with CP are forced to be in long-term

care if they can't afford home care as they need it. So funding your organization to support home care is keeping more people out of long-term care, particularly youth who didn't anticipate having to be there, who want to go to work, who want to meet a lot of the deliverables that this government continues to set, but they just don't have the resources because home care is just not funded.

Again, it's a sector that everybody, at some point in their life, will have to use, whether or not we're used to talking about it in that way, in these political spaces, so I wanted to ask you your thoughts on the ways in which funding home care properly is an added support across all sectors when you're looking at young people with disabilities.

**Ms. Sue VanderBent:** As I mentioned at the beginning—I did mention children, because very few people think about the children that need home care. You're one of them, and that's wonderful. Some of the saddest stories I've ever heard are about children, and not just their children but their parents because many parents give up their jobs to look after their children who have medical issues that are quite astounding sometimes. We saw an article in the Toronto Star, maybe a year or so ago, of this mom and she was almost running a hospital, end stage of care, for her child who was very, very disabled. These are the kinds of cases that need lots of home care because families do fall apart when there's no additional support coming in because even their extended family become overwhelmed and the whole family breaks up.

So your point is critical, that we do need to look after people across a whole spectrum of care, not just aging, but people of mid-age who have illnesses and young children and their families because the families are the ones who bear that burden.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** Absolutely. I know quite a handful of young working people who are trying to work virtually but they're forced to live in long-term-care homes because they don't have home care. They're in their thirties and would not otherwise have to live in a long-term-care home if the supports were in place, so thank you for sharing.

Then, I have another question for Ms. Kumar. My riding in ward 2 doesn't actually have a high school. The high school that was there was shut down; that's Sir John A. Macdonald.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Sarah Jama:** So a lot of young kids, and we talked a lot today about how Hamilton Centre has a lot of issues around mental health and supports like that, but also kids are having to walk almost 45 minutes to get to the high school outside of their area in Westdale, so they have to wake up earlier. These are some of the most at-risk youth in our communities having to walk on foot to get to a high school because we just don't have one in ward 2 anymore.

How does the risk of closing food programs—because I know one closed at Westdale and the kids actually tried to hold a protest and talk to the ministry—impact kids who are already disadvantaged, by not having a local school in their area, who are struggling to get to school in the first place?



**Ms. Bhairavi Kumar:** We do understand that food insecurity is not just one of the reasons why students participate in our Student Nutrition Program; long walks, long bus rides, extracurricular activities before school, just having a hectic morning or even as simple as—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much.

MPP Smith.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** I have so much to unpack, but I think I'm going to start my questions with Ms. Kumar.

Thank you so much for your work. So 70% of all provincially funded elementary and high schools across this province have a Student Nutrition Program, and I want to thank you for your dedication.

We invest \$28.1 million each year—and that was actually increased just recently with an announcement—and we provide funding for so many different partners, including an organization like yourself, the Arrell Family Foundation, the Breakfast Club of Canada, the Schad Foundation, the Grocery Foundation and Student Nutrition Ontario to launch the healthy students and brighter futures Ontario campaign. I was on school council for over a decade; I couldn't agree more. Take a banana, grab a banana. It helps feed and fuel their souls so they can get through the day.

My question to you is: There are increased amounts. I'm wondering if you've received that?

**Ms. Bhairavi Kumar:** Right now, the Ontario government spends \$37.6 million annually on the Student Nutrition Program and that translates into, in Hamilton in particular, 15 cents per child, per day. Our cost for a snack or meal program is \$1.75.

Yes, we have received the funding that you've mentioned, but that is not enough. Combined with everything that we receive, we are still able to cover just 15 cents per child, per day. That amount, clearly, is something that has not worked here in Hamilton.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** All right. Thank you.

I'm just going to very quickly, because I know we've got a few people here on deck, ask Sue VanderBent—you hit something really strong for me. I just actually passed, and it's now in legislation—it received royal assent just recently. I created the Improving Dementia Care Act and that has increased awareness. I couldn't agree more; our government agrees that people should be able to age in their home safely and that's of extreme benefit to not only the family members but the province as well.

1750

Now, you talked about so many issues when it comes to home care. Can you speak to the specific impact of health care and that being provided to home as opposed to a cost issue where somebody would be in the hospital? I kept saying throughout my conversations, "The silver wave is upon us," and dementia care must be a part of your wheelhouse.

**Ms. Sue VanderBent:** Certainly, you make a very important point. We are seeing a demographic—we've all heard the numbers of what's going to happen as the baby boomers age. That will mean a lot of our home care dollars will be spent on people aging, notwithstanding the fact that

we still have other age groups such as children and people of mid-age who need that care.

We know that 94% of people who we recently polled said they want to live at home, and they want to receive care at home. Those are Ontario voters, so there's a lot of support by voters for home care and the advancement of home care. Our members are all accredited through one of four accreditation bodies so that we know they give excellent care in order to continue their accreditation status. What we need to do is make sure that we continue to increase the actual amount of care. Really, right now, about 4% of the total health care dollar—so the majority of the funding does go to acute care. We know that's historic—other countries in Europe and Britain have really changed their health care system quite dramatically to stop building a lot of hospitals and long-term-care beds and segue to home as the place to be.

I'm hopeful that because other jurisdictions have done that, and they are considered to be leaders in the world, Ontario can do that if it starts to focus on home as a centre. Home is where people want to be. Home is where families want their loved ones, but they just need help. We cannot continue to rely on family caregivers to fill that need because, ultimately, family caregivers do need help. Sometimes they get sick, or they get hurt trying to lift somebody, or attempt a procedure that they maybe have been asked to be trained for, but they have problems. So we need more home care desperately as we start to prepare ourselves for this demographic that we will surely, surely experience.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** We're actually making investments in that area.

So I was going to talk about the \$2 billion over three years in home and community care that the government has actually recently put forth. Can you speak to how that initiative will help individuals not only age at home, but how that will help the economies of scale when you're talking about people being in a hospital, specifically?

**Ms. Sue VanderBent:** Yes, well, as I said in my remarks, we are very grateful for the investment. We know that investment has been made and it's a great beginning. We still are seeing that we need to invest in order to look after the growing numbers of people that are going to need home care.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Sue VanderBent:** The capacity exists at this point for us to start looking after more people. Then we have to start looking at the future because the future is going to get ahead of us in terms of the demographics. So while we have the current capacity, we will fall behind year by year as the demographics start to take over and grow past that.

This government has been very good to us. We want to continue that trend in order to support more people, more people with children who have care needs, of mid-age and the very elderly, who we do not want to necessarily see have to live in long-term-care homes when they could be at home with support for their families.

**Ms. Laura Smith:** It's interesting, because things have changed over the course of the last few years and when I started my journey as a care provider, the conversation

really wasn't there. And now I think—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes your time and time for that question. It also concludes the time for this panel.

I want to say thank you for the great job that all three panellists did today in preparing and presenting your case here today. We very much appreciate it and I'm sure it will be of great advantage as we move forward.

As a reminder, the deadline for written submissions is 7 p.m. on Wednesday, February 5, 2025. I want to point out that anyone that made a presentation: If you want to add to the presentation, you're quite welcome to do that up till the deadline and it will be entered in there.

With that, the committee stands adjourned until January 27, 2025, in Stouffville, Ontario.

*The committee adjourned at 1756.*



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