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Standing Committee on Justice Policy

Estimates

Ministry of the Attorney General

Comité permanent de la justice

Budget des dépenses

Ministère du Procureur général

1st Session
44th Parliament

Wednesday 5 November 2025

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Mercredi 5 novembre 2025

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Clerk: Isaiah Thorning

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
JUSTICE POLICYCOMITÉ PERMANENT
DE LA JUSTICE

Wednesday 5 November 2025

Mercredi 5 novembre 2025

The committee met at 1500 in committee room 2.

ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Good afternoon, everyone. The Standing Committee on Justice Policy will now come to order. The committee is about to consider the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of the Attorney General for a total of two hours.

From the ministry, we are joined by the Honourable Doug Downey, the Attorney General of Ontario, and ministry officials and staff.

I'd like to take this opportunity to remind everyone that the purpose of the estimates committee is for the members of the Legislative Assembly to determine if the government is spending money appropriately, wisely and effectively in the delivery of the services intended. As the Chair, I will allow members to ask a wide range of questions pertaining to the estimates before the committee to ensure they're confident the ministry will spend those dollars appropriately. What I mean, by way of clarity, is that you're asking questions that relate to the vote line.

In the past, members have asked questions about the delivery of similar programs in previous fiscal years, about the policy framework that supports a ministry approach to a problem or service delivery, or about the competence of a ministry to spend their money wisely and efficiently. However, it must be noted that the onus is on the members asking the questions to make the questioning relevant to the estimates under consideration.

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 that the ministry can respond accordingly.

Are there any questions from members before we start?

I am now required to call vote 301, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement from the minister for up to 20 minutes.

Minister, the floor is yours, and welcome to the standing committee. If you would be good enough, please, to introduce your deputy minister. And, Minister, when you have two minutes left in your presentation, I'll let you know.

Over to you, sir.

Hon. Doug Downey: Thank you very much, Chair. It's always a pleasure to be here at estimates. I look forward to our discussions.

My deputy minister is David Corbett, the Deputy Attorney General. It's almost part of his name now—when I say his name, I also say he is the best deputy in our provincial government, and very well-respected outside of government, with a very long private sector career. He is loaning his expertise to government and I'm forever grateful for that.

We have an excellent team under the deputy, and some of them are here physically, some of them are watching. If I don't have the answer at my fingertips, I will turn to them so that we can get answers as quickly as we can.

That's sort of my preface in terms of who we are. I guess I just want to talk a little bit about what's happening in the bigger context and then I'm going to come down into some specifics. I expect that we'll talk about some of those specifics more robustly as we go through.

It is without exaggeration to say that Ontario's justice system is undergoing the largest expansion of capacity seen in decades, if ever. It's all part of our plan to help the courts keep pace with the mounting pressures, increasing access to justice and protecting communities at the same time.

I'm eager to share an update on the work that our ministry has been doing. The Ministry of the Attorney General's last estimates appearance had some great things to report and there are even greater things as I sit here today. We have made significant progress in strengthening the administration of justice, and it's already made a difference in reducing the backlog of cases, protecting the communities and taking care of victims.

But first, I want to take an opportunity to recognize some of the crucial partners without whom we would not have achieved the success that we have. The Court of Appeal, the Superior Court of Justice, and the Ontario Court of Justice, both the judges and the justices of the peace, are just some of our steadfast allies in this tremendous modernization we're working on to have implemented across the system. I will get into some details and the roles that they played and the ways that they've supported and ways in which they have led.

We, of course, have beyond the institutions of the courts and the individuals, the Chief Justices, all three of whom are just excellent.

We have our private sector partners, and in the building today, who I think a lot of people will have met with, are the Ontario Trial Lawyers Association. We have the Ontario Bar Association, the Law Society of Ontario, the Toronto Lawyers Association, the Advocates' Society and FOLA, the Federation of Ontario Law Associations, that have members across the province.

Just last week, I was in Thunder Bay at one of their seminars where they were doing continuous learning and professional development. The engagement of the profession in the things that are happening in our court system is really, I think, unprecedented. I was on the other side of that for years, before I was elected, as somebody who was helping to articulate the change that was needed through those organizations. So it is just such a privilege to be able to be on this side of it to pull those changes through. And we are making tremendous progress. I'll get into some of that.

One of the key priorities is to ensure the sustainability of the justice system and to keep people safe. We're making great strides in reducing the backlog that was exacerbated due to the pandemic. We first launched a criminal-court-backlog-reduction strategy in 2021, and by 2027-28, that fiscal year, we will have invested over half a billion dollars to address the backlog.

By allocating up to 52 new judges—and I want to put that in context. We had a complement of approximately 300 Ontario Court judges. Most of you will know, but some people watching may not—I know we have a big viewership for this hearing of non-lawyers. That's sarcasm. We have 52 judges added to a complement of approximately 300. That is a significant growth. But the magic is not in those 52 judges, or in any one of those judges. The magic is that the complement that goes with a judge when they're appointed are seven full-time staff. Those could be crown prosecutors, they could be victim service workers, they could be any number of court clerks, stenographers, any number of support structure to go with those. You can do the math: 52 times seven is about 350. But in fact, we have added 700 full-time staff, most of which have been hired already, although we don't have all the judges in seats yet. In the first tranche of 25, we have 21 of them in seats—we're moving on to the second tranche—and getting them up to speed is critical.

Those 52 new judges at the Ontario Court level are in addition to the associate judges. Associate judges are appointed to the Superior Court. The way the Constitution breaks down, we have the Superior Court judges appointed by the federal government, but I have a mechanism to add associate judges to that complement. We have done that; we've added nine more, actually, over the last while to create capacity at that level. So we're doing everything possible to create capacity.

But I want to come back to this number, this over half-a-billion-dollar investment that will be in place, in total, although we've spent a lot already. We understand what \$1 million is, right? You can imagine what a million-dollar house is. A million-dollar house—if you take \$1 million, it's 11 and a half days in seconds, just to give you a frame

of reference. But \$1 billion is a drastically different number: \$1 billion in seconds is 32 years. So when I talk about \$526 million, half a billion dollars, this is a sizable investment.

This is new money. This is not reallocated money. This is money that the Minister of Finance, the President of the Treasury Board and the cabinet have seen the need for, have signed off on and we're implementing. This is exciting stuff in the in the legal world in Ontario. I'll talk about context in a moment, about what that means across the country and where we sit, if I have time left.

1510

These investments help keep the pace with the growing number of complex cases we're seeing, as cases are getting more complex—things like body cams, disclosure requirements, all of that. If you're interested, we can get into that.

It's about ensuring we fill the positions quickly. I mentioned that we have 21 of the 25 already in place. Back in May, we also announced the appointment of 42 new justices of the peace—just this past May—and they joined the 45 that were added in 2024. So that's 87 new justices of the peace just in the last year and a bit. That total complement is also about 300 individuals who are sitting on the bench as justices of the peace.

We are adding capacity as fast as we can. As I expect you know, there is another call to add more justices of the peace to replace for retirement and whatnot. That's open now, so I can't say much about it except that the intake is happening. I don't have a line of sight to how we're doing there, but I expect, based on past patterns, there will be a high level of interest.

Ultimately, the investments and increases in judicial capacity and staffing help ensure the cases are heard faster. They prevent cases from being stayed, and they reduce the backlog across the system.

In fact, based on the internal crown reporting, the number of cases that are stayed due to section 11(b), the Jordan guidelines, are less than one twentieth of 1%. So of the hundreds of thousands of cases that we had last year, 145 were stayed. Any one is not good; any one is not acceptable. But I can tell you we are on track for that number to be lower this year, like last year's number was lower than the year before. This is because of the investments in the capacity and the co-operation with our justice partners.

We're working closely with the municipal partners to administer the Provincial Offences Act courts as well as the Ontario Court of Justice to address the backlogs.

Our government is building capacity across the system for the reasons that I've already laid out. While we do that, we also want to make sure that people have access to justice.

As part of this commitment, I recently announced long-overdue changes to juror compensation. Juries hadn't really been looked at from a financial perspective for a very long time.

We did look at juries a couple of years ago, and we changed how we produced the jury roll. The jury rolls used to be pulled off property records, and that, by definition,

had an inherent bias. It excluded renters. It excluded individuals on reserves. It excluded a number of people, so we changed that. We went to health records, to health cards, and that has made a difference in terms of achieving the kind of balance that we need.

The recent change that I announced had to do with juror pay. It's really astonishing that it hadn't been looked at since 1989. Under that structure, jurors received a total for the first 10 days of trial of zero dollars for their time and their public service. Between 11 and 49 days, they would receive \$40 per day, and from that day, day 50, jurors were then paid \$100 per day. In some cases, people did not receive any compensation for fulfilling their civic duty while making personal and economic sacrifices.

That pay only kicks in if there's not an arrangement through work that they will be otherwise paid, so there's no double-dipping. That's the responsible way to go forward, and it's the way it has always been.

That's why, as of October 1 this year, we increased juror compensation pay to \$120 per day from day one—no zero-dollar days. It is long overdue. These are the kinds of things that we're looking at. We're looking at all the participants in the justice system to make sure that people have access and can play their part.

We also are concerned and have made changes in terms of the safety and security of everyone who enters Ontario's courthouses. You may be surprised to know that the Ministry of the Attorney General is the second-largest land manager in government. With that, we have the responsibility to make sure that we have safety across the system in coordination with the Solicitor General's office. It includes everything from our permanent courthouses to our fly-in locations, anywhere that court proceedings are being held.

It reinforces our ongoing commitment to strengthen security within the court locations not just for the physical place but for the people who are there. So you will see an increasing number of single-entry courthouses with magnetometers or wands and individuals to make sure the proper screening is done.

Now, Mr. Chair, I'm only halfway through and on page four, so I hope I get a lot of questions. We have a lot to talk about.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Well, you have eight minutes left, sir.

Hon. Doug Downey: Yes, sir.

Our government is going to continue to deliver on calls to help build capacity and strengthen the administration to ensure the sustainability and the future of the system. Everything we do is with an eye to sustainability. These are not short-term things that will then go away. We are building in capacity that will be permanent.

In 2022, as part of our Justice Accelerated Strategy—in terms of bringing remote and in-person and online hearings, it was the right thing to do in 2021, and that strategy brought forward \$65 million over five years to support virtual and hybrid hearings. We have installed audiovisual technology in courtrooms across the province and provided training and support for the judiciary and

court staff. As of September of this year, more than 195 courtrooms have been equipped with technology to support hybrid hearings, and we are aiming to upgrade another 338 by next summer. These investments will undoubtedly ensure a more accessible, responsive and resilient court system.

Another key pillar of the Justice Accelerated Strategy is the landmark \$166-million investment, the Courts Digital Transformation Initiative. This was first announced in 2023, again, with the support of Treasury Board and the Minister of Finance and the cabinet and our government: a new amount of \$166 million, net new money, to invest in a court digital transformation that truly is that. It was announced in 2023. It will replace the paper-based procedures with a digital platform that will support enhanced access to justice. It will connect people to seamless single platforms, allowing them to file documents, access court case information, pay fees and access hearings—all online.

Now, some of you know I was a court clerk and a court registrar before I went to law school. I know something about paper—a lot of paper, missing paper. Really, the system was running over 95% paper-based, piled up in corners, piled up in files, missed under fax machines and under cabinets. This turns that on its head.

When I first started writing this and my team was writing it, it talked about, "This will do this and this will do that." Well, here is the good news: It's not past tense anymore. On October 14 of this year, we launched the courts digital transformation portal. To date, we have 11,000 registered users, having filed 19,000 documents in two and a half weeks here in Toronto. This is a remarkable, remarkable effort on behalf of many people, including the 100 people that gave up their Thanksgiving weekend to make sure that we launched this properly. You probably haven't heard of it, and that to me, in a digital transformation, is a success on its own, because it was unbelievably seamless. We can talk more about it. It was launched in Toronto for all lines of work, except for criminal; that will come on next. We will work out any tweaks that need to happen, and then it will scale across the province before the end of this decade.

I can tell you, I sat down a couple of days ago with the minister responsible from England and the advocate general, Baroness Scotland, and told them what we had done and they could not believe it. They told me that they spent \$2 billion years ago on a system that is not as good as this system for \$166 million dollars. So we are in fact deploying the resources properly on behalf of the people of Ontario.

This is a significant milestone, and the recent expansion is going to help self-represented individuals. It will help people who are represented. It will help everybody in the province, and I'm really proud of our team for doing this. This is a landmark piece. Several governments have tried electronic deployment, and so I can't say enough about how wonderfully this has gone off.

We're going to talk—perhaps, if the questions come up—about public safety and what we're doing in that

space, making sure that we have our serious violent crime bail teams coordinated with the Solicitor General's office and how that's working, the provincial guns-and-gang support units, and the major auto theft prosecution response teams. And we recently introduced a cryptocurrency and cyber crime special prosecution team to match the police specialization to make sure that we're in the right places, doing the right thing, dealing with money laundering, dealing with the movement of illicit goods and funds. All of these teams are not trials; these teams are permanent, they are professional and they are making a difference. The rest of the country is turning to our teams to say, "How are you doing this? What are best practices? How is this going to work?" We are thrilled to be able to share that across the country. Our guns-and-gangs unit is respected—top of the heap.

1520

Public safety is always going to be a priority for us. We will continue to put resources in and operationally change how we do things to make sure that we're getting the best bang for our buck. But it's not just in public safety. It's in dealing with people who come before the courts.

I want to talk about justice centres at some point during this. I'm clock-watching now. I can tell you, the justice centres—let me give you one piece: the London Justice Centre—this is if you could put all the social services into a courthouse so you can deal with why somebody is there as well as what they did. This is not diversion; there are consequences for actions. But you're meeting the needs of individuals beyond the incident.

We have had 2,500 individuals go through the London Justice Centre. Recidivism rates are normally 30% to 40%; in those 2,500, the recidivism rate is 11%. That is a net difference of 900 people in five years—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Two minutes, Minister.

Hon. Doug Downey: —and I'll come back. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You still have two minutes.

Hon. Doug Downey: Two minutes? All right. I'm going to finish this. That's 900 people that have not come back into contact with the law in those five years. If that is not success, I don't know what else is. That is a remarkable way to do things.

We got the idea from Red Hook, New Jersey. We have scaled it into Kenora after London. If you ever get the chance to see the Kenora Justice Centre in action—I was up there in Thunder Bay, hearing from the people who are in the courtroom. What they do is, they're changing lives: hundreds of individuals back in school that could not even see school from where they were in life—just absolutely changing lives. This is a very important initiative and we're seeing the results. It's a great investment.

I haven't even gotten, Mr. Chair, to the Victim/Witness Assistance Program. We allocated \$55 million to victim services through that program. I'll have lots more to say as we go through.

I'm sure we're going to talk about the Landlord and Tenant Board. I would be thrilled to give you an update on the tremendous progress that we're making in that space.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Great. Thank you very much for your presentation.

We'll now begin with the question-and-answer segment in rotations of 15 minutes for the official opposition members, 15 minutes for the third-party member and 15 minutes for the government members for the remainder of the allotted time.

The official timekeeper for this meeting is the Clerk; that means questions and it means answers. As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

Please note: As the Chair, if a member seeks to reclaim the floor during a rotation while the minister is responding, I will recognize the member and allow them to reclaim the floor to ask a new question.

For the deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers and staff that are here, if you're asked to come to the table by either the minister or the deputy minister, please state your name and your title the first time that you speak so that we can accurately record in Hansard who we have before the committee.

I will now start with the official opposition. I have MPP Wong-Tam, please, when you're ready.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you to the Attorney General for his presentation.

I have a series of questions, and I hope that the answers are a little bit abbreviated just because you've noted there's not a lot of time. I think, in the future, if there is a desire to have a longer estimates process, hopefully the government-controlled committee would perhaps agree to that. But I did try.

To the Attorney General: It's been reported that 56% of criminal cases have been withdrawn, stayed, dismissed or discharged before a decision at trial. This is a number that goes back to 2020. I am trying to understand, based on the estimates that has been presented before us, what percentage of criminal cases have now been withdrawn, stayed, dismissed and discharged in this fiscal year?

Hon. Doug Downey: We have projections, but we're still in the fiscal year, so it's hard for me to give you a full number. But for context of what it means to have a case dismissed or withdrawn, there are any number of reasons—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I'm looking for an answer to my specific question, not a definition of why cases get withdrawn or dismissed.

Hon. Doug Downey: But I wouldn't want you to have a number out of context and then say, "Well, here's the number and here's why." I'm giving you the why.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Chair, the—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You're going to ask your question, but we're going to try to get an answer. We're not going to have interruption after interruption.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: To the Attorney General: We're now heading into the last two months of the year. You must have the ability to look back over the past 10

months. I suspect that the issues that are very serious pertaining to criminal charges, I believe that you would have a very keen interest in following those cases. What is that percentage? And if you do not know the exact number, what do you think it is?

Hon. Doug Downey: I never speculate. As you know—you've heard me answer before—I don't do hypotheticals; I don't speculate. But I will tell you this: We collect data—we collect a lot of data—but it is a centuries-old rule that I cannot release the data without the consent of the judiciary. So I'm not even in a position to give you that number as we sit here today.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question, please.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you, and just to note, Chair, that the Attorney General couldn't even give me an estimate of what, in the past 10 months, criminal charges have been stayed or withdrawn or discharged.

I suspect that if the number was 56% in 2020—I hope that it is much lower than that in 2025, recognizing that we are still in the middle of the year. But we're technically not; we're closer to the end of the year now.

I'm going to ask a question because I think public safety is top of mind for many Ontarians, certainly the majority of Ontarians that I've spoken to. They are perplexed on why the police officers, who seem to be doing their job, go off and investigate; there's enough evidence that's been collected that the crowns can then assess and it's now time to proceed; there's a likelihood of getting a verdict that is favourable; and then we hear about these constant cases being dropped.

Since the Attorney General wasn't able to speak to what's happening in the criminal courts, perhaps the Attorney General can speak to us about what's happening with respect to Highway Traffic Act charges that are being dropped. Last year, we saw that there were over 338,000 charges that were dropped before trial or during trial, and that represents over 13% of the highway traffic charges laid overall. I think that is accompanied with an investment of time with respect to the officers who have to place the charge. There is the collection of evidence; there's the preparation for trial; then there is the preparation for trial with the crown attorneys. Everybody gets there, including the court reporters and the justices, and then we hear, repeatedly, that charges are dropped, without really much explanation.

Can the Attorney General explain to us how 338,000 Highway Traffic Act charges being dropped in Ontario is acceptable?

Hon. Doug Downey: I hope in your social media clip you don't actually say that I can't answer it when I'm not permitted to answer it. I hope we're clear about that.

In terms of the Provincial Offences Act, you were a councillor in the city of Toronto, so I thought you would know that the prosecutors are of the city, and so the funding and the operation of those prosecutions are by the city.

You just heard me say that I've appointed 87 new justices of the peace in the last year and a bit, so we are creating the capacity at our side. At the same time, we are

also making sure that we are making the system work in cooperation with the municipalities. We meet with the municipalities at AMO and at ROMA—we have special tables. The Chief Justice of Ontario has travelled around Ontario over the last year talking to different stakeholders to make sure that we have our best foot forward.

But what you're talking about in terms of cases dismissed was a decision by a prosecutor in the city of Toronto. Whether you left that place funded properly or not, I will not opine on, but you certainly shouldn't be saying that it's provincial prosecutors who have done that.

1530

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, sir.

New question, please.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: To the Chair: Just a point of clarification for the Attorney General's own understanding, that this is information that's recorded across the province, not with respect to one local jurisdiction. I would hope the Attorney General takes it very seriously: that when it comes to law enforcement and abiding by the law, there is a suite of complement services that work together to ensure it all has to take place. Obviously, front-line responders are part of the equation; the administration arm of justice, which is solely and squarely within the Attorney General's ministry and that obviously he has carriage of; and then down the line to corrections and rehabilitation.

I want to just really hone in on this a little bit because the government has removed the ability for automatic speed enforcement cameras, and of course there's a cost and a consequence to that. It's not necessarily to make our communities safer, but I want to focus a little bit on some of these highway traffic charges.

We have seen 31% of careless driving charges dropped in provincial courts. We've seen 32% of drivers who are driving with suspended licences, and we have seen over 42% of stunt driving charges dropped. There have been reports about government vehicles involved in some of this type of activity. But I'm really curious to know whether or not the Attorney General is satisfied with those statistics and if he believes that the communities across Ontario are safer if, continually, HTA charges are dropped.

Hon. Doug Downey: There's a lot of preamble to that. What's the actual question?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Through you. Go.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Sure. Of course. I'll say it more slowly. I'd like to know, Attorney General, whether or not you are satisfied that those high numbers of 31%, 32% and 42% of serious, risky stunt driving, driving with suspended licences—whether or not those are acceptable to you.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): To the question, Minister, please.

Hon. Doug Downey: If you would let me take the next eight minutes of your 15 minutes, I will run through the capacity building and the investments that our government is making to make a system work that was not working when we got here.

Am I satisfied? I will not be satisfied until the system is working at optimum level. We are doing everything pos-

sible at extraordinary investment and expense all across the board, right from hiring police officers, to waiving tuition for their training, to getting boots on the ground, to adding more crown attorneys, to adding more judges, to adding more JPs, to making sure we have investments in courtrooms—we're wiring hundreds of courtrooms. We're making sure that we have everything in place to make the system work as well as possible, and then we are working with our municipal partners when it comes to—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, Minister.

New question, please.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: To the Attorney General: I'm heartened by that response. It tells me that you are paying attention, that you are not satisfied with the record that your government has so far and that you're dedicated to improving it. And that's—

Hon. Doug Downey: What I'm not satisfied with is what we were left with when we came to government and all the fixing that needed to happen. We brought the system forward decades in a matter of years. That's because it was left in a state that was not acceptable.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Chair, there's only 15 minutes in this committee. Attorney General, I recognize you're very passionate about things going forward. But since you talk about what you inherited, what you've inherited has been a work in progress now for eight years. What we're now seeing are record-high HTA charges being dropped in your ministry. You are the chief law officer of this province. So therefore, that's why I'm asking you the question.

Hon. Doug Downey: So the answer to the question—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Excuse me, Minister. I'm not going to have cross-debate from the questioner or the responder. So we're going to have one question. We're going to have the response, and it's going to be through me.

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

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): We've got agreement?

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Absolutely.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you very much. Please.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Absolutely, Chair. There isn't a heck of a lot of time left.

Most recently, the Domestic Violence Death Review Committee has put forward 20 recommendations, and I think that the Domestic Violence Death Review Committee has submitted a number of recommendations to the Attorney General's office over the years, and they keep coming back with the same recommendation. So I'm interested in knowing from the Attorney General, is the funding in place to ensure that the Domestic Violence Death Review Committee's recommendations are going to be acted on?

Hon. Doug Downey: You're talking about the Renfrew inquest?

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: No, I'm talking about the Domestic Violence Death Review Committee, which is a committee that falls under your ministry.

Hon. Doug Downey: In terms of the investments in domestic violence and intimate partner violence, as you know, we had a full committee go through a lot of that work is quite voluminous; it's quite complicated. You may or may not remember, but I'll say it for the others. I grew up with a mother who was one of the founding members of the York Region Abuse Program—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Come on. Just answer the question, for God's sake.

Hon. Doug Downey: Well, just ask the question, then.

Ms. Catherine Fife: She did.

Hon. Doug Downey: Then let me answer.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Fife, please.

Listen, let's come to an understanding, right? You heard my statement at the very beginning of the preamble.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: It's not me, sir.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Okay. Just listen to me, please, because this is not going to continue this way. Put the question; listen to the response. The minister will be as concise as he can possibly be to the question. I'm going to hear the response.

Proceed, please.

Hon. Doug Downey: I think it is relevant that I have an understanding of the victim service world. I grew up in that world. And I can tell you the victim service work that we did. We just invested multi-year funding for the child and youth advocacy centres across the system. We just invested in the Barbra Schliker clinic that does amazing work. We've invested in a lot of different places, and it's a multi-ministry piece. If you have a more specific question about have we invested in A, B or C, I can answer that.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Minister, thank you.

New question.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I'm disappointed that the Attorney General cannot answer very specifically recommendations that would have come from the committee that would have been reported directly to him, with 20 recommendations that were directed to this ministry.

I'm going to move on to the LTB because it's a pretty important matter. When the minister was speaking about Bill 60, he talked about the good work that the government is doing to clear the backlog at the LTB. What we've seen is that the number has gone from 20,000 higher to 56,000. Now, I think we're sitting at about potentially 37,000 cases in LTB.

The chair of the Landlord and Tenant Board has been quoted as saying, "I believe that we are on track to position our tribunals with minimal or possibly no backlogs by the end of the 2025-26 fiscal year." Those are remarks from Sean Weir.

Minister, how close are you to removing that backlog in the LTB?

Hon. Doug Downey: We have removed 80% of the backlog at the end of October.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Can you break down that number for me? How many cases?

Hon. Doug Downey: It's 35,800 cases.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Are you satisfied with that number?

Hon. Doug Downey: I am satisfied that we will come to balance, and we are doing it while the applications are increasing. Last year, we had 106,000 cases. Normally, it's about 80,000 or 85,000. So it's a 25% increase.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You have a minute and 48 seconds left in your questioning.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you, sir. Thank you, Chair.

I want to know from the Attorney General whether or not he agrees with Sean Weir's assessment that the balance of the backlog cases at the LTB will hit close to zero by the end of 2026.

Hon. Doug Downey: That is not what he said. What he said is we will come to balance. Balance is not zero. Balance is steady state. You don't understand the system, unfortunately, it sounds like, because when you file a case, it doesn't get heard the same day. You will never get to zero.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Of course not.

Hon. Doug Downey: So steady state is 30,000. We are at 35,800. We will come to balance by the end of fiscal.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: The current hearing time for a tenant is about 18 to 20 months, and a landlord's case gets heard between five to six months. I hear from the Attorney General that he believes that this is a satisfactory number.

I'm going to ask a quick question—

Hon. Doug Downey: Can I clarify? Those numbers are incorrect.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I would like to take my time back.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): To the question, please.

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

I have one final question, and I want to say, then, thank you to the Attorney General. During estimates last week, my colleagues MPPs Mamakwa and Bourgouin asked about the legal costs associated with defending the government against lawsuits and court cases related to Bill 5. Both Minister Lecce and Minister Rickford refused to answer the question. Instead, they were defensive and they deflected. In fact, Minister Rickford responded with condemnation and a little bit of contempt to belittle deputy leader Mamakwa.

I would like to know from the Attorney General today—and please answer this question directly—what is the estimated legal—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Wong-Tam, your questioning time is completed. Thank you.

We'll now move to the third party with MPP Collard, s'il vous plaît, to the Attorney General of Ontario.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Merci, Chair. Thank you.

Thank you to the Attorney General for the presentation. I certainly appreciate that you're working with the right intent, and you're saying all the right things about showing us that you're trying to do the best job possible. You'll agree that access to justice is supposed to be a right; it's

not a privilege, and our system is not perfect. And I guess you will have to agree as well that there's still some improvements needed and in order to identify the improvements that are needed, we need to look at the status of things.

1540

I want to start talking about the services in French, because I see that in your KPIs, I guess you have a target of 65% to have designated bilingual positions filled with incumbents with the right level of French proficiency. And over the last three years, from what I see, you've only been able to achieve 60% of that not very ambitious target, I will say, because 65% of designated bilingual positions is not very ambitious. According to the French Language Services Act, a bilingual position, especially in designated areas—and I will point out to a certain area like Gengarry-Prescott-Russell; I think my colleague will agree—I've had several complaints that people are just not getting the services. So, I do need to ask you, what are you doing to work toward a better result on this?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Minister, to the question, please.

Hon. Doug Downey: So, it's multi-pronged, of course, because there are different areas that we need services. I do have a French-language advisory committee, chaired by Justice Rouleau, who have done incredible work and we meet with them regularly to talk about areas for improvement. So that's on a global, high-level scale.

In terms of—as you may remember from last year, we talked about being able to file in French at any court counter now. It used to be there were only certain spots, so we're trying to make those incremental improvements. It really should have been there a long time ago.

In terms of—I'll talk about tribunals first, because I think that may be part of what you're referencing. The tribunals—if we have somebody who is bilingual, we cross-appoint and cross-train as much as possible to make sure that we have capacity in every tribunal. It is a work in progress. I do not consider it full success at this point. We need more qualified applicants and more applicants that that are bilingual, but we have made great strides over the last couple of years to make sure that we have appropriate services at that level.

You will have seen judicial appointments, or judicial advertisements and then appointments, prioritizing bilingual individuals who apply. Again, an area that we can do more in, but we do prioritize that, along with JPs, justices of the peace. And those positions—the current round that's out there—are designated specifically where we really need people who are bilingual. I can come back to that if you want, but there a number of pieces that we are trying to move forward with.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: But do you know why it is that you're not filling those positions with bilingual incumbents? You can't tell me that there's no bilingual people applying for those jobs, because I know friends personally that are lawyers that are applying for those jobs who are francophones, and still we're not getting the level of service that I think we deserve.

Hon. Doug Downey: I don't have access to who applies. I only get access to who's recommended. But I can tell you that there is an emphasis on somebody—if they are bilingual, they get a second look before they're moved on. But we have to appoint people that are qualified at the same time, so there's a bit of a tension sometimes, but—

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Yes. I agree with—we need to appoint people on merit, but the language is an important factor.

Since May 2024, the government has appointed 40 new judges to the Ontario Court of Justice, 16 of which were appointed to one of the newly created positions and 24 to address vacancies from the previous complement. I think those are your numbers. You may have updated those in your presentation. Do you know how many of those were bilingual judges?

Hon. Doug Downey: I don't have it at hand, but what I can look at are what was advertised for bilingual. But sometimes people are appointed who are bilingual, but it's not a bilingual position advertised.

So, in terms of the tracking, we do an annual report. The Judicial Appointments Advisory Committee does an annual report, and if it's self-reported that somebody is bilingual on their application, it will show up in that report, and that report is posted when we get it.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay. So we definitely need to do better in terms of appointing bilingual judges.

Hon. Doug Downey: Anybody you know who is qualified, please encourage.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay, maybe I'll quit my job and do that instead.

I know you've talked about the importance of upgrading our system to make it faster with technology and whatnot. I need to bring to your attention—and I don't know if I can get an explanation to this today. There is a legal counsel who's actually anglophone; he doesn't even speak French, but he's helping a francophone client. He was writing to me saying that there is a casual disregard for French-language rights at the Landlord and Tenant Board system of adjudication. He's telling me that if you attempt to watch a French-language block, you will see that the manner of interpretation is an open style—I don't know if you know what that is—where every person is required to speak short sentences, stop, allow translation and then continue.

He qualifies it as the process is absurd. There is no ability to sound compelling. Cross-examination is stilted and ruined by the language hurdle. And while translation is always a challenge, the challenge is better handled in the Small Claims Court with simultaneous translation using headphones and an interpreter in the room who speaks the translation into a microphone, and by choosing a channel, you hear that language. But the Landlord and Tenant Board does not do this. We do know that the LTB is one of the boards we have the most problems with.

And the situation I just described to you, which is trying to use the technology to improve services, is actually having the opposite effect with francophones. I don't know if you were aware of that.

Hon. Doug Downey: I was not aware of that. I'm happy to take that—if we can improve tribunals across the system. Every time I hear about something unique, we generally make changes. And we had that with the recruitment of judges: the way that they were being screened for their French proficiency was not satisfactory. We adjusted that. So I'm very happy to follow up with that and see if there's an area for improvement.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Very well. I'm going to turn to speaking about Legal Aid Ontario. Community legal clinics are overstretched. Eligibility thresholds haven't kept up with the cost of living, and more people are being forced to face court without representation. And you know, as I do, that self-represented litigants are a burden to the court.

You did mention you were a clerk at the courts. I was also a clerk at the federal courts. I also worked at the federal courts as a legal counsel, and I've seen first-hand that self-represented litigants are a real burden and are not helping the court move through their workload. It's actually slowing down everything.

I'm going to ask you some questions about the funding of the system because I think we're not keeping up with the needs. Since the government cut Legal Aid Ontario—that's in 2019—how much of that funding has actually been restored in real, inflation-adjusted dollars?

Hon. Doug Downey: I will have to get an answer on that. But while I do, let me update on what's happening with Legal Aid. You talked about self-reps. I don't know who came up with the social engineering formula years and years ago. If you had no children, you had to have income less than \$19,000 to qualify. If you had one child, it was \$21,000. If you had two children, it was another number, and it scaled its way up. I don't understand why the number of children you have impacts on whether you should qualify.

It was like that forever, until we changed it. It changed last year. It was a project that I had been working on for several years. It is now \$44,000, regardless of the number of dependents you have, in criminal matters. That will serve on an annual basis an extra 180,000 individuals. We did it for exactly that reason: so that individuals aren't self-repped and so the system runs better, because nothing is more frustrating for a judge than trying to move something forward and they don't have the tools to do it. This puts the tools there for the individual. That's happening now. That's in place now, and that's a multi-year commitment. That piece is moving along. If we could sustain it and go higher—we'll see in a couple of years once we see the results, but the early results are sufficient for now.

1550

What we're also seeing is that it takes away the need for the lawyer, either on a certificate or on a duty counsel, to have to ask you how many children you have. You may be in a situation like I am, where I have two children of my own, but I have two stepdaughters who are almost adults. So do I have four or do I have two? Why are we having this conversation when we're trying to find rep-

resentation for an individual? So we've taken that away to simplify the system.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: My comment to this is that, despite the adjusted rate, it's still not enough. There are people that are able to work but that still can't afford to hire a lawyer. As you know, they're pretty expensive and they're not eligible for legal aid. We do have that important gap, which is almost middle-class people that can't have access to justice unless they self-represent themselves, with all the obstacles and impediments we've just mentioned.

Can you confirm whether legal aid has had to cut or cap services in the past year due to budget constraints?

Hon. Doug Downey: The only adjustment that we've done is with regard to legal aid for immigration, because that's a federal responsibility. We had some very vigorous conversations with the federal government, notwithstanding we went through a period—of course, there were some elections happening. We wanted stability in the system, so we continued to pay the federal share for several months to make sure that individuals weren't compromised. The federal government has now stepped up, fairly recently, and made their commitment that we were asking for, so there has been no gap in service, but that adjustment has happened in the last short while.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: In order to have certainty around that, that there's been no capped services, when was the last time that the ministry conducted an independent needs assessment of the demand for legal services across Ontario?

Hon. Doug Downey: Legal Aid as an independent agency is constantly doing assessments of where need is and what needs to happen. I don't know—the Auditor General could go in there if she chose and has on occasion, but Legal Aid itself has a board of directors that does oversight.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Two minutes remaining for your questions, Madam Collard.

Hon. Doug Downey: I'll stop there in case you have more.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay. I will ask a last question about equity. There are Indigenous and racialized Ontarians that are overrepresented in our justice system—I think we can all acknowledge that. Yet many still face barriers accessing culturally appropriate legal services. What targeted support has your ministry funded to address this inequity?

Hon. Doug Downey: The single best example is the justice centre in Kenora. The way that it operates—as I started to say earlier, it's about having all the social services there to access, to help people for why they're there and not just what they did.

What happens in that space—there is always an elder at the table. There are often two elders at the table. It operates very differently than what you would see as a traditional court. It is putting people—allowing them to take pathways that they otherwise wouldn't, and it's a very different way of doing justice.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: But that's one example. Have you devoted funding so that those people across Ontario can have access to that kind of adapted—

Hon. Doug Downey: Absolutely. It's a much more expensive way of doing justice on the front end, but in the long term, it's not. We've also added—we spent \$1 million building out a kitchen in the north, so that they can do life skills training. It's serving the community. It's a coordination with the chiefs of NAN. So we are spending real money on real things in that space to make a difference.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you. That concludes the time for your questions.

We'll now move to the government. We have MPP Ciriello, please, when you're ready.

MPP Monica Ciriello: Thank you very much to the minister and the Deputy Attorney General for being here today to answer these questions. I am actually the parliamentary assistant to the ministry and it's incredible to be part of a ministry that is just focused on capacity-building and increasing our access to justice right across this province.

I've seen, first-hand, the active steps to establish a fair and accessible justice system for the people of Ontario, and so my question is to bring to light some of the opposition's concerns when it comes to the lack of funding for justice and victims in our province.

I know our government is always proud to announce the millions of dollars that we put into our province to grow the justice system to serve the people of Ontario. As I mentioned, I've seen this first-hand. Our government is taking action to ensure the sustainability of the criminal justice system and expand our province's judicial capacity to keep the people of Ontario safe.

Minister, could you please tell us about the province's investments to address criminal backlog and continue to enhance the access to justice for those in Ontario?

Hon. Doug Downey: Yes. I really just touched the surface of the kind of things that we're doing for backlog, capacity building. We are literally looking at not just what we do but how we do it.

We're looking to other provinces to coordinate. Just a few weeks ago, as you well know, we had a meeting with all the federal, provincial, territorial Attorneys General and Ministers of Justice to share ideas. We were very, I will say, assertive as a team in terms of what we were asking the federal government to do with bail reform and other adjustments, but at the same time, it allows us to have conversations with our colleagues about, "How are you doing this, and how are you doing that?"—to hear what Quebec is doing in its area and to hear from AG Niki Sharma in BC and what her government is doing in other areas. It's a great way to gather ideas.

But we're not just at a gathering-ideas stage; we're so invested and so in motion, spending real money on real things. We've brought the new Toronto courthouse online, and it's operating. There was a story or two about moving into a new house where there were some bumps, but I can tell you it's serving a population in a modern building with

wayfinding and with—it's just incredible. People come from around the world, and they're just amazed at this public space that we've built.

The electronic piece, the technology piece, the courts digital transformation—I just can't say enough. Government after government after government has tried to put electronic systems into place—a lot of bumpiness. I'm not going to pick on any of my confederate partners in our nation, but some of them have had a real rough ride. One of them recently in the newspaper said, "Oh, we've got to move this out. We're having a rough time." We're actually getting stuff done. I've got a whole book of things that we've been doing, and I just don't even know where to start.

MPP Monica Ciriello: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question: MPP Gualtieri, please, when you're ready.

MPP Silvia Gualtieri: Good afternoon, the Honourable Doug Downey, Attorney General, along with his staff and all of his ministry staff at the back. I'm honoured to be here today as the parliamentary assistant to the Solicitor General, who works very closely with the Ministry of the Attorney General.

Auto theft has been a plague in our communities whether you're affluent or not, which is something that we stress in our Ministry of the Solicitor General. It affects us all. I had a town meeting the other night in my riding, and the topic was community safety. It was extremely well attended, and everyone was extremely engaged. Auto theft is on the rise and an increasing threat for communities across Ontario. I know our government is doing what they can do to be tough on crime and do what it takes to keep the people of Ontario safe.

As of April 2025, the auto theft prosecution response team launched by the government is now a permanent measure to keep our commitment to Ontario to keep communities safe and to support victims. While the federal government delayed the review of the Criminal Code and making the changes to protect the public from offenders, it's encouraging that this government has stepped in to support the OPP and our justice system.

Can you, Minister, tell us more about the auto theft prosecution response team and how this measure will protect communities from crimes such as auto theft?

Hon. Doug Downey: Thank you so much for that question. Really, the most important part of our auto theft strategy is that we are not siloed, that we are looking at resources across jurisdictions and across ministries. We're coordinating with not just the OPP or the Peel Regional Police, who have done some amazing work. They've been so effective in Peel and in your space, but they're also coordinating with the other forces. I know the Barrie police are plugged in to it.

1600

What we found are a number of things. One of the things that we've asked the federal government to do is to go after individuals who recruit youth to crime, because how this has been working is—and it's simple technology—there will be a note on your phone. If you're a

willing participant in auto theft or a break and enter, you will have WhatsApp on your phone, and you will receive a message with an address to go to at a time. You will show up and so will three other people who you do not know. They got the same message. Those four people will kick down a door and put a gun to a head and steal a car and away they go. If one of them gets caught, they actually don't know who the other three are. Increasingly, and for a long time, it has been youth who have been recruited to this. It looks like big money in the moment, looks like low risk in the moment, but because of the coordination, because of the money that we've put in, because of the tracking, we now understand what it looks like.

Chief Nish was instrumental in bringing down—but it's a false sense of security to say that we've brought it down by 25%, because it shouldn't have gone up in the first place. It's still more than it was 10 years ago. This is organized crime doing it, and that money is fuelling all sorts of other things.

So, we've put in place a continuum of everything from bail tracking—that you're quite aware of, the bail dashboard; that literally was the idea of the Solicitor General that got operationalized and that's now in place—doing bail checks, the rope squads, making sure that that happens—and I know Hamilton in particular was one of the early adopters on that—all the way through to figuring out the patterns. The police—it's not enough for them to figure out the patterns; it's to have the prosecutors along with them so that when we do get these individuals, the evidence is collected in the right way and presented in the right way and we can actually hold people to account. It's a multi-pronged approach and we've created the specialized auto theft and bail prosecution team to make sure that we have our best foot forward to deal with these individuals.

But we've called on the federal government just a couple of weeks ago, again. I do have to say, Minister Fraser, the federal Attorney General, when we were together, was very communicative about things. A number of things that are in his bail bill came from Ontario. They were things that we specifically asked for, so I want to give credit where credit is due. He did do that. He worked very well with us and our other partners, but we need more. We need these adults who are bringing youth into crime to face a consequence that they're currently not facing.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question, please. MPP Allsopp, when you're ready, sir. You're lit up.

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the Attorney General, the Deputy Attorney General and all of your staff for being here today for this very important process of going over the estimates and asking the questions that the public would like to ask and see answered.

As you may know, I'm a former chair of the Belleville Police Service Board. My question today for you is about bail reform. It's something that I spent a lot of time talking with officers about, because they're the ones on the front line, doing the best they can, apprehending these criminals—in many cases, violent criminals—and using a lot of

resources to do that. They talked to me about the dismay and the burnout that they felt having to apprehend so many of the same people so many times and just feeling like it was a revolving door, that these people were not being held accountable, that they would end up back on the streets, victimizing the community.

They provided me with one report of an individual who was uttering threats out front of an apartment building. Over the three-day weekend, I believe they had about 10 interactions with the same individual, and they would find them back again at the same apartment building, doing the same thing over and over again. We know that protecting the safety and security of the people of Ontario is absolutely front of mind. I've been very grateful to hear the comments that you've made, Attorney General, as well as the Premier, in terms of taking a tougher stance on crime and holding the federal government accountable as well for their role in the need to reform the bail system.

Recently, the federal government has announced new legislation that purports to be tougher on crime, and I'm sure you spent more time with that document than I have. I wanted to know, how will those changes impact your ministry, and what would you say to the people of Ontario about how we're going to be harder on these violent offenders, and make sure that they're not back out in the community causing more problems?

Hon. Doug Downey: Thank you so much for the question. I want to start by saying one of the shifts that we've tried to have the federal government understand—and I do believe they understand now—everybody would say “violent and repeat offenders,” but it's not somebody who's “violent and repetitive.” We want them to go after “violent” or “repetitive.” So somebody who breaks into cars 10 times needs to be dealt with as importantly as somebody who was violent once.

We need to have that understanding from the federal government. I believe we do.

So, what's in the federal bail bill? The one piece that I advocated for very, very hard—reverse onus is one thing. Back when the Premier and all the other Premiers and territorial leaders signed a letter to the federal government and said, “We need reverse onus on some of these items; this is not working for us,” the federal government at the time, Minister David Lametti, called a meeting two months later. He phoned me and said, “Would you be available?” I said, “You tell me where and when and we'll be there.” And so, we went. We did a federal-provincial-territorial meeting and got some change. We got some reverse onus.

But here's the thing with reverse onus that many people outside of the law world may not know: Of course, it reverses the onus for the accused to have to show why they should be out, but it's on a balance of probabilities scale—which I hate to put numbers to, but it's kind of like 49% to 51% change. That's not enough.

So we pushed very hard to make the case that a reverse onus needs to mean something. It needs to be a higher standard. Now, maybe not beyond a reasonable doubt; that

might be a little too high. And then, there's some other wording that we put forward.

But in that federal bail bill, there is wording that moves it up from balance of probabilities. I think most people won't necessarily digest that, but I think that is the single most important thing that is in that bail bill. If we can move that standard up so that it's clear and convincing that an individual should be let out—and if they say they're going to be staying somewhere that there is some evidence that that, in fact, is the case.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Two minutes remaining for your question.

Hon. Doug Downey: There's more that needs to be done. We obviously did not get everything that we wanted. There is a level of frustration, and the public is not feeling safe.

Years ago, we dealt with proceeds of crime and tools of crime because officers, before they were off shift, were having to hand back the crowbar to the guy on the way out the door. That's craziness.

So we have turned the dial on that a little bit, but we may have more to do in that space.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Darouze.

MPP George Darouze: Chair, through you: Minister, I will talk a little bit about the justice centres—and thank you and your deputy for being here. I know public safety is very important not only for myself but for all the people here in the room and the people out there who are watching us.

In August, our government announced an opening of the London Justice Centre expansion. It's a newly renovated downtown facility, located in Youth Opportunities Unlimited in Joan's Place. This expanded centre will support the province's work to protect communities and increase access to justice for at-risk young adults.

In addition to the London Justice Centre, I know our government is expanding justice centres in Toronto, Barrie, Kenora and Timmins, and it's good for the committee to hear from you on it.

Can you tell us more about justice centres and how they are transforming how justice is delivered across Ontario in our communities?

Hon. Doug Downey: Yes. I'll start before we run out of time, but I can tell you that each justice centre has a different—they're each a little bit unique, depending on the needs of the area. We started with the four. London was the first, and then we had Kenora. We had two in Toronto, one for Rexdale area and one for—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, Minister. That concludes the time for the government questions.

I'd like to turn back, please, to the official opposition. MPP Fife, please, when you're ready.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

I must tell you something: I am still incredibly angry at you for dispensing Lydia's Law last year and sending it to justice committee to die. I don't know how you could justify that move, and I certainly know that Lydia, as a victim of sexual assault, felt that she was silenced that day.

Fortunately, though, she has got a publication ban lifted on her case, and she will be coming back to Queen's Park, and we will be reintroducing Lydia's Law.

1610

Just before I get to the vote item, I wanted to let you know that the Auditor General, back in 2019, asked you and your ministry to ensure that we had a better understanding of the cases that are being dispensed. They wanted you to have eyes on those cases. They wanted you to approach the court system in a way so that we could fix the problems of finding out why so many sexual assault cases were being dispensed and stayed. It does go to resources in some regards, but that's all that Lydia's Law essentially asked for. It was just asking for you to apply the Auditor General's recommendations and to have a better idea of why those cases were being dispensed. The problem is that the numbers of cases that are being dispensed and stayed—specifically on sexual assault, the number continues to go up. That is why I brought the law to the floor of the Legislature.

I have the numbers from the ministry website, and they're high numbers. In 2025, 1,530 sexual assault cases were dispensed. In 2024, 1,439 cases were dispensed. In 2023, 1,171 sexual assault cases were dispensed.

We also know that in these cases, when justice is denied to these survivors, that you also correspondingly have someone who is going to be a repeat offender. I wanted you to give us a sense of how much funding you have allocated to ensure that these women—mostly women—these survivors get the justice that they need and they deserve. That's the vote item, so I want to make sure that there's money allocated to address this serious concern.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): To the question, please.

Hon. Doug Downey: I believe that those numbers came off a website. I don't believe that you can impute why they were dismissed.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Well, that's the whole point of Lydia's Law.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): No, no, no. We're not having cross-debate. Question-and-answer is what we're going to have. Answer please, sir.

Hon. Doug Downey: What I can tell you is that the Jordan dismissals are going down, and they are less than one twentieth of 1%. I can speak to that because I know that.

We have made significant investments and we continue to. I'll just give you a couple of examples. In the 2023-24 PAR funding year, in the funding year for PAR—the Partner Assault Response Program, for those who may not know the acronym—\$12.72 million; the Indigenous-specific victim services, which is a community-led support designed for Indigenous survivors, \$10 million dollars; the Family Information Liaison Unit, \$866,000.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I'm going to reclaim my time, Chair. Chair, I'd like to reclaim my time, please.

Hon. Doug Downey: But you asked for numbers.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I didn't ask for those numbers. I asked for numbers pertaining to the court system, not community-based services. I'm reclaiming my time.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You've asked your question. You had ample time to ask your question. I have to adjudicate that the minister has adequate time to respond. We're timing it up here. Really, over just a minute, and then you're trying to reclaim your time—we need to hear a response; don't you?

Ms. Catherine Fife: In his answer—he was not answering the question.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Okay. Why don't we just continue?

Ms. Catherine Fife: So then I'm going to reclaim my time.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question, please. Thank you.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Minister, I hope that we can agree that sexual violence is one of the most heinous crimes because it is about power and stealing the humanity of another person. You started to talk about the community services to respond to sexual violence. I'm talking about survivors of sexual violence getting justice in the court system.

The numbers—you just actually proved my point. You said, "I can't impute the numbers that these are dispensed cases." You need to follow through with the Auditor General's recommendations so that we have a better sense of what these numbers mean because they're not going in the right direction. Why are you so resistant to ensuring there's some transparency on the numbers of sexual assault cases that are being dispensed in our court system?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): To the question, sir.

Hon. Doug Downey: So, to continue—I hadn't even finished that page. But if we're going to talk about the resources put forward to deal with sexual assault cases and other very, very serious cases, this is exactly why we added 52 more judges, exactly why we added 700 more full-time staff that include prosecutors, but they also include victim service workers. They include all the supports that are needed within that system. This is a historic investment in the court system.

At the same time, we're having conversations with Quebec, who has a very unique way of approaching sexual assault courts. We're having conversations with our other partners. So, I don't think it's fair to say that we're not doing anything and that we don't know what we're doing. We are in fact doing capacity building to deal with this, in particular.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): [*Inaudible*] new question, please.

Ms. Catherine Fife: You mentioned the word "fair" here. What's not fair, Minister, is when a woman has the courage after experiencing a heinous crime to pursue justice—and then to have the courtroom closed because of insufficient resources to have a lack of access to legal aid and community supports to help her navigate the trauma of being assaulted. For you to use the word "fair" within this context after you already dispensed and silenced Lydia, who had the courage to come to this place and raise her case, is incredibly insulting for a minister of the crown.

I need you to understand that the system that you are talking about from your notes does not exist in the real world for survivors of sexual assault. It does not.

I'm going to cede my time right now, Chair, to my colleague MPP Mamakwa.

Hon. Doug Downey: Do I not get a chance to respond to that?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Mamakwa, please. Thank you.

Interjections.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Mamakwa, please. Question, please.

I don't want to hear cross-debate, all right? Got it.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch, Chair.

I just wanted to say, Minister, last week during estimates, myself and MPP Bourgouin asked about the legal costs of defending governments against lawsuits and court cases related to Bill 5. Both Minister Lecce and also Minister Rickford referred to the Attorney General. They refused to answer the questions; instead, they deflected. They were defensive about it. Actually, Minister Rickford responded in a very condescending way to me and attempted to belittle myself, right here. And I hope you as an Attorney General will answer these questions directly.

What is the estimated legal cost associated with defending the government against claims resulting from Bill 5?

Hon. Doug Downey: So, I'm not at liberty to disclose those costs. They're a matter of privilege when they're connected to a court case.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Okay. Nishnawbe Aski Nation is having a chiefs' meeting right now talking about Bill 5. One of the things that they talked about when they were talking about Bill 5—it was a quote I picked up this afternoon, and they were talking: "It's almost impossible to challenge those cabinet decisions in court—almost impossible, like this is the kind of power that dictators give themselves."

Those were their words, and that's what's happening with Bill 5. Rights holders—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Mamakwa, thank you. You're not on the vote. You're outside the parameters of the vote. That's my ruling.

New question, please.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you, Chair. To continue, this actually pertains to vote item 301 that my colleague has been questioning on. It has to do with us having an understanding of what the Attorney General's office has allocated or planned for future legal proceedings.

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You must, as the Attorney General, within the context of this committee, have allocated a certain amount of funding because you are anticipating future legal costs. That number shouldn't be arbitrary. You should have a number, under vote item 301, which says how much you have set aside because you are, of course, anticipating court action because Bill 5 is unconstitutional.

What is the number? And we would like a number, not a story.

Hon. Doug Downey: I would be pleased to respond and tell you that any forecasting for contingencies is done by either the President of the Treasury Board or the Minister of Finance.

Ms. Catherine Fife: No, you, as the Minister, must know that there is an allocated amount of money. We want to know what that number is.

Hon. Doug Downey: If I had a number, it would be privileged. If it's in Treasury Board or finance, you would have to ask them.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question, please.

Ms. Catherine Fife: My understanding from that answer, Minister, is that you're anticipating that you will be sued, that you will end up in court, and that the taxpayers of Ontario are going to have to foot that bill because you continue to push forward an unconstitutional piece of legislation.

I will move on, though. Perhaps my colleague—would you like to ask the courtroom question?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Mamakwa, please. Keep the question within the parameters of the vote we're considering.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: How much time do I have?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You have two minutes left for questions.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: On July 31, 2025, 23-year-old Tyresse Roundsky was fatally shot in Wapekeka First Nation in a fly-in courtroom which had to operate out of the youth centre as they do not have permanent locations in the north.

I think that incident highlighted the issues of police violence against First Nations people and safety issues in the fly-in courts, and yet it is so important that people in far northern Ontario have reasonable, in-person access to courts in their communities, close to home. It is a human right.

Can you please provide an update on the current status of the operation for the fly-in courts in northern Ontario?

Hon. Doug Downey: Thank you so much for the question. It's an absolute tragedy for the family, for the community and for our system. I was quite moved and shocked when this happened. I've spoken to the Grand Chief and said he has my direct number. If there is any engagement that they want, we will do that. We are taking the lead of that community when they want the presence of the fly-in court to continue.

What we have done in the past couple of years is we have put in for remote court in all of the fly-in reserves except for one, and we're building a building in that space—we're affected by winter roads, by ice roads, to get the materials over—so that individuals don't have to leave their community and there can be a level of service that has never been there before.

But in this particular area, it has expedited our discussions about security, not just for the participants in the judicial system—the witnesses and the individuals—but for the communities themselves. I can tell you it's being taken seriously at the highest levels.

Immediately after the incident, there was a discussion, a meeting, with all three Chief Justices and all of my officials to talk about what had happened and how we move forward. We're engaging with the Grand Chief to find a better way.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Are there any funds allocated as a result of that incident that happened?

Hon. Doug Downey: As a direct result of that—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): That concludes the time for responses, and that concludes the time for questions from the official opposition.

I'd like to move to the third party and Madame Collard, please.

Mme Lucille Collard: Actually, maybe I will give you the opportunity to use some of my time to answer MPP Mamakwa's question.

Hon. Doug Downey: Thank you so much for that, and I'll be as brief as possible.

The virtual and hybrid that I talked about is an ongoing cost that we do. But as a result of this incident, we don't have a particular dollar number. I often would tell clients in my private practice—when they came in with something that had happened, I would say, "Is this an expense or is this a problem?" And I would say this is not an expense; this is a problem. And so, we have not finalized any sort of preconceived notion of what needs to be done. We are coming to this very open and we need to engage and find a better way.

Le Président (M. Lorne Coe): Madame Collard, s'il vous plaît?

Mme Lucille Collard: Minister, I'd like to continue my line of questioning with a different focus, which is the Landlord and Tenant Board. I had asked specifically about some French services, but I want to ask about some content because you didn't get to that point in your notes.

Maybe we can get some data, because from the people I'm receiving in my office and the emails I'm receiving and the outreach from people, it seems that the LTB is still in crisis and that we need to fix the problem. It's families waiting months to know whether they're going to have to leave their home. It's landlords waiting for their rent money or getting access to their property. You did make a promise to fix the backlog and modernize the board, but I have to say that the reality on the ground seems to be different, from my perspective.

You did mention at some point that some 80% of the backlog had been dealt with. It seems to be still slow. So can you tell us specifically how many cases are currently waiting more than six months for a hearing?

Hon. Doug Downey: I can tell you this, in real numbers: Over half of the cases are non-payment of rent. So 50-plus per cent are non-payment of rent, and this is part of what has changed in the last number of years. That used to be 75% or 80% of the total. It's now in the 50% to 60% range. We're hitting the metrics; we are actually on the L1s. You're waiting eight to nine weeks from filing to hearing, which takes us out of backlog entirely. So 50% of it is out of backlog entirely.

It's the other part that we're working on. And so, I don't have specific stats. I can tell you the longest ones are the above-guideline increases. Those applications take longer, they're complicated, and those are about landlords applying to increase the rent higher than they would otherwise be permitted.

So, I don't have a specific number for you, but in terms of scale, that is where it is. And the backlog—when we hit 30,000, we're at steady state, and we are at 35,800. We were at a high of 55,000. Now, part of the challenge that I have in communicating with the public and with people is that we're moving so fast to get the number down. Well, the number of cases is going up 25-plus per cent. The data that we get thrown at us is months-old data, so it's out. The real number is 35,800 as of the end of October.

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay.

In last year's estimates, your ministry announced additional funding to hire and train more adjudicators. I think we need them if we're going to make any kind of difference on the wait time.

Can you tell us how many full-time adjudicators you have actually hired and trained since you've made that announcement?

Hon. Doug Downey: Yes, I'll give you specific numbers. We've had some turnover; people come on and people leave, and so it's not a static number. But, effectively, 80 is the current full-time complement. The government in the last budget added more, so I can add six more. So we're in the process right now—the pool's open; people are applying. But we went from 40 to 80, and they're fully trained, in seats, doing hearings right now. And that's a permanent change. So, when we get through the backlog, we will have that extra capacity to make the system work even better.

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay. But we continue to hear that vacancies and turnover remain pretty high, and many hearings are being delayed because they're not being staffed. So what's driving this retention problem and what concrete steps are you taking to stabilize the LTB's workforce?

Hon. Doug Downey: Absolutely. The challenge that we've been having in terms of—so, we have twice as many adjudicators, but we had to get them trained up. That has happened now, so we're running at full steam.

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But nobody anticipated going from 80,000 cases a year to 106,000. That's a historic number of cases heard in a year. This year it will likely be higher than that. Part of the challenge is the volume coming in while we're driving down the backlog at the same time.

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay. I'm going to turn to the virtual hearings. I remember you and I had that conversation last year at main estimates as well. You did emphasize that virtual hearings would make the LTB more efficient and accessible. But there are many tenants—I don't know if you realize it now—especially those in rural, northern, or low-income communities, where that shift has actually made access harder for them. What is your ministry doing

to ensure that people without reliable internet or devices aren't shut out of the process?

I'm saying that because I have lived through concrete examples—where a woman came to my office in Ottawa saying, “No, I want to be able to speak to the judge and I want the landlord to understand my point of view. I can't do that on my phone. I am going to go over to the office and get my time.” And, of course, she couldn't even access the floor where the tribunal is supposed to be, because I don't think it's even staffed.

To my question: What are you doing to help those people that can't just embark that technology turn that you're trying to promote?

Hon. Doug Downey: It's a great question because there has been, for a couple of years now, offices that individuals can go to that have the equipment to participate if they're just on their phone but they want to be online. We also have mobile units that will help the more rural, where they will go out to help individuals, and I know that's happening. I can't give details, but I had a conversation with somebody recently where that's happened. We have increased the funding to the legal aid clinics in the last six years, well over 25%, to create capacity. And that capacity-building is ongoing. That's also a touch point for those individuals. If they are just on their phone, there is a program where they can receive free minutes, and if they don't have minutes, they can actually get a phone.

We're trying to make the system accessible in every way. But the requests for those kinds of accommodations is very, very low. I don't have the exact number—it's somewhere around 1% and lower.

Mme Lucille Collard: Do you have data, then, on how many hearings are actually held virtually versus in person?

Hon. Doug Downey: They're all virtual. The in-person locations have the equipment to participate virtually. Some people may not—you mentioned somebody had a phone, but they wanted to be able to be seen and interact.

Mme Lucille Collard: Right. You're a lawyer, and you know that very often you get deals before you even get into the courtroom. That's because you have in-person opportunity to have that interaction with the opposite counsel. By removing entirely the in-person hearings, you're removing that ability. And so, I don't think you're helping with the backlog and the complexity of dealing with those cases.

Hon. Doug Downey: We all know Teams. We've all worked on Teams and on—

Mme Lucille Collard: But not everyone has access to the technology or is comfortable with it or has internet access.

Hon. Doug Downey: But it gives a chance to have breakout rooms. They have the ability to interconnect that way. In the court system—this isn't LTB; it's just the court system—we've had over 11 million virtual and hybrid hearings. It really is the way things are being done now.

Mme Lucille Collard: Except not everybody is. My mom is 82 years old, and if she had to face that kind of situation, she would be at a total loss. That would be a total denial of access to justice for a person like my mom, who's

82 years old and can hardly get her computer to function to watch a program at home.

Hon. Doug Downey: But I have full confidence—my father is 86 next month. I have full confidence he would not go to court without my sister.

Mme Lucille Collard: Right, well, he's lucky to have you.

Hon. Doug Downey: I'm not allowed to show up.

Mme Lucille Collard: But he's lucky to have you.

I would like to get some reassurance that those people who are vulnerable, that don't have that ready access, can be helped. I would appreciate if you could really get some information about that, like on real cases. And if there is any way we can do a middle version to try to accompany those persons, because they get very desperate. That's very stressful for them, to have to face justice and not have the best-case scenario for them to express themselves.

Hon. Doug Downey: What I will do is I will get you information on the existing supports that I mentioned and the amount of usage and the amount of requests for them. I don't have that at my fingertips but I will get you that.

Mme Lucille Collard: Sure. I would appreciate that.

Thank you. I don't have any more questions.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Okay.

To the government, please. MPP Ciriello.

MPP Monica Ciriello: Minister, too many Ontarians—women, children, and vulnerable people—right here at home in our communities are being harmed, whether it be through human trafficking, IPV or sexual assault. I know, you know and our government knows that we owe every survivor a justice system that works for them.

I am proud that our government has taken those crucial steps to help prevent and address gender-based violence, to deliver supports to survivors and, most importantly, to hold offenders accountable.

In June 2025, you recently announced \$5.6 million to the Child Victim/Witness Program and another \$750,000 for the Independent Legal Advice for Survivors of Sexual Assault Program. With that, seven local service providers across the province all announced they will receive \$600,000 each for the Child Victim/Witness Program. Our communities are grateful that this government is committed to responding to the needs of victims and their families.

Can you please tell us more about these programs and how you will ensure access to justice for all communities across Ontario?

Hon. Doug Downey: Yes. I'll work backwards if I can. Thank you for the question.

The free legal advice for sexual assault victims—my comptroller is not going to like this; my deputy might not like this, but—there is a number attached to it, but if we go over, we go over. That's a service that has to be there. We're committed to that, and I say that half in jest, because we all know that. So there is a number attached, but it may well be bigger. We're going to meet the need wherever it is, and so that's an important starting point.

One of the things that that we did do with Keira's Law—we were one of the earlier adopters in the country—was ensure that judges are trained and have an awareness.

It's something I look for when I'm appointing judges. I want to make sure that they have an understanding of victims. And it's not cookie-cutter; it could be in any number of ways. But that's pretty important.

The way that it works for us: Because of judicial independence I can't make judges take courses, and that's appropriate. I can't; I shouldn't. But what I can do is have them undertake—which is a legal promise with consequences, if you break an undertaking. They undertake to take training as set out by the Chief Justice and the leadership team. They do have robust training, but when we were going through this conversation about Keira's Law, there was a second look at what is happening, how it is happening and there is an openness to improvement so that people do understand—people making decisions and whatnot. That's an important piece of the puzzle. We put that undertaking on the judicial application, so it's not a question; you don't check the box. I guess I could appoint them, but I won't. That's part of how the system works.

In terms of the children and youth advocacy centres, this is something that I've been involved with for a very long time prior to being elected into the provincial level. The federal government under Minister Peter MacKay started children and youth advocacy centres. The way that they work, they're off-site from police stations, they're off-site from the courts. They're in a place often with a service animal to bring down the temperature, if I can put it that way. They're a safe space. The police will attend in plain clothes; others will be there to help children who may be witnesses, they may be victims, in different roles, and it helps them on their journey through this unfortunate incident, whatever it happens to be.

The challenge is the federal government stopped funding them with any sort of sustaining funding. That motivated me to, quite frankly, with some federal government money, to be fair, but not directly—we went back to them and said, "Here's where I want to spend some money within the guns-and-gangs portfolio. Are you okay if I allocate it that way?" When I say "I allocate it," it was the deputy who made all this happen, looked at the gaps in service around Ontario and created a three-year commitment at \$600,000 for six or more CYACs.

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They do tremendous work. They have to go and fund-raise in their communities, and I would rather them be doing the work that they do instead of having to do that. I'm really proud of that. When you come to government, you sometimes wonder, "What difference can I make?" That's a place where we make a difference for kids, and that's good for all of us. So I'm really, really pleased to be able to address that.

I'll stop. There are probably more questions.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question, please. MPP Sarrazin.

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to you, Minister and your team. It's always really good for us to hear about everything you're doing to get a more accessible justice system for all Ontarians.

I know you've mentioned about the launch of the justice-accelerated strategy. You've talked about it and the Courts Digital Transformation strategy, and I wonder if you want to elaborate more on them. I was really surprised to hear that 95% of all of this was paper-based. Maybe you want to add on this.

Hon. Doug Downey: Yes. Transformation affects how we work. It affects how people approach the system. We haven't just automated the system. We didn't just take forms and then scan them, and now they're online forms. We've actually questioned all the way along, "Why are we doing this step?"

The Courts Digital Transformation that I talked about was a partnership with the judiciary and with other stakeholders. Before we embarked on this two years ago, what would happen is, because of the Constitution, the way it's set up, you would have a family law case at the Ontario Court level or you would have a family law case at the Superior Court level, depending on whether there were kids or property. There are different reasons why they're at either level. Same with criminal cases: Depending on what the items were, they were either OCJ or SCJ. Each of those had their own back-office system. That made no sense.

We had other systems running for other areas of law, so we had this multi-disconnected way of running our system, the back-office system. Honestly, it wasn't intentional. Nobody was malicious about it. It's just because the Constitution was split, and maybe the relationship with the Attorney General's office and the Chief Justice wasn't as strong as it is now. Nobody tackled it.

We got together and said, "There's a better way." We collapsed all those systems, and we said, "Enough." We collapsed all of them and put them into one system that will deal with all areas of law.

On the tech side, I don't need tech people that need to know six or seven different systems. There were systems in government when we got here that were running on COBOL. This really was a catch-up.

That's why it's so historic, because we broke down the artificial barriers of the Constitution and the behaviour it was driving, and we broke down the potential barriers between levels of court in a co-operative way.

That's why they're looking at us from across the country—they really are—and saying, "I cannot believe you did that." The minister responsible from the UK that I met a couple of days ago—her jaw almost hit the table when she heard what we spent on it and what the success was in launching it.

Thomson Reuters was the product deliverer. One of the early decisions we made was not to have a bespoke product where we started from zero and started coding. We took something off the shelf and customized it, and that was an important piece of moving this forward.

Like I say, there were a hundred people over Thanksgiving weekend that spent all weekend launching this. It really is something where, in time, people will be landing here from around the world.

While I'm saying that, you may or may not know we have 5,000 lawyers from around the world in Toronto right now. It's the International Bar Association. We're showing off so many of the things that we're doing, and they're saying, "Wow. We want to stay in touch and see if we can do the same."

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question, please. MPP Gualtieri, when you're ready, please. Thank you.

MPP Silvia Gualtieri: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, and all of your staff.

As a government, we are striving for a more seamless appointment process, and as you have stated, Minister, an extraordinary number of judges have been appointed. As Attorney General, you have consistently emphasized the importance of strengthening access to justice for all Ontarians.

On June 5, the government passed the Protect Ontario Through Safer Streets and Stronger Communities Act, 2025, a comprehensive piece of legislation that amends and enacts multiple laws aimed at enhancing public safety and modernizing our justice system. Amendments to the Courts of Justice Act were also passed that will streamline the appointment process to appoint judges faster.

Can you explain what these changes mean and how this will speed up the appointment of justices to the Ontario Court of Justice?

Hon. Doug Downey: Yes, thank you so much.

I've made, in time, two changes to how judges are appointed. The first one was pretty innocuous. What would happen is we would have an opening in Windsor, say, and that would come from the Chief Justice saying somebody is retiring or we're shifting somebody or whatnot—that we're going to have an opening in Windsor. That would then come to my office, and we would send it to the committee. The committee would then advertise it, and they would receive applications for a period of time. They would then take those applications, decide who they are going to interview, and eventually send me a list. That would take about nine months.

The list would be two people—that's what the act said. So there was a period of time—and it was Windsor and London—where I got two names: John Smith and Joan Smith, and John Smith and Joan Smith—those were my choices. I said, "I thought I'm supposed to make decisions, so I want more than two names, when possible." That was the first change to the act and that was years ago, and we changed it from two to six.

When there are six qualified candidates, I get six—sometimes more. If there are only two, then I only get two. I don't know who applies and I don't have line of sight to any of that. But still with those six names, it takes nine months, and that's too long.

So in the next round of changes what we said—and we did this in conversation with—I'm just fortunate, by circumstance, that Chief Justice Nicklas had sat on the committee years ago, so she knew how it functioned—other stakeholders, we said, "What if we did something

like the federal government, but let's retain the integrity of the interviews, because I think those interviews are important. Let's have a pool that if an individual is interviewed and they're qualified or highly qualified, they go in the pool, and they'll check all the boxes of where they're prepared to sit."

They may check London and Windsor and Chatham and Toronto—well, if we have a need in Toronto, I may pick somebody for Toronto and not that person. But then when one comes up in Chatham, I don't have to advertise or anything. I can just put them straight on the bench.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Two minutes remaining for the government questions.

Hon. Doug Downey: We will get to a point once the pool is filled—and they're working on that now—that we'll be able to fill vacancies in a month instead of nine months. That's why the new system is going to move faster, but it maintains all the integrity and all the pieces that the old one did in terms of interviews and in terms of what I get to see and don't get to see. If they're not qualified or highly qualified, I don't even know they applied, and I think that's an important part of the system.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question, please? MPP Allsopp, when you're ready, sir.

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the Attorney General.

The question I want to ask you is about tribunals and the modernization of tribunals. Throughout the course of my life, I've been a residential tenant, I've been a residential landlord, I've been a commercial tenant and a commercial landlord. Whether it was as a city councillor or in my current role as an MPP, you hear a lot from the community, whether it's from tenants or from landlords, about the performance of the LTB.

I really appreciate the statistics that you shared with us today about that balancing around 30,000 cases, the fact that we're at 35,800 cases now, and the challenge of doing that when we have such an influx of new cases. You referenced 106,000 being a peak, and it looks like we're going to be even ahead of that coming into this year. As we've seen, there has been a tremendous amount of change in Ontario. We're a technological leader. We're a powerhouse in AI, and no one would know that better than my colleague from Waterloo, who has seen tech employment in Waterloo increase by 88% under our government since 2018.

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But the court system and the tribunal system have lagged behind, unfortunately. You mentioned the state of the tribunal system when we first took office, and what it has taken to get to this point. So I was wondering, from a cost perspective—and then also from efficiency and processing that backlog—could you tell me more about that modernization process, particularly as it relates to virtual hearings?

Hon. Doug Downey: Yes, so in—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Minister, your time has concluded for the government side.

I'm now going to go to the official opposition. MPP Fife, you have 12 minutes and 37 seconds.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Say it again?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Twelve minutes and 37 seconds, based on the time clock of the Clerk.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Oh, very good. That's excellent. That is so great.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): When you're ready, please.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Today, some interesting numbers we're hearing, that people—I'm hearing them for the first time, because they're clearly fictional.

I'm going to take you to Caledon. What is happening up in Caledon right now—and this pertains to vote item 302. At AMO, I'm sure we all heard the same story of the illegal land theft that is happening there, Attorney General, with the storage of transport trucks.

The town of Caledon describes it as basically the Wild West. There is no enforcement. No one is taking ownership for the illegal businesses that are happening there, including renting the land that is not owned by the person who's renting it, trafficking of drugs and human trafficking.

This is a situation that is not sustainable. Have you estimated any resources to address the illegal use of land in and around Caledon, which is obviously compromising public safety, the local economy? Police are increasingly frustrated by this situation.

Going forward—because, to date, your office has not done anything with respect to this issue—can you give the people of Caledon some hope that there are some resources coming their way to remove these illegally parked transport trucks, and to address the ongoing crime that's associated with it?

Hon. Doug Downey: We do know that 75% of all goods that travel on a truck come through Peel, as a baseline. So we know that. I have talked with Mayor Groves several times. I've met with her and many of her counsellors. I have a decent understanding of what is happening and not happening there.

I don't think it's fair to say that I've done nothing—

Ms. Catherine Fife: But what—

Hon. Doug Downey: I know you don't like the "fair" word; I get it. But it's inaccurate to say that I've done nothing. It's a multi-ministry—MTO, Sol Gen, MAG and municipal affairs and housing—conversation.

Some things are, I will say, in the works, which I cannot put on record. It is a real problem. It's a valid problem. There are ancillary problems, as you mentioned, connected to it—the criminality. It is being taken very seriously.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question.

Ms. Catherine Fife: No, it's still on the same issue.

You say that you have done something. What have you done with regard to the illegal proceedings that are hap-

pening around Caledon and the lack of resources that this community is experiencing?

This is a provincial issue. It may also involve Sol Gen but ultimately, we're asking about resource allocation to deal with ongoing illegal activity that is happening in Ontario. I would like for you to identify a number, a resource number, to deal with this ongoing issue.

Hon. Doug Downey: It would be great if we could take a complicated problem that involves four provincial ministries, the region of Peel, the Peel police and the town of Caledon, and put a number to it and tell you it will be fixed.

Ms. Catherine Fife: It would be great if you could actually say a number, because that's what this committee is about. You seem incapable of giving us numbers today when that is our job as legislators.

Our job is to ask you, as the Attorney General, around resource allocation to deal with ongoing illegal activity in the province of Ontario—in this case, the illegal land theft around Caledon. You must have some figure in all of those binders that could give the town of Caledon some hope that some resources, some funding, some help is going to come their way. That's the whole goal of this committee.

So, I would like you to say a number today. I would like you to say a number that involves multiple zeros to deal with crime that's ongoing around Caledon.

Hon. Doug Downey: So this reminds me of having conversations with clients on an intake and they say, "I have this litigation, and I want you to tell me what it's going to cost." And I say, "Well, you tell me what the other side is going to do, and I'll tell you what it's going to cost you."

Ms. Catherine Fife: You must have some number, for the love of humanity. You have a budget; you've allocated some funding—I would hope—to deal with this ongoing issue that is really crippling the area around Caledon. It shouldn't be a confidential number. You're not running a private business here. This is government, and there needs to be some transparency. I'm not asking for the final number; I'm asking for any number—any number—with some zeros behind it. Can you not do that, Minister?

Hon. Doug Downey: If you can't tell me what the other party is going to do, I can't tell you what it's going to cost us.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Oh my God.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question, please. I want to hear a new question, please. Thank you.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Well, it has to be a new question because we certainly aren't getting any answers, Chair.

My new question to the Attorney General here at estimates, where we are discussing resource allocation and financial commitments that the government is supposed to be making to address ongoing issues in Ontario is: You recently, Minister, made an announcement on behalf of the government and you have ordered all staff back to the office in person. The government has explained this choice, saying that, "How do you mentor someone over a phone? You can't. You've got to look at them eye to eye."

Is the government willing to take the same approach in Ontario Tribunals like the Landlord and Tenant Board and restore the right to in-person hearings and services for every applicant who requests it, following your own advice and your own words of wisdom pertaining to going back to work?

Hon. Doug Downey: So you're saying that I made the declaration that the government is going back to in person?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Yes, you did speak to this in the media. You did.

Hon. Doug Downey: But I want to know context that you're talking about.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Do you not know your own words that you've said around this issue? Do you believe that people should go back to work in office?

Hon. Doug Downey: I believe the 11 million hybrid and virtual hearings have been a success in this province. I think that there is a water level that we will hit on different things, and it's not a cookie cutter for every single situation, so to broad-brush and say that every situation should mimic the other is very simplistic.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Minister, you can't have it both ways. You've said on the public record that it is important to be face-to-face—co-location matters, mentorship matters, working alongside colleagues matters—but for some reason you don't think that this applies to the Landlord and Tenant Board. Why is that?

Hon. Doug Downey: I think we would have an equally successful meeting today if we were all on Teams. It depends on what is happening. The accessibility and the cost reduction for individuals to have their matters heard through the Landlord and Tenant Board or through the Social Benefits Tribunal far exceed the in-person requirement.

Ms. Catherine Fife: So, in your opening comments, you talked about the magic that is happening in our courts. Do you think that that magic actually results in people getting their day in court? Because based on the backlog of people waiting for court dates, you were not meeting that magical moment, in my opinion.

Hon. Doug Downey: We've had to put the resources in, and we're getting them trained and we're getting them in the right places with the right skills, and it's bearing fruit. The backlog is coming down. I'm not going to take credit for that. I'm providing the resources from my space, but the other legal partners and the judiciary are doing the scheduling and doing the work to make sure that this happens.

But putting in millions and millions of dollars to legal aid for the 180,000 people who would otherwise be unrepresented, putting more judges on the bench, putting more prosecutors in the system, putting more victim services in the system, all of that is helping. It's helping with the backlog, and it's helping with the functioning of courts, and it's a permanent change. So when the backlog does come down, when we do achieve 100% success, then those resources will still be there to make our system even greater.

Ms. Catherine Fife: We now have a better understanding. I will say that you don't regard reducing that waitlist to zero as balance, so thank you for that clarification.

You did mention in your opening comments that the Ontario trial lawyers are also here today. I had a meeting with them. I hope my colleagues also took a meeting with them. They raised a really important issue that will impact your budget and the funding that's allocated to the court system. Effective July 1, 2026, all benefits under the Statutory Accident Benefits Schedule will become optional—this is something that you say that you're supportive of—except for medical, rehabilitation and attendant care benefits.

These reforms come against the backdrop of an existing system that has been eroded over time and that is increasingly difficult for injured Ontarians to navigate, often leaving them without full or fair compensation.

The OTLA has urged this government not just today, but literally for years at finance committee, at least for a decade, to consider strengthening these supports throughout the insurance framework and to consider the cumulative and compounding impact that these changes will have, particularly to the most vulnerable Ontarians.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Two minutes remaining for questions and answers.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Has your ministry conducted a fiscal impact assessment to determine how these insurance reforms will affect public expenditures? Can the minister explain how the recent changes to Ontario's insurance framework will protect consumers? We definitely see this as a whitling-down, if you will, around consumer protection and shifting more costs onto the taxpayers. Have you done an assessment of this? Are you seriously considering what the Ontario trial lawyers are bringing to your office? Because they have some very valid points, Minister.

Hon. Doug Downey: I meet with the OTLA on a regular basis. I met with them this morning at 9 o'clock. I met with them a couple of weeks ago online. I hear often from their stakeholders, and I hear from other stakeholders.

The changes to auto insurance that you're referencing are, again, multi-ministry. I think your questions are better put to the Minister of Finance. But I do stand beside and behind the changes to auto insurance that we need to make to give people choice.

Ms. Catherine Fife: So you think people having the choice to make a decision and opt out of services that are not fully clear to them—to your point, there is a consumer protection issue here for sure. But I'm asking you, as the Attorney General, have you evaluated the fact that drivers who opt out of certain services are actually going to cost the system more down the line? Have you done any fiscal assessment or impact on that?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Nineteen seconds, sir.

Hon. Doug Downey: I guess I'll start with—the presumption that people are uninformed, I think is erroneous.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Of course it's happening.

Hon. Doug Downey: I think that people deserve choice. I think that it's important that we do reform. The system needs to be optimal. I don't think that the approach that people won't get it, so we shouldn't do it, is the appropriate—

Ms. Catherine Fife: So you disagree with the Ontario trial lawyers? Okay, thank you very much for that—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): The time has elapsed for questions and answers. Thank you both. This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of the Attorney General.

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

Shall vote 301, ministry administration, carry? All those in favour, raise your hand. All those opposed, raise your hand. Carried.

Shall vote 302, prosecuting crime, carry? All those in favour, raise your hand. All those opposed, raise your hand. Carried.

Shall vote 303, policy, justice programs and agencies, carry? All those in favour, raise your hand. All those opposed, raise your hand. Carried.

Shall vote 304, legal services carry? All those in favour, raise your hand. All those opposed, raise your hand. Carried.

Shall vote 305, court services carry? All those in favour, raise your hand. All those opposed, raise your hand. Carried.

Shall vote 306, victims and vulnerable persons, carry? All those in favour, raise your hand. All those opposed, raise your hand. Carried.

Shall vote 307, political contribution tax credit, carry? All those in favour, raise your hand. All those opposed, raise your hand. Carried.

Shall vote 308, Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario, carry? All those in favour, raise your hand. All those opposed, raise your hand. Carried.

Shall vote 309, court technology and transformation, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, raise your hand. Carried.

Shall the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of the Attorney General carry? All those in favour, raise your hand. All those opposed, raise your hand. Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of the Attorney General to the House? All those in favour, raise your hand. All those opposed, raise your hand. Carried.

This concludes our consideration of this ministry's estimates.

Before I wrap up the committee, I have a point of order from MPP Allsopp. Please, when you're ready, sir.

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Yes. Thank you very much, Chair—just a brief one to correct my own record; I always try to be fact-based. I made a claim about Waterloo that tech employment had increased by 88.5%. It's in fact London that increased by 88.5%; it's 46% in Waterloo.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Duly noted, please, Madam Clerk. It is permissible within the parameters of the committee to correct one's record.

I'd like to thank the Attorney General of Ontario. Deputy Ministers, thank you for being here—it's nice to see you again—and all the other ministry officials who took the time to join us. Thank you to the committee members for your due diligence and participation.

The committee will now adjourn until Thursday, November 6, 2025, at 8 a.m.

The committee adjourned at 1707.

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