

Legislative  
Assembly  
of Ontario



Assemblée  
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## **Official Report of Debates (Hansard)**

F-6

## **Journal des débats (Hansard)**

F-6

### **Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs**

#### **Estimates**

Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training  
and Skills Development

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

#### **Budget des dépenses**

Ministère du Travail, de l'Immigration, de la  
Formation et du Développement des compétences

1<sup>st</sup> Session  
44<sup>th</sup> Parliament

Wednesday 29 October 2025

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

Mercredi 29 octobre 2025

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Chair: Hon. Ernie Hardeman  
Clerk: Lesley Flores

Président : L'hon. Ernie Hardeman  
Greffière : Lesley Flores

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## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Wednesday 29 October 2025

## ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES FINANCES  
ET DES AFFAIRES ÉCONOMIQUES

Mercredi 29 octobre 2025

*The committee met at 1500 in room 151.*

## ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF LABOUR, IMMIGRATION,  
TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Good afternoon, everyone. The Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs will now come to order.

We're meeting to consider the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development for a total of two hours.

We're joined today by staff from Hansard, broadcast and recording, and legislative research. From the ministry, we are joined by the Honourable Dave Piccini, Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development—welcome, Minister—

**Hon. David Piccini:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** —Acting Deputy Minister Melody Robinson; and ministry officials and staff.

As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. I trust that the deputy minister has arranged to have the hearings closely monitored with respect to questions raised so the ministry can respond accordingly. If you wish, you may verify the questions and issues being tracked by the research officer at the end of your appearance.

Are there any questions from the members of the committee?

If not, I just want to also remind the deputy minister and any other members of staff that are going to speak during the questions and answers to make sure that they all start with introducing themselves for Hansard to make sure we have the right statement to the right person.

With that, I'm now required to call vote 1601, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement from the minister for up to 20 minutes.

With that, Minister, the floor is yours.

**Hon. David Piccini:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, colleagues. Good afternoon, Chair, and members of the standing committee. I'm honoured to be here today with you to discuss how our ministry is protecting Ontario's workers and unleashing our economic potential by protecting and strengthening the rights of workers; empowering people through accessible training to secure quality jobs;

and driving initiatives to make Ontario the best place to live, work and raise a family.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Premier Ford for his leadership in these efforts. He's been such a strong leader in protecting Ontario workers—very supportive of our ministry—and supporting businesses while keeping costs down for families.

I want to thank our incredible team: both caucus colleagues—parliamentary assistant Firin is here today—and the acting deputy and the entire team from the OPS, who worked really hard to implement our various ideas in what has been now our seventh Working for Workers. They're going to keep on coming because we've got more good ideas. I value their work, and I enjoy working with them and my political team as well.

We've made bold strides to ensure Ontario can persevere in the face of President Trump's increasing tariffs. Our economy has been resilient in 2024 and continued to grow in early 2025, but we recognize there's a lot of anxiety out there amongst Ontario's workforce. To maintain our position in these uncertain times, our government has an ambitious agenda and a capital plan to support growth by building more highways, transit, broadband and other infrastructure for 1.5 million new homes we need by 2031.

But many employers in particular, targeted fields are still having trouble filling vacant positions. This July, there were over 165,000 job vacancies in Ontario.

Filling in the skilled trades and emerging industries is extremely important right now because approximately one third of skilled workers in Ontario are aged 55 or older and are nearing retirement. It's not uncommon.

In many of what they call the lobby days, where associations come to Queen's Park—we heard just the other day with the masonry council that the average shift, the average team they're sending out is in their mid-to-late fifties. This is sort of the norm we hear here at Queen's Park. These are the workers that we're going to need to build our future and the homes, infrastructure and highways to keep our province and goods moving. To tackle this problem, we continue investing in training to ensure that we have the skilled workforce we need to fill these vacancies and bringing training closer to home.

Our Skills Development Fund has been a backbone of our government's plan to train workers for in-demand careers in every corner of the province. Since its launch in 2021, Ontario has invested \$1.5 billion through the SDF,

aimed to train more than one million workers for in-demand careers.

Our goal is simple: provide better training for better jobs with bigger paycheques in every corner of this province. We're investing another billion over the next three years to support critical sectors and help train even more workers, bringing in the total to \$2.5 billion. Through the first five rounds, we've backed over a thousand projects to help 700,000 people take the next step in their career. Our sixth round of funding opened this summer and will provide an additional \$260 million in strategic investments.

Training projects are run by organizations across Ontario's job-training network, including unions, colleges, businesses, employers, trainers, service providers, non-profits, community organizations and many more, because collaboration between partners across training systems is the best way to reach as many Ontario workers as we can, recognizing that training at every age matters.

Through the capital stream of the Skills Development Fund, we're also helping to build state-of-the-art training centres. We've already committed \$137 million over the next nine years to build these training centres. This includes unions, Indigenous centres, industry associations, fire halls, just to name a few. With this funding, they will renovate, retrofit, repair and expand existing training centres or construct new state-of-the-art training facilities.

This will improve access to the physical space and equipment needed for successful skills training in various critical sectors of the economy. I think to local Skills Development Fund capital projects in regions like mine—Bowmanville, with the expansion of the firehall. I know MPP Burch and I did a lot of work down in Welland. We know that the training and fire needs are diverse around Ontario, and so supporting better training in rural communities and rural centres like ours—we have a nice composite department between both paid on-call and paid officers—is key, and that's what we're doing with the fund.

It's also breaking down barriers for folks in the north. I think to Ironworkers Local 759, Adam MacGillivray and the team up there; they're doing incredible work. We saw the expansion to their training hall and met the next generation of trainers. Why is this important, in particular in the skilled trades? It's important because we know we have a gap, which I mentioned earlier, and it's also important because we know there are many waiting for in-class training. So the more we can do to expand those training opportunities around Ontario, the better.

We're promoting the skilled trades too, and our skilled trades career fairs are a central pillar to that. To further grow our skilled trades workforce and empower the youth of Ontario to enter the skilled trades, we've also continued to offer our successful Level Up! skilled trades career fairs, first launched in 2022. Last year, in 2024, nearly 45,000 students, parents and teachers learned about careers in our various skilled trades across Ontario. Level Up! is really and truly an immersive program, travelling across the province to demonstrate to Ontario youth that

pride comes with joining the skilled trades. The 2025 series of Level Up! is under way, and we expect to connect with over 50,000 participants this time across 12 communities around the province over the course of 29 days.

They've had the opportunity to step into the skilled trades, get hands-on experience, try first-hand and connect directly with employers, allowing them to get an understanding of the pathway from classroom to careers because you don't always necessarily—in a high school setting or middle school setting or elementary, for that matter—get an opportunity to be hands-on and to see first-hand a man or woman in the trades. To have those opportunities has been exceptional.

What's exciting is that we've expanded opportunities to support parents, these days in the evening, opening up for the general public. I know first-hand from the local Level Up! that parents have approached me and said how much it means to go there—grandparents with their grandkids, with their children—to get the hands-on experience and see about those local economic opportunities in their community. Most don't know that in communities like mine—we do the NHL whistle; I've often talked about our custom plastics. They don't know that at Mirmil we do custom woodwork; at JEBSCO, same thing. We've got so many examples of that in our community. We make the Calandria tubes and are at the forefront of medical isotopes in Port Hope for example, the community I live in, with Cameco.

Getting this understanding empowers youth to know about those opportunities to live, work and raise a family in their own community.

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On the labour mobility front, we've made a number of important strides. We've really seen the need to nation-build, to put partisan politics aside and to work collaboratively to build a stronger Canada. We've introduced legislation and regulations to support the removal of interprovincial barriers for Canadian workers coming to Ontario. These regulations come into force January 1. Canadians in certified professions can begin working in Ontario within 10 days. Once credentials and requirements are confirmed by the regulator, they can work as of right. This is a sharp contrast to the current process, which can force workers to wait anywhere from several months to half a year before being registered and able to start a job.

The historic implementation of as-of-right rules will apply across professions covered by more than 50 regulatory authorities and 300 certifications, helping employers fill critical gaps faster, protecting workers and supporting a stronger economy. This is a common-sense solution to allow certified Canadians to work across the country, filling critical labour gaps.

We're also leading Canada, with our partners in Nova Scotia, on health and safety harmonization: things like hoisting and rigging, working at heights, fall protection, making sure we're harmonizing those standards so that we can make sure that workers who are travelling on nation-building projects aren't caught amidst delays to redo a similar safety certification that they've already done.

Elevating that is going to strengthen our standards across Canada. Rising tides raise all ships.

Strengthening workplace safety through Working for Workers: Our government is ensuring every worker returns home safely by introducing tougher penalties for bad actors and expanding enforcement to hold employers accountable.

Supporting fair play and better conditions: We're standing up for workers with higher minimum wages, stronger protections for gig and digital platform workers, and new rights to disconnect from work.

Improving job security and training by expanding access to training and apprenticeships: Through initiatives like the Skills Development Fund, we're helping workers gain the skills they need for better jobs with bigger paycheques.

Protecting workers' dignity and well-being: From clean washrooms on the job site to requiring properly fitted PPE, heat protection measures and new employment standards, Working for Workers is putting people first and building safer, fairer workplaces across Ontario.

In December, this government passed a new, groundbreaking Working for Workers Six Act, and in May we introduced Working for Workers 7. These build on successes we've seen through our previous five Working for Workers bills. Working for Workers 6 and its complementary regulatory changes focused on supporting the well-being of workers and their families, keeping costs low for workers and businesses, honouring workers and growing Ontario's skilled trades workforce to protect the well-being of workers and families.

We created a new job-protected, unpaid, 27-week long-term-illness leave for eligible employees unable to work due to a serious medical condition. This is the longest for this type of provincial leave in Canada, because people should be able to focus on healing without working about losing their job.

Through Working for Workers 7, we also proposed a new 16-week job-protected unpaid leave for eligible employees who are welcoming a child through adoption or surrogacy, so that these families have access to the same benefits available to other families expecting a new child.

To protect worker safety, we've expanded our 2023 requirements for properly fitting PPE in construction to all sectors, ensuring women and workers of all body shapes and sizes have properly fitting PPE to keep them safe at work. This is a pretty common-sense change, but we didn't have that in Ontario—one of the first to bring that forward in Canada. We've heard from workers of all different professions how important this is.

We've also created a new regulation for records of washroom cleaning. This covers what must be posted and where it must be posted to help ensure basic worker health and safety and dignity in the workplace, bringing those same standards from Bay Street to Main Street.

We've cracked down on bad-actor employers who repeatedly violate the Occupational Health and Safety Act by creating a minimum \$500,000 fine for corporations found guilty of repeat offences within a two-year period

where the offence resulted in the death or serious injury of one or more workers.

And for roadside workers, we expanded our requirements under the Highway Traffic Act for drivers to slow down and move over when passing emergency vehicles and tow trucks, to also include prescribed work-related vehicles at roadside when flashing amber lights are activated, excluding construction zones within posted speed limits. This is better supporting our front-line heroes, those who put their lives on the line and do essential work to keep our communities safe.

We've further strengthened WSIB's presumptive occupational cancer coverage for firefighters. We reduced the number of years a firefighter or fire investigator must be employed prior to diagnosis to have presumptive coverage for primary-site kidney cancer from 20 to 10 years, the lowest required duration of service in Canada. And we removed the requirement for a diagnosis to be made before 61 years of age for primary-site colorectal cancer—measures to protect our front-line heroes like they do for our communities every single day.

To continue developing a skilled workforce, especially in critical industries, we expanded the immigration pathways for self-employed physicians using the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program; reduced decision-making timelines for regulated professions to make registration decisions for internationally trained applicants; provided more potential apprentices pathways to start a rewarding career in the trades by allowing people to register as an apprentice without meeting the standard academic entry requirement for their chosen trade through the experienced apprenticeship pathway; and kept costs low for apprentices by removing the certificate of qualification exam fee for apprentices taking their exam for the first time—this was quite common. We saw a tax on the trades under the previous government, and we're removing those barriers to enter the trades by making it more affordable, putting more money back in people's pockets, which has been a core tenet of this government and a priority for Premier Ford.

And finally, to protect and support newcomers, we strengthened and expanded the tools we have in the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program to deter and punish bad actors.

In our last Working for Workers 7, we followed on the successes of previous bills and we introduced measures that, if passed, will protect Ontario workers, fight worker abuse and support the skilled trades.

We've remained focused on protecting Ontario workers and businesses, especially given the current economic uncertainty and tariffs from the US. We've stepped up and will continue to invest in upskilling and reskilling workers to unleash the potential of our strong workforce. That's why we've proposed measures to speed up the construction of training centres to support the Skills Development Fund Capital Stream. I cannot tell you the number of Skills Development Fund capital proponents I've spoken to—like a recent visit in Ottawa, where it took months just to get a permit for a sign.

We can't wait to train a next generation, and we can't wait these excessive months upon months for permits and delays. We know that adds to the cost of a home. We know that's adding a cost to youth trying to get a new skill set, just trying to train. That's why we've proposed measures to speed up the construction of training centres. We've worked closely with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario—had a good sit-down with them at the last AMO meeting—and are making sure that we exempt certain projects from certain planning permits and approval requirements, which really just slow down construction.

Again, I got a call from London the other day—the same thing happening there; challenges. I've spoken with the mayor and I think we all agree that training workers faster is a good thing.

While this government is pulling out all the stops to prevent layoffs before they happen, we also need to prepare to support the people affected. My job is to make sure we are planned and we are prepared for the worst. This includes improvements to the support employees receive from their employers in mass termination situations, like a proposed requirement for employers to provide up to three unpaid days off for activities related to obtaining employment, such as job searching and accessing employment services and, as of July 1, a new requirement for employers to provide information about provincial employment services for skills training and job search support. We've seen the success of formerly Action Centres, now POWER, Protect Ontario Workers Employment Response Centres.

For temporary layoffs, we've proposed changes to allow employers to extend a temporary layoff to 35 or more weeks for non-unionized employees, where specified criteria are met so that employees and employers can continue to maintain their employment relationship. Maintaining an employment relationship could mean longer access to things like health benefits for employees and avoiding or delaying the financial cost of a termination for employers, which can make a huge difference for a worker facing termination.

For our POWER Centres and Better Jobs Ontario: To complement these changes, in August we also launched a new initiative, the Protect Ontario Workers Employment Response Centres, or POWER Centres, we're calling them. We're investing \$20 million in 2025-26 to help with transition for laid-off workers, including those impacted by US tariffs. These POWER Centres are delivering worker-focused, immediate and comprehensive supports, including training and customized referrals for workers affected by mass layoffs and closures—another investment from our government to support and protect all workers in Ontario.

We're also investing an additional \$50 million in Better Jobs Ontario to expand access to vocational and skills training for in-demand jobs. This will help job seekers—including those facing challenges finding a stable job, like youth and people on social assistance—with up to \$35,000 for up to two years to help with costs such as tuition, transportation and child care.

In Working for Workers 7, other proposed changes include building on legislation requiring high-risk workplaces to have naloxone kits. For construction workers, we proposed requiring employers with a construction project of 20 or more workers that lasts three months or longer to have an automated external defibrillator and a worker trained to use it. These sorts of defibrillators matter when seconds save lives. What I'm really proud about is the number of workers who will get access to training on how to administer these defibrillators. This is a game-changer.

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I want to thank all of the partners who were there to support us on that, which includes incredible partnership between employers and labour together standing behind our government for this announcement. It's not about placing some equipment on a job site. In a cardiac event, we know seconds save lives, and construction sites are one of the top workplace settings for cardiac events. It's about ensuring everyone who is helping build Ontario gets home safely the end of the day.

We also proposed creating the authority to require public infrastructure project owners, constructors and employers to treat Chief Prevention Officer-accredited health and safety management systems as equivalent in procurement processes, really levelling the playing field and making it equitable for all employers across Ontario. And we proposed establishing the authority to create a new general administrative monetary penalty regime under the Occupational Health and Safety Act to ensure this new requirement strengthens workplace safety and enforcement.

To protect employees and fight worker abuse, we proposed changes to crack down on employers who cheat the workplace insurance system by giving false information, hiding payroll records or skipping WSIB payments—it's unacceptable—so injured workers get the support they deserve and everyone pays their fair share.

To protect jobseekers, we proposed requiring job posting platforms to have a mechanism in place for users to report fraudulent publicly advertised job postings so these platforms can remove them.

**Hon. David Piccini:** Finally, to protect newcomers and better align immigration with labour market needs, we proposed—

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

**Hon. David Piccini:** —giving the minister the ability to establish or remove Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program nomination streams, granting inspectors the authority to require in-person interviews, allowing the government to return applications that no longer match in-demand labour market needs, and strengthening the integrity of the system.

We've also ensured a stable minimum wage increase. We've enhanced our occupational health and safety enforcement. We've ensured we're taking steps on injury and illness prevention. It goes on—expanded supports for newcomers in Ontario—and this is just a glimpse of the work we've accomplished thanks to the leadership of the Premier, the unwavering support of colleagues across government and the dedication from everyone within our ministry—because our strongest resource is our workers.



We will always have workers' backs. We're protecting them by making workplaces safer and fairer, addressing the need for skilled labour and creating opportunities for everyone across our province.

When we continue to put workers first, we're making strides towards an economically stronger and prosperous Ontario.

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

We will now begin with the question-and-answer segment in rotation of 15 minutes for the official opposition members, 15 minutes for the third party member, five minutes for the independent member and 15 minutes for the government members for the remainder of the allotted time. As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

We will now start with the official opposition. MPP Stiles.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

I'm going to start with some questions related to the decisions that have been made by the Minister of Labour and his office. Some of these were raised in the Auditor General's report as they inform spending decisions that the minister will presumably be making in the coming year.

Donations to the riding association of the former labour minister really skyrocketed during the time that he was running the Skills Development Fund and then just cratered when he left. Now donations to the current minister's riding association have shot up while a disproportionate amount of those same Skills Development Fund grants went to applicants that made donations to the minister's riding association.

I wanted to know if a donation to the minister's riding association is a factor in a successful application, in a case where maybe perhaps an application scored poorly when professional ministry staff ranked it, but it was somehow moved to the top of the pile and received, in many cases, millions of dollars. I wonder if the minister would care to comment.

**Hon. David Piccini:** No, and I would reject the premise of that question.

We make sure that when we assess—let's start with, first, what this is. This is a recognition that we've had external factors that are affecting our economy, from the pandemic, where this fund had its origins in the future-of-work panel, to a recent all-out tariff war with President Trump attacking key sectors of our economy.

So when we take our mandate to the people, we make sure—and I'm responsible to make sure—that we assess these projects against government priorities, like the housing supply action plan, like our infrastructure plan, a \$200-billion plan to build—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Mr. Chair, I'd like to reclaim my time there, if I may.

I appreciate that you gave me a response, but what I'm trying to get at is, we know, based on the Auditor General's report, that professional ministry staff ranked projects, and then a very large number of those projects—

more than 50%—shifted from low to medium priority to the top of the list. Many of those projects are connected to either donors to your riding or to insiders, let's call them—people who are perhaps lobbyists for those organizations.

I'm trying to understand what criteria—because it's a little unusual. In other provinces, you would have this kept away from political—perhaps we could call it—interference. In this case, it seems like—well, it's quite explicit, actually, according to the auditor—the minister and his staff went in and removed some of those lower-ranked applications and bumped them up to the top. I'm trying to understand what the criteria were that allowed that to happen, because as the Auditor General made very clear, that has the appearance of preferential treatment.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Point of order.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Point of order: MPP Smith.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Thank you, Chair. I appreciate that. Since the member has brought up that these are things from the Auditor General's report, that would be prior to the 2025-26 budget, and are discussing the estimates of the 2025-26 budget. I'd appreciate if the member could stay within the confines of what the estimates is, and that is for the 2025-26 budget.

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

The member will know that we will try and keep the discussion to the estimates.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** This is very much regarding what's going to happen next, because we know that the minister has said, pretty explicitly, that he has no intention of changing the process and how these decisions are made. And so, we want to understand how it is that these decisions are made.

Perhaps what I could ask is, how many high-scoring applications for the Skills Development Fund funding were turned down because a lower-scored application was hand-picked by this minister?

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Point of order again.

**Hon. David Piccini:** So two questions there—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** If I may, Chair, this speaks explicitly to decisions that will be made in the next coming year.

**Hon. David Piccini:** Yes, happy to answer that. So two question there, and I'm happy to answer both.

The first question: incorrect. The only priorities considered are government priorities, which have been publicly taken to the people: the housing supply action plan; we took our plan to protect workers in key segments of our economy, as I've talked about, in the north—mining; as I've talked about, ensuring our \$200-billion spend on infrastructure actually has the pipeline of workers in design and construction to make sure that we deliver on that promise. These are the things we look at when assessing that.

The second thing—and another incorrect statement you made—was with respect to future decisions. I've accepted the recommendations of the Auditor General. We welcome the role of an independent office to assess government programming. I welcome that and am working with

the Auditor General to make sure we implement those recommendations that she made to strengthen the program, without question.

I think it's so important to stress that for workers—and it's important we tell them—that when you're worried in a key sector of our economy, if you have access to training, at any age—I mean, this is a recognition by the Premier and by this government that training at every age matters, and that investing in workers at any stage of their career matters: short, rapid training—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Okay. So, if I may, since we have a limited time—

**Hon. David Piccini:** But I just think it's important to explain the program, and—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** But if I may, another tack for that— to maybe put it in a different way so that you understand what I'm trying to get at here.

You say that your government has all these priorities. You would have thought, one would presume, that as the minister, that would be communicated as the priorities of the government to the people who were the professional ministry staff who were asked to rank these. So there seems to be some disconnect there, Minister.

**Hon. David Piccini:** They are. The criteria is public.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So again, they ranked them low and, somehow, they got to the top of the list. So I'm wondering, which government priorities were not considered by ministry staff in your own ministry that were considered by your political staff—your staff in the minister's office—as suddenly more important than the other ones?

**Hon. David Piccini:** As I said, the criteria is public and online for everybody to see. It's in the guidelines, and so when we're assessing it, we also take into account things like the fact that when President Trump's inauguration happened, he launched an all-out tariff war. The Premier said that tariffs only raise the cost on goods; they're damaging for workers in both Canada and the United States. When you impose these sorts of tariffs, it has a very real impact.

1530

We look at things like that to say, "Okay, we've got to make sure we have this rapid fund." That's important, because we've never had this before. People don't have time to just leave work and take a four-year degree. It's costly. As important as those pillars are, recognizing that now we have a pillar for rapid training in Ontario matters—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Minister, if I may, I'm not really sure I understand, though. You say it's posted somewhere on a website or something, but it's obviously not getting to the very people who work in your ministry, so there is a problem there.

I'm asking this question because there are about 800,000 people out of work right now in the province of Ontario, and we are just beginning to feel the impact of the hit off tariffs. Frankly, I think the fact that your government has no job plan, no strategies in many sectors, including forestry—people need to know whether they lost

out on opportunities and why, and will those opportunities be there in the future under this minister?

When grants seem to be given out like Halloween candy, frankly, they need to know: Is it Leafs tickets? Is it a trip to Paris? What is it that actually helps to move an application up to the top of a pile in this minister's office? Because once the minister's staff are involved and suddenly we see this massive shift, people are going to have questions.

I wonder if you maybe you can tell me—and let's get to the results, because, again, informing what's coming: Can you tell us how many training spots were impacted by the hand-picking of those low-scoring applications over the high-scoring ones? What kind of training increase do we see there?

**Hon. David Piccini:** I think we've established the fact that people are free to support whomever they want. Many of the incredible proponents delivering SDF training are unions that formerly supported you, that donated to you. I understand you're upset that those unions are supporting this government—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Sorry, Minister: Are you saying that the donations and support of certain organizations—

**Hon. David Piccini:** No, I'm not. Don't put words in my mouth.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Oh, my goodness. I think that you are.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Order. As I said when we started, speak through the Chair.

**Hon. David Piccini:** So, Chair, to answer that question: People are free to support whom they want. Our priorities we take into account when we fund projects are priorities of this government, are the criteria for the Skills Development Fund that are publicly accessible. The member can impugn all sorts of things that she wants, but that's the facts. The facts are that we have a program to support Ontario workers; that is benefiting workers of all political stripes—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Mr. Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time. I have very limited time, and I don't think he's answering my question—

*Interjection.*

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I don't think you're answering my question, with respect, Minister. I was asking about how many training spots were created as a result of this shift in ranking.

But I must say that I think that was a very not-so-veiled message to people who want to perhaps apply for these training grants. I have to say, pointing out that they can support who they want to support—I've got to say, you're sending a pretty strong message there, Minister, especially at a time when your government is increasing donation amounts so dramatically—by 47%, actually. I think you're sending a pretty strong message there, Minister. You're nodding your head, so I guess you possibly agree with me on that.

Okay. You don't want to answer my question about how many training spots were actually created. Let's go to how many fewer jobs will be created because this min-

ister—you, the Minister of Labour—wants to hand-pick low-scoring applications over high-scoring applications.

**Hon. David Piccini:** The only one talking about those donations is you. You're cherry-picking. I'm simply pointing out that SDF-funded projects support people of all political stripes. We don't care—as the Premier often says, any colour or party you support, it doesn't matter. What matters is the quality of the training you're delivering and the impact.

The Auditor General herself pointed out the strength of the KPIs of our work to ensure that people are actually getting a job placement. Having this rapid training—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Sorry, Minister. How many, if I may—

**Hon. David Piccini:** —to land a job on the other side of that rapid training matters.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** How many—

**Hon. David Piccini:** Seven hundred thousand have been trained, and 100,000 people—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Seven hundred thousand have been trained. And how many jobs have they been moved into?

**Hon. David Piccini:** Over 100,000 people have found employment within 60 days or less.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Yet 800,000 Ontarians are still, sadly, unemployed right now.

Listen, you accuse me of cherry-picking, but it was more than 50% of the applicants that were influenced by the interference of this minister and his political staff, so I think that's not exactly cherry-picking, if I may.

What I've been asking you is how many—you talked about how training opportunities were created. Maybe the minister needs to work on some metrics here, but I still don't know how many of those were impacted. Were there more jobs or more training opportunities created because of these more than 50% of the applications that you and your ministry staff, your political staff, decided to bump up to the top? How did that benefit workers?

I have to say, I'm confounded that you don't have these numbers handy. The ministry should certainly have metrics to track that kind of information and that certainly informs what's going to happen next, because nothing the minister has shared with us so far gives me any confidence that this same scheme, this same pay-to-play scheme, isn't going to impact their decisions going forward.

**Hon. David Piccini:** We do and I gave you the numbers of 700,000 trained, over 100,000 finding employment within 60 days or less. We've supported 200,000 college partnerships. We've had an impact.

You asked who has been impacted. Let me give you a very tangible example: I recently attended a graduation for the introduction to millwrighting program, which is run out of OPG. This was a direct Indigenous-only class that happened to have all eight graduates from Indigenous communities. We had an example of a youth from Alderville First Nation whom I met when I was there. The local millwrights do an incredible job. What was nice—because you want to know that impact, and what job is created from that training—is all eight ended up on jobsites, whether it's Ranney Falls or Healey Falls

hydroelectric projects, or whether it's the future SMRs we're building, the future nuclear plants we've committed to—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So, Minister, you don't have a specific metric for that, those applications—

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

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** —that you specifically took out of the pile, put to the top of the pile for some reason that you say was clear to everybody, but isn't—

**Hon. David Piccini:** No, let me address that specifically, because it's a good question. Every specific project has their KPIs and outcomes and I've spoken to you about a few of them—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** And will you share all of those with us, by project and by application? Will you let us know, please, which one of those were bumped up by your political staff?

**Hon. David Piccini:** The KPIs are public, and we've seen a lot of the graduates at these events—I should say, on the KPIs, I've spoken about exceeding KPIs. The Auditor General herself, in her report, acknowledged the strength of the ministry in making sure proponents achieve their performance outcomes and that's what this is all about. I gave you an example of the millwrights; there's other examples, like electricians—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I will say, Minister, I've met many, many of the same students, apprentices etc. What I'm finding, increasingly, despite—by way of another anecdote, like yours—

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

We'll now go to MPP Fraser.

**Mr. John Fraser:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister. It's good to see you.

**Hon. David Piccini:** Good to see you.

**Mr. John Fraser:** I want to start by giving some context. The best way to judge future behaviour or future things is to talk about the past. There are some things here, the defined actions that have been taken with the Skills Development Fund that are very clear. The Auditor General has said that this fund—which is still continuing, still has about \$700 million left, \$345 million this fiscal year—was neither clear, transparent or fair. I might not have those in the right order. Those are pretty strong words. We know that the decisions that were made, more than half of them went to low- and medium-scoring applicants, which is kind of unusual for a government program that is looking for value for money. I think that's a fair assessment.

I want to make sure that this is clear to the minister so that he understands it. I want to read out here a definition of what's called a “conflict of interest.” I'm sure the minister knows that that is. It's “a situation in which the concerns or aims of two different parties are incompatible,” a situation “in which a person is in a position to derive personal benefit from actions or decisions that are made in their official capacity.”

There's something called the Members' Integrity Act. In the Members' Integrity Act, it says in section 8—if you

have it—“a member of the assembly who has reasonable grounds to believe that he or she has a conflict of interest in a matter that is before the assembly or the executive council”—which the minister is—“or a committee of either of them, shall, if present at a meeting considering the matter,

“(a) disclose the nature of the conflict of interest; and

“(b) withdraw from the meeting without voting or participating in consideration of the matter.”

**1540**

In the case of Keel Digital Solutions, a low-scoring project, the minister himself said categorically on radio, “Yes, I intervened in these low-scoring projects and it was the right thing to do.” The challenge is that the minister was a close personal friend to Michael Rudderham, who was an actively lobbying in a registered lobby, a lobbyist—as he should be—for Keel Digital Solutions. They received \$7.5 million. The minister said, “Yes, I intervened in the decision.”

Mr. Rudderham also had another client, LifeLabs—at one point \$2 million for training and retention. The minister didn’t mention whether or not he recused himself from that when he had that opportunity, but he can answer that when I give him an opportunity to answer.

Also connected to Keel Digital Solutions was when the minister attended a hockey game—and there are some questions about hockey, but I don’t want to get into that right now; I’m not going to try to figure that out, because that’s immaterial—with someone who then became a director of Keel Digital Solutions.

I guess my question to the minister is: These funds going forward are really important; it’s like \$7 million, 700,000 people out of work, hundreds of thousands of kids going to food banks every week. It’s clear this is not right. Can we have a guarantee that the minister will never do this again?

**Hon. David Piccini:** Thank you to the member. Through you, Chair: That’s not what I said. What I said is that the government—and I’ll repeat it, because it’s important to reiterate. When we assess projects, we look at both the criteria, which are public, and we assess against recent and emerging government priorities—which can include things like a new inauguration of a President and an all-out tariff war—to make sure that we target, for example, the steel sector. If we’ve got applications from

**Mr. John Fraser:** Okay. You’re not answering my question.

**Hon. David Piccini:** —that we’re giving a good look at those applicants.

**Mr. John Fraser:** I’d like to get my time back. He’s not answering my question.

I asked a specific question. This is not going towards the answer, unless it’s germane to that. I asked him if this situation would never happen again.

It’s very clear that the minister knew. The minister said openly—it’s evident for everybody—“Yes, I stepped in on a file where a very close friend was representing two companies. I was also involved with the director of the

company and I thought that was okay.” You could have a picture of that in the dictionary beside “conflict of interest.” I’m not asking you to explain it, because there’s no explaining it—unless you can. I’m just asking you: Will you not do it again? It wasn’t right. You know it’s not right, I know it’s not right, they know, they know—everybody knows.

Given there’s \$7 million on the line out there, 700,000 people out of work, hundreds of thousands of kids going to food banks, people who can’t get the health care that they need—they want to know that you’re not going to make decisions in conflict, or based on who people know. There’s a whole bunch of other stuff in here that’s in this fund.

The thing that really upsets me—and I get mad every day, and I’m sure these folks do—is you trot out a police union or you trot out firefighters or you trot out workers. They’re doing some good work. Some of the unions, we funded, too. But do you know what is happening? This is such a mess, minister. You’re dragging them down, and then on top of that you hide behind them, every single day.

Just tell us that you’re never going to do this again. That’s all I want to hear. That’s all Ontarians want to hear. What you did there was wrong. There’s a whole bunch of other stuff there, but what I’m talking about is that one thing. It’s not right, and if you were sitting here and I was sitting there, you’d say exactly what I’m saying to you. So are you going to commit to the people of Ontario, to the people at this table that you’re never, ever going to do that again when it comes to the Skills Development Fund?

**Hon. David Piccini:** Chair, through you again: As I said, when we assess these and the officials bring forward projects, we assess against government priorities, which can include things like the tariffs, like the steel sector, and we assess against those priorities.

I stand with those workers, MPP Fraser. We stand side by side with those workers. They reach out and say, “We’d like to come and stand with you at Queen’s Park,” and these groups recognize the impact that this fund is having. We never had a fund that supported people with rapid training—12-, 16-, 18-week training—that can link them directly into a job. So I stand with these groups.

**Mr. John Fraser:** No, you’re hiding behind them. That was my point. You didn’t get it. You’re hiding behind them.

**Hon. David Piccini:** You can say it as many times—we stand with them.

**Mr. John Fraser:** You trot them out every day, and they’re people who are doing good work, and the mess and the rot that we see here, it’s there for everybody to see—

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** I would remind the member: Speak through the Chair.

**Mr. John Fraser:** Okay. Sorry, Chair.

The rot that we see here is clear for everybody to see. It doesn’t look good. I think that’s fair. I don’t think I’m being unfair here. All I’m telling you is, stop trotting them out. Carpenters are doing great work. They’ve been doing great work for 10 years, right? How do they have to be dragged down into this mud?

Just say you won't do that thing again. That's all I'm trying to get you to say. It's not complicated. It wasn't right. You know it. I know it.

Chair, respectfully, I'll move from this, because I'm sure that the—I ask for your patience, Minister, because I'll go on a different line of questioning. If you want to come back to this, you can let me know. I'm happy to keep discussing this, but I don't think that you're going to give me the answer to that question.

**Hon. David Piccini:** May I answer, Chair, if that's all right with you? I just think it's important, because we celebrate workers and celebrate their success, and when I say—

**Mr. John Fraser:** You're hiding behind them.

**Hon. David Piccini:** When I say we assess projects—

**Mr. John Fraser:** Chair—okay. Chair—

**Hon. David Piccini:** Chair, may I just answer the question? The member has gone on—

**Mr. John Fraser:** I just said I was moving on. The question is up.

**Hon. David Piccini:** When we assess those projects and prioritize the construction sector, we celebrate the work of carpenters, we celebrate the work of industrial millwrights, of labourers, of folks of diverse backgrounds that advance those government priorities so we can build your hospital on time, so we can build your school—

**Mr. John Fraser:** Okay, so, I'm just going to go—the minister—

**Hon. David Piccini:** —that the government shut down in rural Ontario communities like mine. Thank you, Chair.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** The member wants his time back.

**Mr. John Fraser:** I want my time back. How much do I have left?

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** You have 5.2.

**Mr. John Fraser:** Oh, wow. That's great. That's like a lifetime.

I just want to go back to the Auditor General's report—and again, going towards the \$700 million because, quite frankly, when I read the Auditor General's report and having worked with public servants before, who are serious people, who take their job seriously, who when they rate things are doing it so that they can get the best value for Ontario taxpayers—when the Auditor General says the minister's office chose to fund poor, low- and medium-ranked applications more than half the time and we also know that more than half of the money went there, I feel for people who are doing really great work and then someone makes an arbitrary decision based on some of the things that the Leader of the Opposition was suggesting: who the lobbyist is, who gave what. That's not right.

In the last round of Skills Development, bars and restaurants and nightclubs in downtown Toronto got \$27 million. The question is, were you just really backfilling their payroll? There's no real evaluation of how well that turned out. If I was in Ear Falls, I might look at that and go, “Wow, that's a lot of money. I'm going to lose my job. Why did they do that?” Maybe the minister can explain why—

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Point of order, Chair.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Point of order?

**Mr. John Fraser:** I'll rephrase the question—

**Mr. Dave Smith:** I'll remind everyone that we're talking about the 2025-26 budget and that the questions have to be about the 2025-26—

**Mr. John Fraser:** Well, they are, but you didn't listen to what I said.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** I did.

**Mr. John Fraser:** No you didn't.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** You said in the last round, which was—

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Order. It's a point of order, and I'm sure will get to realize that he's supposed to be speaking to the estimates.

**Mr. John Fraser:** Well, you've still got \$700 million to spend, so maybe the minister has got another \$10 million for the bars. That's what I'm trying to figure out. Or maybe another \$4 million for Keel solutions—it was a solution for somebody.

1550

I'll rephrase the question so the member from Peterborough—

**Mr. Dave Smith:** God's country.

**Mr. John Fraser:** The member from God's country. I live there too.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** I'm sure across-the-floor discussion falls in the category of “speak through the Chair.”

**Mr. John Fraser:** I can't resist. Chair, he's so charming. He's so charming, right?

**Mr. Dave Smith:** And good-looking.

**Mr. John Fraser:** And good-looking too.

I will rephrase the question. I live in Ear Falls and I'm going to lose my job, and things aren't looking good. I'm looking to the government for help, and I saw what happened with the bars and restaurants in downtown Toronto—but we're not talking about that right now. But I say to myself: “I wonder if they're going to do that again.” Because I'm up here; I'm not in downtown Toronto. What's going to happen to me?

I think it's a fair question. I'll give you some time, Minister; what the heck.

**Hon. David Piccini:** I think that one of the strengths of this program is that when workers look to training in the province of Ontario, it doesn't matter your background. You could be working in a bar, you could be working in a gas station, you could be working folding sheets in a hotel—we see you; we value you. If we can implement training that's going to take you a few dollars more an hour and help you with some better training for a better job with a bigger paycheque, we value that.

I think it stands in stark contrast from the approach of the previous government, which was not to recognize those blue-collar workers, which was not to see their value and strength that they bring to our economy—

**Mr. John Fraser:** Chair, I'm going to grab my time back. They only gave me so much time, Minister.

How much time exactly?

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

**Mr. John Fraser:** I just want to go back to where we started from, and I want to ask the minister—because I think it's important for people to know about the \$700 million that's to come, because he's going to make more decisions—whether or not intervening for Keel Digital Solutions, who his friend was getting paid by, and he had a relationship with another employee, was a conflict of interest.

**Hon. David Piccini:** I look forward to future rounds of Skills Development Fund funding and to supporting workers across Ontario, to advancing priorities of the government and the people of Ontario to support their training, to make sure that in every sector of the economy, we have a tool that can link employers, link unions—

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time. We will now go to the independent.

Just before we start, I would like to suggest to the committee that if you ask a question, you have a right to an answer. It isn't necessarily the answer you want, but it's still an answer. So if we could keep the discussion concise to questions and answers, that's why we're here.

**Mr. John Fraser:** I gave you half my last minute.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** I wasn't making any reference to anybody on the committee or what's been said to now. I just want to make sure that we have a process where we're asking questions to get answers from the ministers about the estimates for 2025-26.

With that, MPP Brady.

**Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady:** Thank you to minister and all the staff here this afternoon.

Had I known we could chat about the Auditor General and the integrity act, perhaps I would have framed my questions differently. I'm new to the estimates show and I'm sure some of you might be relieved to know that although I'm charming, I'm not going to be very dynamic in my line of questioning compared to the rest of you.

I'd like to begin by saying that I have heard, Minister, from the business community that they are happy with the WSIB surplus rebates that they have been receiving over the past 3.5 years, with \$5.2 billion in surplus funds to eligible safe businesses of all sizes, and, of course, we just realized the most recent round of \$2 billion this month.

They're also pleased with the reduction in the WSIB's average premium rate for 2025-26, but they want to know a little more information about the continuation of the WSIB surplus rebates. I understand that these rebates help the business community, they spur the economy, but we do know that critics argue the funds come at the expense of injured workers and disincentivize legitimate compensation claims. In your remarks, you said that the ministry is focused on giving injured workers the compensation they deserve.

So I'm wondering, Minister, if you could tell how long the rebates might continue. And what would you say to the critics of those rebates?

**Hon. David Piccini:** Thank you. Through you, Chair, I think first and foremost, to just set up how, with the

surplus, we got to that position: We had a position where WSIB was an underfunded liability, meaning we just simply didn't have the dollars to support injured workers through their life and lifespan. Working with WSIB, with the incredible team that works at WSIB—strong leadership, strong management of the asset—we've gotten to a position where it exceeds. I think what is responsible to employers is, when your asset grows to a point where you're financially very healthy, you're giving that surplus—because many mistake these employer premiums for taxes. They're not taxes from the general public; they are employer premiums, and we're giving them back to employers.

So what I would say to those employers is that they have a new distribution that will be in their accounts, for safe employers, by this Friday, by the end of this month.

**Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady:** So I asked you, "Will the rebates continue so long as WSIB remains healthy?" I understand there's a new model where premiums will be tied directly to individual employers' claims. Will that affect the rebates?

**Hon. David Piccini:** No. If we continue in a place of fiscal health, we can expect surplus distributions to go back to employers. We put it in legislation: once you hit 125% of the sufficiency ratio. We'll continue to work with employers.

But we also launched a fund, I would add, to support injured workers: over \$400 million that's supporting research. We've tripled the number of supports we're offering injured workers—I mean, tripling; that's bringing care closer to home for injured workers—and working with injured groups on loss of income earnings, and on retirement and how we can continue to better support them.

**Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady:** Thank you. I noticed on page 23, in 2024-25 there was \$6 million for the tools grant, "assisting apprentices with tools and equipment costs for their trade." Many young people that I've met with have told me that the grant was insufficient in some sectors, and it was also taxable. They appreciated the funds nonetheless. I don't see the tools grant itemized for 2025-26.

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

**Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady:** Maybe I missed it, but I'm curious if the grant will continue and, if so, will the amounts increase or perhaps be made non-taxable?

**Hon. David Piccini:** Yes. The tools grant—Chair, through you—will continue. We saw a 10% increase in 2024-25. It was issued to over 10,513 apprentices. We've seen a growth in the number of apprentices, and we will continue that incredible program that was a loan under the previous Liberal government but is now a grant to help people get into the trades. We want to remove that Liberal tax on the trades. We want to get more people into the trades. That's why we will increase that and continue to support it.

**Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady:** So the grant will be increased?

**Hon. David Piccini:** The grant, yes, to more people.

**Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady:** To more people, but the actual monetary value?

**Hon. David Piccini:** It saw a 10% increase last year. We'll see that moving forward. I don't want to speculate; I am working on continuing to expand it in the new year, so stay tuned.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time. We'll now go to the government side and MPP Firin.

**MPP Mohamed Firin:** I thank the minister and his team for the presentation today. Minister, I've had the privilege of travelling across this province and seeing how this program is impacting young people. What I wanted to ask you today is: In your time as Minister of Labour, have you seen an increase in the number of people registering for apprenticeships? And has there been an increase in the number of youth and women that have been registering for apprenticeships in that time?

**Hon. David Piccini:** Thank you, MPP Firin. Through you, Chair: We have seen an increase. We saw last year over 16,000 youth register for apprenticeships. That's the highest in over a decade. Thanks to Skills Development Fund programs, we've helped break down barriers for traditionally under-represented groups in the trades. You want to get more women in the trades? The key to that is retention. We're working on that as well.

**1600**

We've made those common-sense changes in the Working for Workers that I elaborated on. Properly fitting personal protective equipment—how many women did we see who could fit both legs in one leg of the coveralls that they're wearing? Or putting an electrical technician working on high-voltage etc.—the electrical workers got gloves that were too big. This is dangerous. Being a province, to take a progressive step to be the first to mandate properly fitting protective equipment, I think, matters. It's an important piece to getting more people into the trades.

Simply put, at a very high level, we can't build and achieve our ambition of \$200 billion on infrastructure and the hospitals—I'm fighting for one in Campbellford. MPP Smith knows. We've both been working on that, supporting Peterborough Regional Health Centre. You can't do that leaving 50% of the workforce behind.

To answer your question about women, for example, we've seen a doubling of registrations for apprenticeships among women. Through incredible programs—and I know you and I have visited many of them, like Hammer Heads—we're seeing incredible diversity in the trades, people from all walks of life picking up tools to be part of that generation.

I've often reflected back on my own family story and talked about my grandfather, who was part of a generation that helped build Canada. I think we want to extend that to today's generation from all walks of life. Take an active stake in your country and build something you can look back on and be proud of, whether that's a new hospital in communities like mine, in Campbellford, or whether that's the Ontario Line.

We've had a chance to meet some of the workers on that, and we're talking a diverse group of workers. We're talking workers from Oaks Revitalization, for example,

getting a second shot at life, actually earning a paycheque. Crime is one of the number one things I hear, so reducing the number of people who reoffend by supporting training programs through the Skills Development Fund that are helping these predominantly young men find a second shot at life and become taxpaying, productive members of society is a game-changer. We've seen that through so many of our programs.

We'll continue to support programs like that that are really designed to give people a leg up, to take an active stake in the kind of Ontario that they want to be a part of.

**MPP Mohamed Firin:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** MPP Smith.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Thanks, Chair. I appreciate that.

I'm going to touch on a couple of things that the opposition hasn't, because I think when all of us look at what's going on, everything becomes about the local politics itself.

You mentioned that your riding is just south of mine. We have, I'll call it, a shared employer, because if he was on the opposite side of the street, he'd be in my riding, but because he's on the side of the street that he is right now, he's in yours. The vast majority of his employees come from the city of Peterborough. They're a manufacturer; they make some very heavy equipment that we need right now in the construction industry. You see that product on pretty much every large development at the moment, but they're really struggling to find sheet metal workers and to find welders, and they have been relying fairly heavily on backfilling that with some immigrants.

The Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program is one that I've spoken to them about a number of times. What's concerning for both him and myself is that the federal government made the decision to reduce the nominee allocation by 50%.

I'm curious: From your perspective, what kind of an impact does that decision have on us being able to backfill some of those skilled labour positions that do take three, four years to go through school, when we know that we need those people right now? We know that we're short by about 300,000 people in skilled trades. When we don't have the ability to take somebody from, perhaps, the UK or from France, where we know that the level of skill is going to be very, very similar to what it is here in Ontario, how does this have an impact on what we're trying to do, and on your ministry, to bring in that skilled labour that, quite frankly, will take us a couple of years to train?

**Hon. David Piccini:** Good question—a lot of things in there. Just a fun fact that I think I'd like to share, because I ask for monthly updates on apprenticeships: We've seen a 14% increase in plumber completions, an 18% in industrial millwright completions, a 31% increase in drywall, acoustic and prying applicators. That just gives you a flavour on the approach we're taking, because it is multi-faceted.

You talked about immigration, which I'll get to in a moment, but you have to expand capacity in Ontario. We're doing that in high schools. We're supporting

bringing more equipment into high schools through SDF projects with groups; bringing in new CNC machines to schools. We're supporting that sort of programming. We're really bringing back the trades into the class, mandating a trade tech course. The Level Up! program that I spoke to, getting hands-on experience—not just for kids, but targeting parents and grandparents.

But then you know the important role that immigration plays as well. The federal government is making changes to restore integrity to our immigration system. The cuts we saw in our provincial ability to nominate—I think we all recognize that the province is the best to determine what our labour market needs are. That's an agreement, a shared responsibility, but the formative role the provinces play has been one that dates back—Prime Minister Chrétien recognized it, Prime Minister Martin and successive Prime Ministers thereafter really, really recognized that.

When you cut our allocation in half, it has a real impact. It puts a strain and a challenge on officials, as well, in dealing with the tripling of high-risk applications—some of the challenges on integrity that we're seeing. But we've made a number of changes: strengthened the integrity, increased administrative monetary penalties, gone after bad actors.

I don't know if ADM Lee would like to add anything to that.

**Ms. Gloria Lee:** My name is Gloria Lee. I'm the assistant deputy minister for the global talent settlement services branch. My program area does deliver and administer the Ontario Immigrant Nomination Program.

We have introduced a number of improvements to really ensure that the program is responsive to the needs of employers while also protecting the integrity of the program. Over the last few years, we've introduced a number of improvements, including increasing the capacity of our investigations and enforcement and compliance unit.

Last year, we made over 576 visits on on-site inspections. We have also increased the number of staff that are available to go out and undertake those activities. We have introduced a number of improvements, such as setting up a process with the Minister of Finance to share tax data, so we can ensure that the information that we receive can be confirmed. Those are some examples of what we've done.

We also have introduced a number of legislative improvements through the working for workers packages that look at toughening sanctions, outcomes, banning, being able to ban people faster. All of those improvements we've introduced in the program.

We also recently introduced what's called our employer portal, and that really helps ensure that the limited nomination spots that we have go towards employers. They have to confirm they have an employer job offer to ensure that we are focusing on people who have jobs that are confirmed. Taken together, we continue to move forward with improvements to address the integrity of the program.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** MPP Saunderson?

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. How much time is left?

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** About five minutes.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Five minutes? Great. Thanks.

Minister, thank you very much for your presentation today, and thank you to your staff for being here.

You said something that resonated with me during your presentation, and that is, "Pride comes from joining the trades." My oldest son, Dylan, after doing a university degree, couldn't find a job, so he went back to do precision machining at Georgian College. He graduated in May and was starting work by July. When I look back to when I was in school, the trades were sort of considered as a second option, as a fall-back plan, as opposed to being given the full respect that they deserve.

I'm wondering if you can talk to the efforts of your ministry through the Level Up! trade fairs that you've talked about, in terms of educating kids, but also parents and grandparents, and also whether your ministry is tracking the success of that: how we're changing attitudes towards the trades and if we're seeing numbers increase. You've talked about some of the increases, but just looking at the Level Up! program and how that's impacted the people coming into the trades today.

1610

**Hon. David Piccini:** Great question. Last year, over 28,000 new apprenticeship registrations, of which 16,000 youth registered for apprenticeships—these are the sorts of metrics we use to make sure we're increasing the stats I just gave you earlier when I asked for those completions, because it's more than just registering; it's about tracking them to completion.

In our pre-apprenticeship funding and our Skills Development Fund, which the Auditor General noted, we've already implemented measures now tracking SINs. These are changes I brought in to make sure we track long-term employment outcomes to really ensure value for money, value for our training; to make sure we see long-term supports. At its core, it's not even just about offering the training; it's about making sure that training is having an impact and making sure we ensure retention long-term.

Without question, we are facing challenges today—workers across Ontario and across Canada. We are not immune from the global realities of a trade and tariff war on sectors that have been impacted. These workers want us to stick up for them, to stand up for them.

I'm glad we have a Premier doing something and standing up, versus just the sit-down approach, because clearly that's not working. You have to get on the radar of folks south of the border and make the case on why we're better together. Nine million wake up every morning in the States to produce goods for Canadian customers.

Why I relate that to this is that when we're firing on all cylinders—it worries me when I hear from employers that 80% of their book value right now is civil work. That's thanks to Premier Ford—the commitment to build a stronger Ontario—but we have to create the conditions to grow that, so that the private sector has the confidence in investing. The instability, the uncertainty that President



Trump has caused has an effect on private sector investment.

We're going to do our part, because notwithstanding the challenges we see on a year-over-year basis, we know one in three are retiring. We know we have to grow that talent pipeline. We know that when a journey person retires, you're not getting that same institutional knowledge and that skill set in a new apprentice, or even in a new journey person, for that matter.

So we've got to expand capacity, work on programs for retention, make sure we're supporting workers at every step. Again, a big dropout piece to support that retention and three-year apprenticeship was common-sense things like supporting the travel allowance, making sure that during their in-class portion of training, we're supporting them. We implemented things like wage subsidies for our skills development programming when you're on the job.

All of these things are helping people, helping them get a better job with a bigger paycheque. We are tracking that long-term and working with our partners like Assure and others on long-term labour market studying, planning and tracking.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you. You have 27 seconds.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** I think I'm going to use them.

I just wanted to say that I'm seeing in my riding the dramatic effects of these programs on the ground. We have boutique manufacturing with MacLean Engineering. It's making battery-operated mining machinery that's changing the world. They have a huge need for skilled labourers. We're seeing the demand, and the plan to meet that demand is critical.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** That's all of them. Thank you.

MPP West.

**MPP Jamie West:** Thank you, Minister, for your time today.

In the last round of questions, there was a lot about the SDF, the Skills Development Fund. I want to say we do support the fund itself. The concerns we have primarily are about the way it's been administered. More than 50% of low- and medium-ranking applications were pushed up. I'm sure there's a percentage of those where it makes sense, but when it's such a high number, it does cause concerns. I think what I'd say is, the glass is 49% full. We want to make sure it's as full as possible, because we think the funding and training is really important.

I want to go back to the last time we were in estimates and just read from Hansard just to set up the question for the future. Last year, September 17, we were in this very room, and I was asking about Scale Hospitality. I said, "We're talking about an organization that was awarded over \$5 million"—this specific organization. I'm not saying the Skills Development Fund is a bad thing; I'm saying that, in this instance, it feels unusual that the ministry's office would say, "Please review this one. It did not score very well. It did not score very high." For some reason, it made it over the bar and Ontario's taxpayers gave \$5,397,501.

Maybe if you could follow up in writing to find out how many people were helped through this. Did they hit their target with the 2,500 job seekers? Were they able to build the training institute? Because that was in their assessment for a while, that they could build a training institute using this money. You replied, but did not speak about SDF, so I'm not going to read that because I'll run out of time, but it is in Hansard.

Then, I said I'm not asking about that and I asked to reclaim my time. I said, "I'm just wondering if I could get in writing: What did the Ontario taxpayers get for this investment? And I understand this is important work. This was during COVID, following COVID.... This was an industry on life support. I'm not saying it's a bad investment, I just want to know, in this specific instance, what was the return on investment for Ontario's taxpayers?" That's all of it for Hansard.

I didn't receive a response, and it's been a year. Last year, I thought the funding was \$5,397. My understanding is that the funding for Scale Hospitality is now just shy of \$17 million. I am asking you, Minister: What was the return investment for the nearly \$17 million that Ontario taxpayers invested? How many people were trained through this? Did they hit their target with the 2,500 job-seekers? Were they able to build the training institute?

**Hon. David Piccini:** We trained workers on how to get jobs. They exceeded, is my understanding—because I went back and reviewed—their targets for numbers trained, exceeded their targets for adults with an identified disability trained, and so exceeded those targets.

I think, writ large, there are so many projects. As I said, when we assess it, I look at those broad priorities of government—advancing those priorities, making sure we have a fair number of construction projects that we're funding, a fair number of mining projects in the north, that we're not excluding areas. I'm proud that we are touching every single riding of this province; find me a fund where you make sure that happens. These are the factors I'm looking at to make sure that our training isn't exclusively in the GTA, but that we're reaching every corner of Ontario.

And of course, I'm glad you acknowledged hospitality, the sector that was hit hard during the pandemic. When I visited partners like Unite Here Local 75, the HTA, the training centre—

**MPP Jamie West:** I'm going to—sorry, just because of the time. I appreciated the answer. Would I be able to get this in writing? I asked for it last year. If you can just search for the numbers and provide it to me in writing, would that be okay?

**Hon. David Piccini:** I just gave the increase, the exceedance of the targets, and we'll continue working hard to share these stories, as we've done. All these announcements have been publicly made, and we stand with those partners—

**MPP Jamie West:** But, Minister, you didn't answer the questions directly. You said they exceeded the targets, but I wanted to know how many people were trained. Did they hit the target with the 2,500? I guess you answered that

one. And were they able to build that training institute? If you can't give it now, can you provide it in writing? Because I asked for it last year.

**Hon. David Piccini:** The training institute—as I said, I don't recall the specifics there. I can elaborate on the training institutes like the hospitality training academy at HTA—

**MPP Jamie West:** But for Scale Hospitality specifically, are you able to provide those?

**Hon. David Piccini:** Again, I don't recall in that specific training centre piece, but I do know—

**MPP Jamie West:** Would you be able to look it up and get back to me and provide it in writing?

**Hon. David Piccini:** I've answered on the key measures and the metrics that were exceeded—

**MPP Jamie West:** But you haven't answered the questions I asked you a year ago. These are the exact same questions; I copied and pasted them from Hansard. I asked for them in writing last year and you weren't able to provide them. I'm asking this time, a year later: Could you please provide that information to me? I can go through the Clerk; I can get the Clerk to follow-up with you. I'm just wondering if you could let me know. It's a substantial amount of money.

**Hon. David Piccini:** There are thousands of workers impacted in the hospitality sector.

**MPP Jamie West:** Let me just put it in context, okay? Scale Hospitality: They had three rounds of funding. In 2022-2023, they got \$5 million; in 2023-24, they got \$5,999,000; and in 2024-25, they got \$5,750,000. So that's a total—and I may have the rounding number off—that's just shy of \$16 million. But let's go with \$16,750,000.

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I know that if I bring my kids to a college and they do a two-year program, for the two-years, it's going to cost, out of pocket, \$2,400. So for that amount of money, I would be able to train 6,979 college students. In a three-year program, which costs \$3,600, I would be able to train 4,653 students. At a university, for a four-year program, it would cost, depending on what university, \$6,100, and I would be able to train 2,745.75—2,746 if you round it up—students.

In Scale Hospitality, when they got \$16,749,000, I think the people of Ontario—that's taxpayer dollars; what's the return on investment on them? How many people were trained? Did they hit their scale? Did they build the training infrastructure? What did the people of Ontario get back for giving almost \$17 million to Scale Hospitality? And it could be a great answer.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Point of order.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Point of order, MPP Smith.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** As the member pointed out, that was for three previous budget cycles. This is the estimates of the 2025-26 budget. I'm happy to hear the member talking about this; however, we are focused on the 2025-26 budget.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** I'm sure the member will realize that we're here for the 2025-26 estimates.

**MPP Jamie West:** Well, I'm concerned that we have a trend now of between \$5 million and \$6 million a year going to Scale Hospitality. In the future, are we going to be giving more money to Scale Hospitality when we, in a year now, haven't been able to say any of the metrics that were met, haven't been able to tell taxpayers: "For the \$5 million in 2022-23, you got—I won't tell you, as the Minister of Labour. In 2023-24, we gave them almost \$6 million, but I can't tell you what you got for that. In 2024-25, I've given them \$5,750,000, but we're not going to tell you what you get back for that as taxpayer dollars."

You can't go around talking about the Skills Development Fund and wondering why people are confused about the 51% that feel a little shady when you have numbers like this and you can't provide an answer. You didn't provide it in a year. I've asked, I don't know, four times already if you could provide it in writing. You danced all around that question. I don't know what's up with this. It seems like if I gave someone \$17 million, I would tell you exactly what you'd get back.

*Interjections.*

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

**Hon. David Piccini:** As I've said, thousands of workers have been trained, exceeding metrics of adults with disabilities, exceeding employment outcomes. And that's the key piece: exceeding employment outcomes.

**MPP Jamie West:** What was the outcome? What did they exceed?

**Hon. David Piccini:** I want to draw it back, because as minister, I want to know: If we're investing in construction training programs, for example, are we seeing an increase in the number of registrations and apprenticeships? I just gave that number: 28,000 new apprenticeship registrations, 16,000 of whom were youth. That is an over-a-decade high. That's telling you that these sorts of Skills Development Fund investments, programs like Level Up!—because I think it's a suite of things that you have to do—are having an impact, are having a real-life impact, resulting in improvements. That's the kind of thing I look for as minister.

**MPP Jamie West:** I only have five minutes left. If the standing orders were the way they used to be, I think we'd have a whole day here, but I only really get an hour to ask questions, so I just want to go onto the next questions on it.

Like I said, I'm in favour of the trades. We've talked lots about this. Level Up! in Sudbury was a great event. It was really exciting. It did a good job. I sent you some photos of that. I think it's a great thing. Again, the glass is 49% full. It's the 51% that was low- and medium-ranked, that got nudged up, that causes concerns and makes people and the taxpayers wonder what value they get for their money.

If you can't tell me that specifically, for SDF, what is the cost per student per course in general?

**Hon. David Piccini:** I think I have given some examples. I've said that we fund thousands of projects. I don't see all of them. But when I do look at it, I look for those priorities that I mentioned—how many adults living

with disabilities. I gave an example of a low-scoring project like Melly's Workplace, and the impact that they're having. They've exceeded their metrics.

So I think what folks want to know, what the Auditor General highlighted with KPIs is—folks want to know you're getting value for that money. I highlighted that and gave a very specific example of a project that's exceeding. I think this is the kind of thing we want to do—

**MPP Jamie West:** Chair, I've been asking questions for 11 minutes and I haven't gotten a single answer. Can I reclaim my time?

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Yes.

**MPP Jamie West:** Okay. So you won't tell me what it costs per student per course for SDF in general. You want to talk about the 49% of SDF that we're pretty much aligned with.

Our concern—and I think I share it with my colleagues—is that you have a really important fund that's being misused, looks like it's being misused, and the people of Ontario are going to think that SDF is a bad funding program because it's not going to the places that will be training people adequately.

So in terms of college programs, does SDF—in your ministry, do you track duplicate training, as the public colleges? And if not, why not?

**Hon. David Piccini:** So to be able to train, you have to have TDA, or training delivery agent status. I've spoken with our officials on our future labour market needs. We look at things like what's our wait time for in-class training before we allow someone to deliver that training. I don't think it's an either/or when it comes to training trades workers; I think it's an and.

I think unions felt ignored under previous governments for the important work that they do. I do think a common misconception is—unions train. We have training halls. And I know you know that, but I think a lot of Ontarians don't. They do great work, and there are employment outcomes. So when we talk about funding—it's a great use of funding to invest in IBEW, in LIUNA—

**MPP Jamie West:** Chair, I have about two minutes. I'm still not getting an answer.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Go ahead.

**MPP Jamie West:** Chair, let me explain why people are getting concerned in Ontario about SDF.

The leader of the official opposition, Marit Stiles, mentioned a lot of things already that seemed a little bit fishy. Your spouse lobbies for Career Colleges Ontario; that's an organization that was headed by the spouse of the former Minister of Labour prior to you taking on that role. And so that feels like maybe someone there has their thumb on the scale, right? Your mother-in-law was appointed to the Ontario Land Tribunal on October 17, 2023, about a month after you became the minister in the role.

These could all be happy coincidences. But when you're out there or you're trying to figure out how to pay for groceries and rent, when you're really feeling that pinch and you keep finding these happy coincidences where the Minister of Labour has record donations coming to his riding association, the Minister of Labour's friends

and family are all getting these benefits and the Minister of Labour is showing up at the hockey game on the ice, the floor seats, and going to Paris, it all becomes overwhelming for the average person.

You don't acknowledge that SDF needs a brighter future so that it's not 49% full; so that it's 100% full?

**Hon. David Piccini:** I think a few things: One, I think there was a time when we respected our personal families, but if we want to go there, I'm happy to answer about my family members. You're incorrect.

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

**Hon. David Piccini:** My mother-in-law and my wife are good women, allowed to earn an income and have a profession—

**MPP Jamie West:** Oh, 100%.

**Hon. David Piccini:** I make sure that all the right procedures are in place with respect to my wife. We take our work seriously.

I think that when we talk about the Skills Development Fund and the incredible work that's being done with our colleges, with our union partners, it's having a real impact on people's lives. The importance, when you consider the context of the trade war that we are in today—

**MPP Jamie West:** In 15 minutes, I haven't had one reply. I feel like I can't even get you to acknowledge your name. I've had zero replies on this. It's all been dancing around and—

**Hon. David Piccini:** Well, for folks watching, I think my name is on the bottom, but it's—

**MPP Jamie West:** I'm just saying, every time I ask you a question, you go somewhere else.

People are worried about the amount of money that's going into this. There's a scandal about this. People who don't pay attention to politics are like, "I cannot believe the next story that's come out here."

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** That concludes the time.

MPP Fraser.

**Mr. John Fraser:** Thank you very much for being here, Minister. Just to make sure we're clear: I think there's \$345 million that was spent in the latest round that wasn't included in the Auditor General's report that we're not talking about today, but we are talking about but we're not talking about. About 63% of that went to people who donated \$1.3 million to the Progressive Conservative Party. That doesn't smell right.

But actually, that's not what I want to talk about. I want to talk about the next \$700 million. If you take a look—and it's even in the Auditor General's report—we see what we would call the usual suspects. We saw them in the greenbelt. We saw them around ministerial zoning orders and maybe the Dresden dump—I think the Dresden dump too, right?

1630

They're names like Amin Massoudi, Michael Diamond, Nico Fidani-Diker—that sound familiar? But the most familiar name—or as I like to describe him, the shadow Premier, Kory Teneycke—got about \$100 million for his clients. That's a lot of money.

As a matter of fact, and I was saying this this morning: FGF Brands got a modest \$1.2 million. But what happened was they were in a video with the Premier. If you want to go and see it, it's on his YouTube. He has a lot of videos. You can go and see him at the bakery, and I'm sure it's quite entertaining, because he is very entertaining. But then after that, they hired Rubicon, Mr. Kory Teneycke—what a happy, happy coincidence. I asked the Premier this morning, and it's a fair question: Did somebody—when they were shooting the video; did they come to him after and tell him to call Kory? Because this is a bakery. They bake stuff. They bake Ace Bakery bread, which is great bread. But they don't know the lobbying world; that's not their thing. How did they find out?

When you look through some of these, like the shipyards and the boat yards, how do they know to go to Rubicon and Kory Teneycke, and how do they know which lobbyist to go to? How do they know who has applied? I know it doesn't say on the application, "If you're looking for some help, here are four or five names that might be able to help you." This is generally what you do when they're not-for-profit corporations, but these folks aren't.

I guess my first question to you is, have you ever pointed someone, anybody, in the direction—with regards to government, whether it has to do with the Skills Development Fund, but most importantly—of Rubicon Strategy or Kory Teneycke?

**MPP Mohamed Firin:** Point of order.

**Mr. John Fraser:** Who was that?

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** MPP Firin.

**MPP Mohamed Firin:** Thank you, Chair. We're here to talk about the 2025-26 budget and estimates. I urge that we focus all questions towards the 2025-26 budget. What the member opposite is talking about has nothing to do with the 2025-26 budget.

**Mr. John Fraser:** They're substituting players, but they're singing from the same hymn book, sir.

I will rephrase the question.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** I would just point out that the member should also sing from the same hymn book and stick with the estimates. I'm sure you will get back to them.

**Mr. John Fraser:** I'm going to. I'll just rephrase my question.

It's in the context of—I guess where we're going to get to, you wouldn't answer that question anyway. The next one was: Did anybody from your office? But you probably wouldn't have answered that anyway.

I guess the thing is, going forward for this \$700 million—because I could ask about the \$345 million or \$342 million or whatever it is that's gone out, and who was the lobbyist. It's not me talking about the lobbyists. I'm sure you've read the full Auditor General's report from cover to cover and then back again. It talks about the effects of lobbyists.

It's so unusual that people in this field will go out and specifically hire a certain company or group of companies when they don't normally do it. So somebody is saying,

"You should be doing this; if you want to get this, you should be doing that." I'm not saying it's you, Minister. But I think that what my question really is is, how do we stop that from happening? Because it is.

**Hon. David Piccini:** Just to answer your question directly: The answer is no. What I've pointed out and what I do want to say to the member, because I do understand the member is zeroing in on one specific thing: Through the course of my visits to folks who've received SDF funding, I've encountered former staff members of his. But it sort of came up in passing where they would say, "Hey, I used to work in the Legislature." "For whom?" and it was for that member and his party, and that's nice. People are allowed to have careers after. That's not a factor in what we do.

What I'm simply trying to point out—

**Mr. John Fraser:** Actually, it's not about them having careers; it's about real people—the 700,000 people—who don't have a job getting a job. What it looks like you're doing is somebody has got to go out and get somebody to advocate to you—not to the public servants; to you and your office. That doesn't smell right. You're doing a public good. They're looking for money from government. I'm not saying that that's you. I do have a concern about the conflict of interest that you have; I'm not saying that you've got a conflict here. That one is very clear. You told me—you told all of us on the radio, "Yes. I did this." I know there's going to be debate about that, but that's clear.

The question is, going forward, is there an expectation? Will the people who have lobbyists do better than the people who don't? Because the 700,000 people who don't have work can't afford Mr. Teneycke. That is my point.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** And, I submit, you should make the point through the Chair.

Minister.

**Hon. David Piccini:** Thank you, Chair.

So I'll repeat again: The answer is no. The point I was making is, regardless of political stripe, those things don't matter. And the point I was making is that I have seen people of a variety of political stripes, but that, again, does not matter, because what matters is the strength of those KPIs and are they achieving those outcomes—again, something the Auditor General spoke about.

What matters to me is that, when we have a trade war, we have a program to support steel workers. What matters to me is that we have a program that's going to get a next generation of workers to actually build the hospitals, build the long-term-care beds and stay true to that commitment we made. These buildings don't just appear; it takes men and women to actually build them. That's what we're focused on—whether it's that or whether it's health care workers who we're supporting and training.

One of the new things in the latest round of the Skills Development Fund Capital Stream is I've been engaged with a lot of hospitals, making sure we can support cutting-edge surgical procedures; making sure we're supporting research at a time when we're seeing, south of the border, cutbacks in research funding; making sure we're supporting funding like that—

**Mr. John Fraser:** I'm not sure this is germane to the question. I'll take my time back because I'm not sure this is germane to the question of the effect of lobbying on the future \$700 million which Ontarians are going to depend on.

I guess it's just really unfortunate that somebody has to go out and hire a lobbyist to influence a decision that has clearly been done—overriding the expert, excellent advice of the public servants in your ministry. You would agree, which makes me wonder why you overruled them in the first place.

I just want to move on to something totally different. My colleague Ms. Brady, MPP for—

**Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady:** Haldimand–Norfolk.

**Mr. John Fraser:** Haldimand–Norfolk—how could I forget?

She talked about the surplus in WSIB. I do know sort of towards the end of 2017-18, the unfunded liability, that debt, was getting shrunk; that there were surpluses and you have returned them to employers. I can understand why you're doing that. This is not directed at you; it's directed, actually—it's Ministers of Labour, since I talked to a Minister of Labour about this. It is one thing to give money back. There's another piece, which is that you have to take a look at: "Are my risk profiles okay? Am I covering people okay? Am I covering everybody that we can cover?"

Because the point of WSIB was it was actually supposed to be for everybody, right? And it got limited. So there were these weird things that happened where people are doing the exact same work as other people, but by virtue of their employer, they're not covered. So there's a question as to whether you can reassess risk profiles, maybe reduce your cost on them and include more people. I think that's a good thing. I mean, WSIB is not a Liberal idea, not a Conservative idea—it might have been—but it's an idea—

*Interjection.*

**Mr. John Fraser:** Yes. Well, It was the turn of the century. There were a few things happening back then.

But you know what I'm saying, Minister: We do it for each other. It's a good thing, so that people can go to work knowing that if something happens to them on the job, they'll be okay. You know exactly where I'm going and what I'm going to talk about right now.

To be fair to you, Minister, because I've been a bit hard on you today—that's what my job is; I won't stop. But on this one, I've talked to ministers from Kevin Flynn to you. I know you've talked to me, and you said this is something that you're considering and that you're looking at.

**1640**

Mr. Hardeman will understand this: I've had a private member's bill that involves PSWs, developmental service workers and youth services workers in residential settings who aren't covered because their employer is not the province of Ontario. If you're in that setting and you're at the William E. Hay Centre in Ottawa, you're covered. You're full WSIB. If you're doing the same work—it's in retirement homes as well too, so it's not all provincial

matters. People are doing the same work. If you're in a retirement home, you're pretty close to what people are doing in long-term care, and they're schedule 1.

I introduced the bill six times. I have debated it twice. Every minister said respectfully, "Yes, I'm interested in doing it. We should do it"—every minister, because it's the right thing to do. I know that it's hard because, in the grand scheme of things, there's a lot of big stuff out there. It's a small group of people. But I'll tell you why it's important: These workers—mostly women—caring for the people we care for most, because of their pay often work two or three jobs. If they get injured on one, they don't get paid for the one. They don't get paid for the number two or the number three. The coverage isn't as good. So that puts them at risk, and it's unfair, because if they're working in a group home that's owned by the province or a detention centre, they're covered.

As you can tell, I'm just reminding you in this very public way about it, and you have, in fairness, said positive things to me, and I take you at your word. So I am pushing on this. I'm going to debate it a third time—and I hope I don't have to. I can do another bill. The member here has done the same thing. Sometimes you stick with the same thing until you get it.

I guess my point on the surplus, outside of this thing that I want you to do, is—are we thinking about covering other workers because we have a surplus, because we can adjust our risk profiles and our costs to include more people, so that more people will be protected? So you won't have a woman in a retirement home who is a PSW hurting herself and losing two thirds of her income because she's only getting paid for one? They don't have the same coverage. It's not fair. I don't know all the workers in his province who are in that situation, but I'm sure there's more than that.

What I'm asking you to do—and you don't have to answer me today; you don't have to say yes or no. I'm not asking you to pass the bill or do that—I am, actually; I shouldn't say that. But I'm not asking you to say yes or no today. What I'm asking is that you consider not just returning the surplus to employers, but think of who else we can cover, how we can cover people better across the board, not just certain sectors—because we kind of do that. We kind of focus—not the only government—on certain sectors. They are important, but then you have these women. It's not fair.

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

**Mr. John Fraser:** I'm done.

**Hon. David Piccini:** I think you haven't asked for lip service, because we've spoken about this, but I want to point to action. Your direct question on whether this government has shown they are willing to expand coverage and expand the supports—we have, and we have shown that. It's been through successive bills, and the gentleman sitting right next to you knows about that, because we've expanded supports for people who otherwise wouldn't get it.

In the example of firefighters, they did not get support; we expanded it, and these are new families. The MPP from

Hastings–Lennox and Addington, MPP Bresee, brought a wife in who had tried and came to this place, as other workers have that you’ve met with that you alluded to. I just wanted to answer this in, hopefully, a collegial way, as I’m always committed to expanding that.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** I do wish you’d left him more time. That concludes the time, so we will now go to MPP Brady.

**Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady:** We’re all aware of the work undertaken on interprovincial barriers. You spoke about it this afternoon, Minister, and I applaud this.

This afternoon, however, I met with members of the Ontario Dental Association who were telling me that there’s currently a shortage of 5,400 hygienists in Ontario and 3,400 dental assistants. They’d be part of that vacancy number of 165,000. The situation is exacerbated by a limited supply of dental assistant training programs in Ontario. I was heartened to hear that the ministry is expanding access to training, and I hope dental sees the benefit of those efforts.

HARP is the Healing Arts Radiation Protection program; it’s a mandatory program in Ontario for dental assistants who are operating X-ray equipment. We’ve gone through with the labour mobility legislation, but here we are with dental assistants waiting at the border, wanting to come to Ontario and work, and we tell them they’re not qualified unless they pay \$9,000 for the HARP certification. Many of them don’t have the \$9,000.

We heard from Minister Fedeli yesterday in this room, and he was saying that we’re all one country, so why do certain things and people work in one province and not another? He was saying it was silliness, and I would agree with that. I question how different dental equipment can be from one province to another. Teeth are teeth, albeit some nicer than others. I do know that the ODA asked your ministry last year to recognize certification from other provinces, and they were disappointed their request was not considered.

I’m curious, Minister, if this was an oversight by the government. Or can the minister please tell me whether or not dental assistants—why they can’t be treated like other professionals when it comes to labour mobility in Ontario?

**Hon. David Piccini:** Excellent question. I will answer, and then I’m going to ask one of our officials to come up to join me.

I know that when we looked at labour mobility, one of the key things that has often been—in particular in the health space, which is why Minister Jones oversees that and we work very closely, when you’re putting people under and administering certain drugs, we’ve got to make sure that that training on how to use that has occurred elsewhere. Those are some of the factors that when we brought this in, when it comes to—we want to improve labour mobility, but it cannot be compromising health and safety, which is why when I talked about health and safety harmonization, we talked about how rising tides raise all ships.

I don’t know if anyone wants to talk on the dentistry piece particularly—

**Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady:** That’s okay, actually. Will you commit, though, to having maybe another look at this request? Because I would assume that—I understand the health-related concerns from the Ministry of Health if you’re administering anaesthetic and things like that, but I would assume that we could look at that training. I understand the problem is HARP and it has to do with X-ray equipment. I’m wondering if the ministry will commit to having a look at the ODA again, so we can help close that labour gap in the dental industry.

**Hon. David Piccini:** Yes, I indicated to the ODA when I bumped into them today that I would sit down with them, and they mentioned this issue, admittedly in passing. Because of estimates and things today, I didn’t have the full schedule to accommodate a meeting with them, but I did give them my card—my cellphone—and said, “Let’s sit down,” as is the Doug Ford way: “Here’s my cellphone. We’ll sit down. We’ll get it done.”

**Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady:** Okay. I’ll switch gears: I’ve been hearing from employers who are frustrated by financial and time costs, administrative burdens associated with taking on apprentices. Other common complaints involve—

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

**Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady:** —the variable skills and readiness of apprentices, communication gaps and the inconsistent training quality.

I’m going to skip down to my question here on this: I understand that there are a lot of apprentices who are actually having a hard time getting an exam site, getting the tests done. They wait sometimes nine to 12 months to actually take the exam.

**Hon. David Piccini:** We have moved the exams from direct administration by government to Skilled Trades Ontario, as is the case with many regulated bodies, and the certification. We acknowledge that there were challenges through the transition; however, I’m pleased to say today we’re expanding the number of exam sites.

We’ve worked with some of these case files from offices like yours and mine and others to assist—

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

We’ll now go to MPP Racinsky.

**Mr. Joseph Racinsky:** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for coming this afternoon. To your ministry staff: I really appreciated the update and all the information about the incredible work that you’ve been doing and are continuing to do, in skilled trades and in other ways, supporting workers.

In your remarks, you mentioned the skilled trades capital projects. Just a couple of weeks ago in my riding, Landscape Ontario broke ground on their new training facility that they’re building, with the ministry’s support. I’ve got peers, young people in Halton Hills who are apprenticing as electricians, and they’re actually able to work on that site in Halton Hills, building that facility. It’s all part of our government’s plan to build and to support workers in that way as well. Landscape Ontario actually

also receives skills development funding, \$3 million for their GROW program.

**1650**

The opposition doesn't seem to ever want to talk about the great things that this program is doing, but I know a gentleman in Acton; he's middle-aged with kids in school, and he was working in the video game creation sphere. For whatever reason, that business is not going very well, so he was looking for different employment and was able to go through the GROW program at Landscape Ontario, which is supporting hundreds of workers through that program. He went through the training and is now able to find employment working at a landscaping company, which there are dozens of in my riding and in the outskirts of the GTA. Landscaping is a huge industry with dozens of businesses, and now he's working for a sprinkler installation company—just a fantastic story of how our government is supporting workers.

My question is about the Working for Workers 7 bill that is currently going through the Legislature. During these economic challenges, what is Bill 30, Working for Workers 7, doing to help workers and employers navigate tariffs, mass layoffs? How is Bill 30 also cracking down on bad actors that are creating fraudulent job postings online, duping people out of millions of dollars? If you could elaborate on those two points in Working for Workers 7, please.

**Hon. David Piccini:** Through you, Chair, to the member: Great question. I appreciate the stories. I know often it irritates the opposition to hear about the actual stories of the people being impacted, because these are real people. I struggle to think of any program that's had this sort of impact on people's lives the way that our Skills Development Fund program has.

I know that this bill puts in place measures to support in the case of any form of layoff. I want to be very direct here, because the Premier has been out with our automotive sector, with the steel sector to fight for those jobs, to keep those jobs here in Ontario, in Canada.

I have a difficult job, and in the case where we've seen, over successive governments, where there is either a temporary layoff or retooling, it's not good enough just to scratch your head when that happens and say, "Oh, I'll start working on a plan." You actually have to have one now. Prepare for the worst. That's the difficult job that ministry officials and I have to do every day.

So we've put in place measures to greater protect workers, to greater ensure that wraparound supports are there for them in the case of either a layoff or in the case of a retooling. We sat down with those labour leaders to say in these affected sectors, "What else can we do?" The changes to support workers are a great example of that, expanding the suite of supports. We actually made it.

I know over the course of today, there's been a lot of partisanship. My motto and our method as a government has always been to set that aside, and the gentleman who stood at the table was actually a member of the NDP party executive. We stood behind a podium together to make

that announcement because, again, those things don't matter. We're here to support workers.

Support on bad actors, in particular in our immigrant nominee program—we didn't have a number of measures in place. We didn't have the ability to go after bad, unscrupulous actors the way we today do. We didn't have the ability to call in applicants for interviews the way we now do today. We didn't have the ability to level the administrative monetary penalties. So, we've been very clear for bad actors, be it a bad-actor employer or a consultant, that we will, and we do have the tools to, both protect the individual that is being scammed but also preserve the integrity of the system.

This is a system where we've seen an increase in the demand because of the federal government changes, because of the fact that they've pursued an unsustainable levels plan, which is the plan under which we see arrivals into Canada.

When we talk about the number of unemployed, when we talk about the number needing family doctors, the one piece we're failing to acknowledge is the massive population growth. It's not a result of anything other than the fact that we have seen a significant increase in arrivals. With it comes the unique challenges of trying to find housing, trying to find health care.

These are all things we've advocated to the federal government. When you take into account that levels plan, something they never consulted us on—I will always recognize when they do something well, and they did this year, finally, the first time since I've been minister. Speaking with previous ministers of all stripes, it's been a while.

We've asked them to take into account health care, to take into account education capacity. Imagine the challenges of a teacher and five new students joining who don't speak the language. These are real challenges. Imagine the need for family doctors, the acuties of needs of people coming in.

So these are things that we are putting in our Working for Workers bills. What I like about it is it's not one and done; it's a fact that we have said we will have successive opportunities to implement a variety of progressive measures to support workers.

**Mr. Joseph Racinsky:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** MPP Rosenberg.

**MPP Bill Rosenberg:** Minister, thank you for this afternoon, for what you've presented us today.

I had the opportunity to visit one of our skilled trades fairs this fall. What a great opportunity for our future workforce. Technology has opened their minds to the opportunities that are available. The interactive models that we've seen at the fairs—the interest was high, and it's invaluable when we're trained to get kids involved in the future.

Earlier, you talked about protective gear for women. While I was at that fair, there was a start-up company that was directly making and producing protective clothing for

women. That just shows you a little spin-off of what can possibly happen at these fairs.

We know there has been stigma attached to the skilled trades, maybe one of the reasons why Ontario's youth don't consider the skilled trades as a career option. What are you doing to break this stigma and encourage youth to enter the skilled trades?

**Hon. David Piccini:** Thank you, MPP. Through you, Chair: Thank you for the question and your shared work in breaking down those barriers and tackling the stigmas.

There's no one silver bullet. It's a suite of things you have to do. You have to ensure greater exposure at the elementary and high school level, which is what we're doing through the tech classes. You have to see more people that you want to become. We are doing that with the Level Up! career fairs, where youth get to come face to face with the people in whose footsteps they may want to follow. It's having a real impact in seeing those people and engaging, having conversations. What I love about it, and what we as a ministry have ensured, is that it's hands-on learning and we're forcing the interactive nature of these exhibits at Level Up!.

One of the recent changes we brought in was an evening component to target parents, recognizing that we've got a province of people from diverse backgrounds; we've got differing attitudes from older generations to younger generations. That's the beauty that is this province. But to tackle some of the previously associated stigmas, we said, "Hey, let's bring in parents. Let's bring in grandparents." Let's see, hands-on, what you can do day to day. Let's talk about our commitment to health and safety. Let's give you a chance to try a trade. And trades are more than just construction, right? We've got hairstyling and so many diverse trades. That's been a real game-changer for parents.

You want to know that it's working. I mentioned a statistic to you, a record number of youth registering for apprenticeships. That's not a coincidence; that's a result of the suite of things this ministry has done to greater expose youth. I think that is so important when we're promoting career pathways. For too long, this wasn't viewed as a career pathway. These are careers. These are men and women who are building Ontario.

Without a strong economy, we don't have any of the things we need. Construction is so key to a strong economy. Our skilled trades are key to a strong economy. We're promoting them and increasing the number of youth in these careers, because AI is not going to replace your pipefitter or steamfitter. AI is not going to replace forming and doing underground work etc. I think this is important. Our stats are showing an increase. We've been promoting this, marketing it, exposing it to youth in a variety and suite of ways, and it's having an impact.

1700

**MPP Bill Rosenberg:** Thank you, Minister. And I think you were looking directly at me when you talked about the trades with the hairdressers, and I'm glad it's a trade.

*Laughter.*

**Mr. Logan Kanapathi:** How much time?

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** You've got a minute and a half, MPP Kanapathi.

**Mr. Logan Kanapathi:** Thank you, Minister, for that presentation, and thank you, all the staff, for being here. We shared a lot of information. Thank you.

I mentioned before, Minister, that my city, Markham, is the most ethnically diverse riding—not only city and riding, but the most ethnically diverse city in all of Canada, according to the census.

The SDF project is working very well in some of these areas. For example, I mentioned it before: the SDF project, Trillium Med Village funding, \$851,000—a program to train internationally trained nurses. This never happened before, Minister. It's the first time we're training the internationally trained nurses into the system. The door was closed all these years.

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

**Mr. Logan Kanapathi:** They are working on the assembly line. Could you elaborate on that? It's the best program. It's working. Who is the Skills Development Fund training? Could you provide examples of the type of workers and sectors supported through this program?

**Hon. David Piccini:** Yes, absolutely. I think the beauty of the program is that it is impacting people in a wide variety of disciplines. It has supported PSWs in communities like mine, like yours. Nurses—it has reduced dependency on temporary agency staffing, I think that's something we all recognize the need to reduce; we've talked about it in the Legislature.

But we're supporting innovative technology like WorkersFirst, which was in partnership with SEIU. We're supporting training. You saw the Minister of Health talk today at length about the record number of people in licensure in this province and the work we're doing to provide—

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time for this presentation and this round this afternoon, so thank you very much, Minister, for your attendance. On behalf of the committee, I want to thank you for being here. I also want to make sure you extend the thank-you to all the members of the ministry who are here to advise us, going through this.

**MPP Jamie West:** Chair, can I—it's not about the estimates. It's just that I misspoke earlier.

Earlier, I had said that I only have 60 minutes to speak. I was speaking about it in the past, when it was two rounds of 30 minutes, but it's two rounds of 15 minutes, so I only have 30 minutes to speak. I just wanted to clarify that.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Okay.

This concludes the committee's consideration for the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote?



Shall vote 1601, ministry administration program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1602, pay equity commission, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1603, labour relations program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1604, occupational health and safety program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1605, employment rights and responsibilities program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1607, Employment Ontario, carry? All those in favour? Opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1608, global talent and settlement services, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development to the House?

*Interjection.*

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Shall the Chair report? That's the question. You're doing better at voting than I am at asking.

All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

That concludes our consideration of this ministry's estimates. I'd like to thank Minister Piccini, as I already did, and everyone else who was here and participating.

There being no further business, this committee stands adjourned until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, November 12, 2025, when we will consider the estimates of the Ministry of Finance.

*The committee adjourned at 1706.*





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