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F-9

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F-9

**Standing Committee on
Finance and Economic Affairs**

Pre-budget consultations

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

Consultations prébudgétaires

1st Session
44th Parliament
Thursday 4 December 2025

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44^e législature
Jeudi 4 décembre 2025

Chair: Hon. Ernie Hardeman
Clerk: Lesley Flores

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

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Thursday 4 December 2025

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES FINANCES
ET DES AFFAIRES ÉCONOMIQUES

Jeudi 4 décembre 2025

The committee met at 0901 in committee room 2.

PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Good morning, everybody. I call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs to order. We're meeting today to begin public hearings on the 2026 pre-budget consultations.

Please wait until you're recognized by the Chair before speaking, and, as always, all comments should go through the Chair. The Clerk of the Committee has distributed committee documents, including written submissions, to committee members via SharePoint. To ensure that everybody who speaks is heard and understood, it is important that all participants speak slowly and clearly.

As a reminder, each presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation. After we have heard from all three presenters, the remaining 39 minutes of this time slot will be used for questions from the members of the committee. The time for the questions will be divided into two rounds of five minutes and 30 seconds for the government members, two rounds of five minutes and 30 seconds for the official opposition members, two rounds of five minutes and 30 seconds for the recognized third-party members, and two rounds of three minutes for the independent member of the committee. I will provide a verbal reminder to notify you when you have one minute left for your presentation or allotted time speaking.

CANADIAN FEDERATION OF
INDEPENDENT BUSINESS
ADDICTIONS AND
MENTAL HEALTH ONTARIO
CEE CENTRE FOR
YOUNG BLACK PROFESSIONALS

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): With that, we go to our first group of presenters. The first table consists of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, Addictions and Mental Health Ontario and the CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals, who are virtual. They will hopefully be arriving at some time during the presentation.

We will start with the first presenter. As you heard, you will have seven minutes to make your presentation. At six

minutes, I will say "one minute." Don't stop, because that minute is the most important part of your presentation.

With that—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: No pressure.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I'm just going to say, it doesn't last any longer than one minute.

With that we will start. We do ask everyone speaking to start by addressing their name so Hansard can make sure to attribute the great presentation to the right person. We will start with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business.

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: Good morning. I'm Julie Kwiecinski, director of provincial affairs for Ontario at the Canadian Federation of Independent Business.

Before I begin, here is a bit about CFIB. We're the non-partisan voice of over 39,000 small and medium-sized businesses across Ontario. Our members represent all sectors and professions ranging from A to Z—accountants to zoos—and everything in between, and 92% have 25 or fewer employees.

I'm in committee today on behalf of CFIB's Ontario legislative team to share the state of small businesses and solutions to help these job creators survive and thrive during our challenging economic times.

Here are three important points from our monthly business barometer index for November:

(1) Both short- and long-term business confidence levels in Ontario continue to remain below their historical averages.

(2) For the past 27 consecutive months, lack of demand has been rated by Ontario small businesses as the top barrier to their sales or growth.

(3) Tax and regulatory costs have continued to rank as the top small-business cost constraint.

Small businesses face such an urgent need for comprehensive tax relief that in a recent CFIB survey about top concerns, taxes surpassed operational costs like rent, uncertainty over economic conditions, energy costs and trade uncertainty. That's why our top three solutions focus on lowering the small business tax burden, starting with changes to Ontario's small business tax rate—SBTR, for short—and threshold.

We applauded the Ontario government for decreasing the SBTR from 3.5% to 3.2% in 2020. That was almost six years ago. It was before the pandemic, before the invasion of Ukraine that hampered global supply chains, before the inflation surge, before US tariffs. It's time to lower the

SBTR again. We recommend a decrease to 2%, along with an increase to the eligibility threshold, from \$500,000 to \$700,000, and annual threshold boosts tied to inflation.

If the threshold had been indexed to inflation since 2007, the last time it was raised, it would be well over \$700,000 now. Just lowering the SBTR to 2% would help 326,650 small businesses across Ontario. Just raising the threshold to \$700,000 would help 21,420 small businesses.

These SBTR measures would be investments in small business. When we asked our members in a survey what they would do with the tax savings, 51% said they would increase employee compensation, 44% said they would expand their operations and 34% said they would hire new employees. The Ontario government could make these two SBTR investments as a tariff relief measure under the remaining \$4 billion in the Protecting Ontario Account.

Tariffs are likely here to stay and our members have been feeling their impacts, especially higher costs. Right now, Ontario is tied with Quebec for the highest SBTR in the country. Meanwhile, two other provinces, Nova Scotia and PEI, made SBTR moves this year to improve their tax competitiveness. We've heard the arguments about smaller provinces needing to do more to attract investment. While that may be true, we believe that Ontario can do better to retain and attract even more entrepreneurs.

For our second tax recommendation, we urge the Ontario government to lower its business education tax rates—BETs—to close the wide gap between its average BET rate and residential education tax rate. Ontario's average BET rate is still almost six times its RET rate, and unfortunately, only two municipalities to date, Toronto and Ottawa, have taken the province up on its offer to create a small business property tax subclass with matching provincial BET relief.

For our third tax recommendation, we urge the Ontario government to raise the employer health tax—EHT—exemption threshold from \$1 million to \$2.25 million to match Manitoba and index it to inflation annually instead of every five years. Like the government's last SBTR decrease, the \$1-million EHT threshold took effect almost six years ago, in 2020.

0910

Time is not on my side, so I'll have to save details about our remaining two solutions for our written submission.

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

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: They are about bringing back a renewed Apprenticeship Training Tax Credit, introducing a new informal training tax credit, and creating provincial and municipal construction mitigation programs.

In closing, I ask the MPPs here today to put yourselves in the shoes of small business owners. They don't have a compliance department to keep them up to speed on rules coming from all levels of government. They don't have a lawyer on speed dial. They don't have time to browse through websites to look for programs for which they end up being ineligible. That's why small businesses prefer direct measures like tax cuts over loans and grants to help them weather the tariff storm and unpredictable economy.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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

We will now go to Addictions and Mental Health Ontario.

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: Good morning, honourable members and guests. My name is Jennifer Holmes Weier. I'm the chief executive officer at Addictions and Mental Health Ontario, which you will hear me affectionately refer to as AMHO. That might be how you know us.

We represent more than 150 mental-health-substance-use-and-addictions organizations delivering front-line service throughout Ontario. They come together as part of Addictions and Mental Health Ontario, driven by a shared vision of building the best health system anywhere. That's a pretty exciting goal, and there's lots of work that's going on in order to make that a reality, because every day, our members are working to prevent crises, reduce harm and help Ontarians be well and find wellness. They're supporting your community, your friends, your family and your neighbours.

Today, I am going to talk about five different investments that we believe are most essential to give them the tools and support they need to do their jobs and serve Ontario.

You're going to hear me talk about the need for the Ontario government to invest in sustainable operations. Predictable annual funding increases are essential to sustainably funding ongoing operations and preserving the positive impact of the budget 2025 investments that you'll hear me talk about in a minute.

The mental health, substance use health and addictions workforce: Over the next three years, the government must address the significant wage gap that is drawing skilled, experienced health care workers away from community-based care to other publicly funded employers for comparable jobs.

You're also going to hear me talk about some things that are really exciting that we want to move forward with the government as it comes to system transformation. We'd like the government to allocate appropriate funds and resources to begin implementation of a new care standard for bed-based substance-use health services.

Then, finally, we're also going to be talking about mental health and addictions supportive housing, specifically about the capital and ongoing health care costs to create 1,000 new MHA supportive housing units as we get Ontario on track to meet demand. While building new is important, we also need to sustain what is already in place; 45% of Ontario's existing MHA supportive housing is in need of critical repair, and so we're asking for \$15 million to help keep these homes safe, accessible and appropriate.

Last year, more than 846,000 Ontarians turned to our mental health and addictions community health providers for support, which was a 45% increase from the previous year. More people are asking for help, and that is a great thing. We want people to ask for help, but unfortunately, too often when they do ask for help, they are being made to wait for that help. We want more doors to be open.

We know that timely access to critical care is essential for engagement and recovery. The average wait times for many MHA services are measured in months, not days. For community-based substance use treatment, the wait times are sitting at about 113 days, which is four months; for early intervention mental health services, 126 days, again, four months; bed-based substance use supportive treatment, 83 days; and supportive housing, 1,460 days, or four years. These delays are pushing people into more costly parts of the health care system. They are causing them to perhaps give up on seeking help all together, and they're escalating concerns into crises.

An estimated one in three mental-health-related emergency department visits are for non-urgent needs that are better handled in community upstream and before those concerns turn into crisis. In budget 2025, the government recognized the need for funding for the community mental health and addictions sector specifically to stabilize the operations at their base funding levels, providing a 4% base funding increase. This was a really important first step, but it is not enough to close the significant gaps which are preventing people from accessing care.

I'm going to come back to those five things that I wanted to talk to you about today. It is why we are over-archingly recommending predictable annual funding of at least 2.5% increases for the mental health, substance use health and addictions care sector. We want to ensure that the health care our members are providing is understood as health care and funded as health care in the same predictable ways, aligned with other parts of the health care system.

Over the last 10 years, inflation in Ontario has averaged 2.6% annually, so without predictable annual funding increases, the gains we made, for example, in budget 2025 will be lost within the next two to three years. Ongoing operating funding allows our sector to respond to changing client needs, innovate in service delivery and keep pace with rising costs, ensuring Ontarians receive timely quality care.

The other significant structural issue that we are asking for your attention with is the need for competitive compensation in our sector. The unpredictability of funding increases as well as the funding levels have led to an estimated \$300-million wage gap between community-based mental-health-and-addictions staff and our peers in other public sectors.

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

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: We know this will be complex to close, but we're asking the government to consider closing it within the next three years.

We are very excited about work that the centre of excellence in mental health and addictions at Ontario Health, together with the ministry, is doing around minimum care expectations for substance use services. We would love to see those implemented. It will take, we think, probably about three to five years in order to do so, and so we're asking for the resources accordingly.

Supportive housing I'm going to love to talk to you about more. It is a very important health care intervention

that is not only housing but wraps around the health care supports that are required to help people be well. There is a backlog right now of 36,000 people on the wait list. We want to get started this year with 1,000 more people served.

Thank you very much for the time and for your attention. I welcome the questions.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much for your presentation.

We will now go to the CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals. They will be virtual. I see we're on the screen, so the floor is now yours.

Ms. Trynée Hancock: Good morning. Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity for the opportunity to speak here today. My name is Trynée Hancock. I am the associate director of program and service delivery at CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals.

I want to start off with our recommendations that I'll be talking about today, the first being that the government of Ontario increase and stabilize long-term investment in the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan, BYAP, with multi-year predictable funding dedicated to economic empowerment and employment focused streams.

The second recommendation is that Ontario incentivizes the inclusion of cross-sector partnerships that align with employers, non-profits and government to co-design a paid work experience for youth which leads directly to meaningful and in-demand jobs.

CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals was founded in 2012 by Dr. Kofi Hope as a Black-focused, Black-founded, Black-serving organization committed to advancing the economic and social well-being of Black youth in Toronto. Originally launched as part of the Youth Challenge Fund in 2006, CEE Centre emerged as a legacy initiative in response to the surge of gun violence known as "the Summer of the Gun."

0920

Today, we continue to address barriers for Black youth in accessing meaningful employment and career development opportunities. Our mission is to foster a society and economy where Black youth can achieve both financial prosperity and high-quality jobs for themselves and their families.

To achieve this, CEE has developed a comprehensive workforce development ecosystem tailored for Black youth ages 18 to 20, combining skills training, holistic social supports, psychotherapy, business development and strategic partnerships with community and industry leaders. Our approach equips Black youth to excel as professionals and contribute to Canada's economic growth.

Over our service period, we have developed over 20 skilled programs aligned with these sectors in finance, technology, entertainment, social supports and trades. Since our inception, we've served over 2,000 Black youth, achieving 85% employment retention rate two years post-graduation, and assisting over 100 youth in establishing their entrepreneurship business journeys. This demonstrates tangible impact to this work.

Through the sector, we've developed partnerships with United Way, government, the NBA Foundation and the city of Toronto that has helped us establish these workforce pathways for Black youth. These collaborations empower young people with skills and opportunities to bridge workforce gaps and foster innovation and diverse thought leadership through the future of economic growth.

As we propose building a resilient provincial economy through empowering Ontario's youth, we want to identify that the youth unemployment rate in Ontario is at 14%, while for Black youth it's estimated to be over 20%. The barriers are the most acute in urban areas like Toronto, where Black youth are living in underserved neighbourhoods and are disproportionately affected by challenges. Our labour market exclusion is not a result of individual failing but structural inequities, such as:

- lower callback rates and interviews for Black candidates, even though they are qualified;
- a lack of paid entry-level experiences, enabling them to qualify for the two-year experience requirement;
- rare funding for mental health and trauma supports and employment programs;
- cost barriers such as transit, digital tools, housing, work equipment, child care;
- employers' weak pipelines that limit coordination with community organizations to reduce transition from training to sustainable jobs; and
- the access to employment insurance for contract work for overrepresented Black youth in this stream.

We want to emphasize the impact of community-based work. CEE has prioritized working in the communities that most need it, while working with communities to continue to develop strong pathways for Black youth aged 18 to 29. CEE's model puts this evidence into action by prioritizing serving those furthest away from the labour market to make the biggest impact.

A few features of CEE's model are sector-specific training aligned with employers' needs, including:

- professional certification;
- wrap-around supports for mental health;
- counselling, career coaching, transportation supports, digital access and financial literacy;
- wage subsidies for equity-focused hires and opportunity for employment networking; and
- holistic onboarding, ensuring that participants receive tailored support.

The need for sustainable, strategic investment into Ontario's youth is the last point that I want to cover here before I circle back to our recommendations.

The Ontario Black Youth Action Plan, BYAP, is a proven instrument in supporting Black children and Black youth as well as Black young professionals with mentorship, skills training and employment pathways across the province.

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

Ms. Trynée Hancock: Support from BYAP allows CEE and similar organizations to develop innovative, scalable programs that address real labour market needs in sectors like technology, trade, social services, finance and

entertainment. For organizations like CEE, BYAP funding is essential in delivering a targeted and culturally relevant program that prepares Black youth for meaningful change in their careers.

So, again, I would like to return to our recommendations to increase and stabilize investment in the Black youth action plan and incentivize cross-sector partnerships with employers and the workforce delivery pathways.

Thank you so much for your time today, and we look forward to how we continue to grow Ontario's economy through the investment in youth employment.

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

We now will start the first round of questions, and we will start with the official opposition. MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: How long do we have? Do we have nine minutes for questions?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): It's seven and a half minutes.

Interjection.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Five and a half minutes, sorry.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. Thank you.

Thank you to the presenters for coming in and speaking today. I have questions for each of you.

The first question I have is just around Addictions and Mental Health Ontario. Can you just give me a little bit of an understanding of who is in your organization? Is it private and public or non-profit? And what are the key mental health and addition issues you are serving?

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: Thank you. All of our members are providing publicly funded services in Ontario, in all areas of the province. They are community-based organizations; they are hospital-based organizations; some of the major psychiatric hospitals, specialty hospitals in Ontario; and providers who are offering everything from peer support to counselling, substance use services, bed-based treatment services. So it is the full continuum of supports for mental health substance use and addictions right across Ontario.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. Thank you.

And then the other question I had is just around the supportive housing piece. You mentioned some pretty startling figures in terms of the wait times—you estimated four years—and then also the amount that we need to build, and just off memory, it was 30,000.

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: There are currently known to be 36,000 people on wait-lists, yes.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Sure. So can you tell me a little bit more about that wait-list? Who's waiting? What treatment do they need? And do you have an estimate on cost when it comes to the construction or operations of supportive housing? If you don't know the answer, that's fine; I'm just curious.

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: Yes, we do. When we talk about supportive housing, what do we mean? It refers to housing programs that have a combination of housing supports, whether it could be rent geared to income, rent supplements or purpose-built facilities, and wrap-around

health support services, so whether it's counselling, addictions support, peer support or, later in the transition, more on the activities of daily living. So for it to be operational and for it to be meeting its health care objectives, it requires investments in both housing and in health. We know that supportive housing, MHA—when I say that, I mean mental health and addictions supportive housing—costs \$2,000 to \$5,000 per month, which is significantly less than if somebody is in a hospital setting, which is about \$31,500 a month; in-patient mental health is \$17,000. At the other end of the spectrum, as well, if somebody ends up being justice-involved, in the correctional facilities, that's \$11,000 a month.

We know that investments in this care reduce emergency department use. It reduces police interactions. It reduces hospitalizations and supports recovery. There are two projects that we are showcasing in our submission to committee. One is called 10 Shelldale, in Guelph, and one other is Dunn House, in Toronto, and both of those are supported by AMHO members. They are achieving some incredible outcomes, whether you look at it from health outcomes, justice outcomes, community outcomes or cost savings in the system.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for that.

My next question is to the Centre for Young Black Professionals. I didn't know a lot about the programs that you were mentioning, so I just want to ask some clarifying questions. The Black youth action plan: Could you tell me a little bit about how many people it serves, and for it to be fully functional, what would be the cost of running it?

Ms. Trynée Hancock: The Black youth action plan is currently receiving a \$16.5-million investment from the government until 2025. So they serve from birth to adolescence, and they cover—

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

0930

Ms. Trynée Hancock: Specifically how they contribute to CEE is they are impacting our CEE-Tech program, which is developing the next leaders in cyber security and emerging systems designs throughout all sectors, as we have identified that all corporations actually need to improve their cyber security programs, as the need is growing, as we continue to rely on AI and technology to push corporations forward.

CEE itself has been funded on a yearly basis for a \$100,000 contract that renews every year without long-term investment, and we are developing leaders in that program. That program takes about 24 weeks to develop, and it invests in 15 youth with those funds. BYAP is a bigger program that's government-funded, but how it impacts CEE specifically is through that yearly grant.

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

We'll go to MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you, Chair, and through you I'll start with the Centre for Young Black Professionals. I appreciate the presentation that you gave. The Black youth action plan is doing some really important work in communities. Earlier this year, though, there was something

that concerned me a little bit where it appeared that there was a longer-than-usual delay in accessing funding for that. Was that your experience with the program?

Ms. Trynée Hancock: Yes, it was our experience. I believe it had to do with this government red tape. Sometimes when there is an election or there is a reason to pause certain programs, it does impact the delivery of the grants. Specifically, the MOU gets held up. They aren't allowed to sign any contracts.

Typically, these contracts for the grants are negotiated around April and directly align with fiscal planning for a non-profit. When there is a delay, we cannot confirm programming. We cannot do recruitment. I believe this delay was three months, and so it put a big hole in our calendar and also holds up the supports for youth.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I appreciate that. In my riding of Ajax, we had some big challenges with how delayed that funding was. It was at the point where some organizations were about to lay off staff, because they didn't have any additional reserves, because they were running a very lean operation and they were ensuring that the funding that they receive goes directly to supporting Black youth.

In terms of the yearly grant, would you like to see that grant multi-year?

Ms. Trynée Hancock: Yes, we would like to see it multi-year so that you can adequately plan. We all know that non-profits must start at zero every year, so if we don't have these confirmed agreements, we really can't plan or have investment in our staff, whether it would be just knowing that your job is there or long-term professional development for them, strengthening the services that you're providing to the youth. It has an internal effect; it also has an external effect in terms of the services.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you for that. Around paid work experience for youth, would something like the Canada Summer Jobs program at the provincial level be something that you would like to see?

Ms. Trynée Hancock: That is a great suggestion, but Canada Summer Jobs has a bit of work to do in terms of the restrictions. It requires youth to be exiting a post-secondary program in order to qualify. Therefore, if you're taking a different pathway and doing the workforce development program, you do not qualify for summer jobs.

Also, the way that Canada Summer Jobs is applied, we could not apply for summer jobs and then provide the work placement on the back end. It's for internal purposes.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: What would you like to see around that?

Ms. Trynée Hancock: I think what we would like to see is a dynamic funding structure. Right now, what we're seeing is \$100,000 in our granting structure. That only goes so far. That can't put 15 to 20 youth into work placement as well as proprietor programs with dynamic services. So we'd like to see a better flexibility and growth in the fund, as well as long-term investment in the year-over-year funding structure.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Okay. Thank you.

How much do I have left, Chair?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Two minutes.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I'll switch gears very briefly to Jennifer. Thank you for your presentation. How many supportive housing units do you think the province of Ontario needs to build in order to address the homelessness crisis?

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: Supportive housing, specifically for mental health and addictions, supports folks who certainly are unhoused or experiencing housing precarity. It also supports other individuals in their recovery journey. Other folks seeking AMHO supportive housing might be someone for whom their existing home environment is not conducive to their recovery. It could be their local community. When it comes to this in particular, what we're asking for is 1,000 new units this year and in each year for the next 10 years.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. I haven't looked at these numbers in a few months, but I think my understanding is we probably need about 20,000 supportive housing units across the province. When we look across the province, in pretty much every single community there is a homelessness crisis, there's a mental health crisis, there's an addictions crisis, and folks aren't getting the support that they need.

The federal government is going to be putting a billion dollars into building supportive housing, which is fantastic, but I'm very concerned about the lack of operating support afterwards. Would you agree with that?

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: It has to come hand in hand. There's the capital support for the thousand units that we're looking at; we estimate that to be about \$193 million. As you said, Build Canada Homes could present a great opportunity—

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

We'll now go to MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you to all of our presenters this morning. My question is for CFIB. I just want to say how much I appreciate your tax barometer emails each month; much of that content makes it into my weekly newspaper columns.

I want to applaud the government on some of the business support we did see in the fall economic statement, but I think we need to do more. Last Saturday I was out Christmas shopping, and I was visiting local businesses. One business owner—she's a young girl and she took over the business from her mom. There were tears in her eyes. Black Friday 2023 for her was a \$20,000 day. Last year, it was an \$8,000 day. Last Friday, she barely made \$2,000.

We have to do more, and as a fiscal conservative, I believe in tax cuts. There have been motions—I've tabled a motion in the House with respect to lowering the small business tax rate and we've seen a private members' bill also on the table, and the government has dismissed those.

My question to you, Julie, is if you had to pick between lowering Ontario's small business tax rate and raising its eligibility threshold—I'd like to see both done, but if you had to pick, which one would you choose and why?

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: That's a tough question, MPP Brady, but first I would like to offer the monthly business

barometer emails to any MPP. You can reach out to me after the committee. We're a non-partisan organization. You are all welcome to receive them. They measure business confidence levels on a monthly basis in Ontario and across the country.

Now back to your question, MPP Brady. If CFIB had to choose—it's a tough choice because obviously we would like both. As an example, Nova Scotia did both.

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

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: As of April 1, Nova Scotia lowered the small business tax rate from 2.5% to 1.5% and elevated the threshold. If we had to pick, definitely lowering the small business tax rate from 3.2% to 2%—I think I alluded to it earlier—would have greater impact. It would help 326,650 businesses. That's why we would choose lowering the tax rate.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you. Just quickly, what is CFIB doing to help businesses pivot to new markets right now?

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: We've been doing a lot of work in this area. What we're finding with our members—one of the challenges is that sometimes there's a widget or gidget they need that only comes from the United States at this point in time. There is no new market. You have to create a new market, and we all know that doesn't happen overnight.

I can give you a couple of examples. Our Ottawa team—we have a fantastic team in our Ottawa office—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. No more examples; the time is up.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I want to thank each of our presenters today for coming and advocating for your organizations; all have great input and great suggestions and we appreciate that feedback during this process.

0940

My question is for the CFIB, to Julie. My riding of Simcoe—Grey, and particularly the town of Collingwood, has a long-standing relationship with the CFIB. In your comments, you mentioned that most of the businesses you represent have under 25 employees; I know that that's the majority of employers in my area, and I think over half of the private sector employers in Ontario would fall into that category as well. So it's a very important aspect of our market and it's also under great stress, as you indicated.

You've talked a great deal about potential tax relief and said that it's not really about grants and loans. I'm wondering if you can talk to us about the WSIB rebates that this government has implemented and how that has affected your businesses, your clients, members and what you see, boots on the ground, as a result.

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: Great question, and I want to thank you for your support, MPP Saunderson, of CFIB Small Business Saturday.

WSIB surplus rebates: Our members—and remember, this is businesses of all sizes, not just small businesses. It's based on payroll, so the larger businesses would get a bigger chunk of the money. But it's really been a great form of relief. The Ontario government has distributed \$5.2 billion in surplus rebates over the last three and a half

years, this year alone \$4 billion: \$2 billion in February and March, and another \$2 billion as tariff relief in October. It's really helped our members. Some members say, "Oh, I got \$80,000," and then they got another \$80,000.

And the beauty of it is, it shows up in your account as a credit, and then magically, you can fill out a little form—no red tape—and it turns into a cheque within 45 days. And because of all the tariff struggles and economic conditions, this money has really come in handy.

And the beauty of it is, more than anything, that we're talking about surpluses that are sitting there—like, \$7 billion. So you're not taking money out of the government coffers; you're giving businesses back what they paid in, because the WSIB is 100% funded by employer premiums. So you're giving businesses back the money that they paid, because they overpaid, and the WSIB does have a policy to never go under 110% funding, so it's never going to hit anything below 110%, or 10% overfunding.

So it's been fantastic. We fought for this; we'll continue to fight for the surplus rebates. You can only imagine a business getting \$160,000 in one year. Yes, it's its own money back, but some provinces don't even do this, like BC. They won't even acknowledge that it's a surplus rebate. So kudos to the government. We encourage them to keep doing this.

To get it, you have to be a safe employer. They don't just give the money to anybody—a safe employer that pays premiums. And this is not affecting any worker premiums or what workers are getting in terms of their premiums. Workplaces are getting safer. There are programs; small businesses take the government up on them for safer workplaces, so you're looking at surplus money that's just sitting there, going back to businesses of all sizes for good use.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you again to all of the presenters for coming out this morning and sharing your insights on what you would like to see in the upcoming budget. It's very much appreciated.

My question is to Jennifer. Hope Place Centre is in my riding. I'm not sure if they're a member of yours or not, but they do incredible work, and I was able to attend their AGM this year and also announce some capital funding that they received from the Ministry of Health to improve their building in my riding of Halton Hills. So I wanted to ask about the fact that our government created a ministry, a portfolio, dedicated to mental health and addictions a few years ago, and if you could just share whether you think that's important and how that has maybe impacted your sector.

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: Yes, it is important. It is important because it helps us to continue to shine a light on mental health, substance-use health, and addictions care as essential health care services for Ontarians.

We're able to collaborate with government, and we do so with the ministry and with the centre of excellence at Ontario Health to create a better system, and that's what our members are here to do. They're here to serve. They're here to make sure that what they are providing in terms of

health outcomes is strong for people of Ontario and as well that the system can be sustainable over time and continue to evolve and meet some emerging needs. We are happy to work in partnership, and one of the things that comes out of that partnership, for example, is the work that I mentioned around minimum care expectations.

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

We'll now go to MPP Shaw.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I have a few questions for you, Julie. Thank you for your presentation. I would be happy to be on your mailing list if you wanted to add me to that.

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: We will add you for sure, MPP Shaw.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you. That's great.

In Ontario, we're really concerned about job losses, and your presentation caught my attention because when you're talking about the small business tax reduction, the two things that the employer said is that they would increase employee compensation and also look to hire more employees. I think that this is an important contribution to our economy, to people who are losing jobs now in Ontario or who are working maybe part-time, reduced hours when they need to be working full-time. We know, as we all say, small business is the backbone of the Ontario economy.

Can you just speak more directly about how this small business tax reduction would play such a key role in making sure people stay employed and expand our economy?

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: I'm going to go back to my earlier points. We are a very evidence-based organization, so we always reach out to our members.

We asked them directly, "If you were to get these tax savings, what would you do with them?" and 51% said they would increase employee compensation. So employee wages would go up. Employees would have more money in their pocket. Some 34% would hire new employees. Employment would increase. Some 44% would expand their business. That would lead to economic growth on its own.

That's why we see it as an investment, not forgone revenue, because businesses would use the money wisely to grow the economy. Thank you for the question.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Yes. I see that's really important. Thank you for the work that you do.

Do you have a question, MPP Bell?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I would like to go back to Jennifer. Thank you. I've got a few questions.

One is around Dunn House in Toronto and if you are seeing any tangible outcomes from that investment. You can always follow up with me if you've got specifics on that.

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: Sure. Dunn House in Toronto is operated by AMHO member Fred Victor together with the University Health Network and a number of other partners.

I can share what they have been reporting. What they are reporting, for example, is that emergency department visits dropped 52%, which saves over \$400,000 a year, and hospital admissions dropped 79%, saving \$1.6 million a year, among other outcomes. There are other programs as well that are innovating in this model.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay, and that's for the people who are living in the Dunn House supportive housing facility?

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: Correct.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay, good. All right, sounds good. The other question I have is around when you were doing the estimate of costs for the different types of options available to government if they're supporting or responding to people who are struggling with homelessness or addiction. You mentioned that it costs between \$2,000 to \$5,000 for a supportive housing unit. Can you flesh out what that cost is? Is it the rent? Help me understand that.

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: Yes. There are the capital costs.

Ms. Jessica Bell: So that includes capital, or is it just operating?

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: There's then the operating costs for the unit as well as the health care costs that are associated with it.

So when we talk about building 1,000 new units this year, which is what we're hoping for, we're looking at a capital investment of about \$193 million and an ongoing operating cost of about \$52 million. That is to provide those units which people will be able to attach to for varying lengths of time, depending on their need and program.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Just to clarify, the \$2,000 to \$5,000 estimate that you mentioned includes capital and operating, the mental health and the health care wrap-arounds, and the rent?

0950

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

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: Yes. It's housing, so it's the rent. So it could be rent supplements—there's a number of different ways that housing is offered. In addition to that, we have a report I can send you called Unlocking Solutions that breaks it all down.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you. I would appreciate that.

The final question—and Julie, we might need to follow up—I was curious about the small business property tax credit that the city of Toronto has moved ahead with. Have you got an assessment on how it helped individual businesses, how much money did it save them? Are you hearing feedback from your businesses?

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: Well, I can't give you specific amounts, but Toronto opted to go with 15%. The province allows—this municipal tool allows—any municipality to go up to a 35% reduction in commercial and industrial taxes, which is then matched by the province in the Business Education Tax—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. Maybe we can finish that in the next question.

MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Do you want to take 20 seconds to finish that?

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: Oh, no. That's okay, I can finish it after.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Okay.

Jennifer, I actually want to correct what I had said: We need to book 93,000 supportive housing units in the province of Ontario. It's a big problem. I will be very frank, Chair: I'm tired of seeing bandages placed on the crisis that is happening, and we need to get on with building supportive housing units in the province of Ontario.

Julie, thank you very much for your presentation. You've said a lot of things that Ontario Liberals are calling for, which is cutting the small business tax rate, which is extra supports around employer-apprenticeship workforce development, supporting, I would say, small businesses.

Do you want to expand just a little bit around the employer supports that could be provided by the province when you're bringing on, for example, a new employee?

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: Thank you. I really, really appreciate that question, because I didn't have time to get to the last two asked. So I appreciate that.

I'm going back to the theme of direct measures here. Small businesses don't have time to look at websites. A lot of the programs are not for them; they're for bigger business, so they're ineligible. We're not saying that those programs shouldn't exist; obviously, big businesses are employers too and they need programs as well. But we're saying those programs don't work for us.

We're looking at—and this would be a youth employment measure too—an informal training tax credit. You wouldn't believe how many members tell us that they train employees on things that you think an employee should already know. Basic things: showing up to work on time, writing a memo properly, working as a team—just basic, polite comportment in the workplace. And then what happens, sadly, is that the employee moves on three months or six months later to a better-paying job at a bigger business.

We're actually trying to figure out how to do this. We've looked jurisdictionally; we don't see anything. I think the nugget, really, here, the devil in the details, is defining informal training. We're going to work on that, and hopefully we can come up with something that's amendable to the government.

Thank you for the question.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I appreciate that, and I thank you for putting that on the table. I think it's really, really important.

You were mentioning around small business confidence right now in the province, and that is not going up, I think, for a variety of reasons. How is that competitive landscape for small businesses? Are we seeing more being created right now or just seeing things kind of stagnant? What does that look like?

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: I'm going to use a term that our research department is working on for a report: entrepreneurial drought. The whole climate of things—I don't have the survey data here, but I know we've asked a

question recently: “If you were to start a business now, would you do it?” And the number is very low; it’s well below 50%. That kind of ties in with the business confidence levels.

Remember too, these business confidence levels, it’s not pointing fingers at anyone, because as far as small businesses are concerned, all levels of government should work together to figure this stuff out. A lot of our members see government as the “big G.” It doesn’t matter which level it is. That’s why red tape reduction is so important. Tax and regulatory burden have been at the top of our list of cost constraints for I don’t know how long. They always want red tape reduction and lower taxes, if you had to pick one thing historically.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I appreciate that.

Jennifer, I want to thank you for the presentation from Addictions and Mental Health Ontario of what you’re looking for year over year, because, in my view, it tends to be a sector that’s sometimes overlooked. I appreciate you coming here today and sharing this directly at the committee and folks that are listening.

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

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Around the staff piece, is there anything that the province can be doing? Because I know staff that are working in the not-for-profit space, wages aren’t as great. Is there anything we can be doing to help retain staff better?

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: Absolutely. The first and most important thing we can do is to close the wage gap, to work on competitive compensation for community health workers. These are skilled, experienced staff doing very difficult jobs, helping the most vulnerable in our society. We understand that number to be in the neighbourhood of \$300 million for mental health and addictions, in particular. That’s for folks like social workers, caseworkers, addictions workers. This is the number one issue that our members tell us keeps them up, is about how—

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

MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I’m wondering, Julie, if you want to finish your piece on the widgets and gidgets.

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: Oh, I would love to, because I was telling you about our great Ottawa team, but then it kind of dropped and you didn’t know what they did.

They actually have met with European Union reps. CFIB members are looking at two major markets right now: the European Union and Mexico. Our president, Dan Kelly, was invited by the federal government to meet with Mexican officials. Those are the markets that small businesses are looking into right now.

Again, I have to say that this stuff doesn’t happen overnight. It’s going to take a long time. Things like the Canadian mutual recognition agreement that was signed on goods by most jurisdictions, that’s unprecedented and historic. We have to see how that all pans out. But this stuff takes time. You’re not going to get results overnight. You just have to keep plugging away.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: The short- and long-term confidence is troubling to me, just as my colleague said here beside me. We’ve talked a lot about what we can do to create a better business environment for those businesses, and I agree with those items wholeheartedly. But I’m wondering if CFIB has any consumer—if you know what consumers are thinking? I feel like we need to do more to drive consumers to those small and medium-sized businesses. We haven’t touched on that yet, and I’m wondering what the consumer is thinking and how we can get them there.

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: That is a fantastic question, MPP Brady, because I’m sure people are aware that shopping habits changed in COVID. People went online, and the sad part is, they stayed there. So how to get them back? One of the things that we—I don’t know if you’ve heard this term, “showroom shopping.” This happens at Christmas. People will go into the local sporting goods store, try on a pair of skates. They know exactly—

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

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: —they want the Bauer model. Then they go and buy it online because it’s 50 bucks cheaper. So it’s getting small businesses back, and a lot of businesses can’t be online.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Quickly, my last question, Jennifer: In my neck of the woods, in Haldimand–Norfolk, I see a huge shortage in the professionals needed to address the supports needed in the community. I’m wondering if there is a way that we can be more efficient in consolidating the professionals needed to support the people in our communities.

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: When we look at the levels of increase of service that we have been providing and then look at as well—which I mentioned earlier was about 66% over a five-year period. In the same period, staffing only increased 2.8%. So they’re operating very flat.

These organizations are efficient. They are very effectively delivering with what they have. We know that the number one thing we can do is to bring more folks in.

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

MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you, Julie and Jennifer, for your presentations today.

My question is for Jennifer. Through our government’s addiction recovery fund, we’ve added another 400 detox, treatment and withdrawal management beds across the province that have already had over 10,000 unique uses.

1000

Is this something that has impacted your organization, and what else can the government do in the same scope? Do you find this type of specific investment helpful, and where do you think there is room for improvement?

Ms. Jennifer Holmes Weier: Yes, it’s very helpful. We are thankful for the support.

One of the things that we talked about earlier: The wait times for bed-based, substance-use, supportive treatment is about 83 days in Ontario. So we know that there is need

for more of the very services that are supported by things like the addictions recovery fund. It's communities right across the province that need that support, and we would welcome the opportunity to explore that further.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you very much.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Triantafilopoulos.

Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos: Thank you to all the presenters for being here today. Your information is very valuable to us as we proceed on these pre-budget consultations.

I'd like to direct my question to Julia at the CFIB. What I wanted to ask was, you had mentioned that you'd prefer as an organization—that your small business members would prefer direct tax cuts. But you also mentioned that the programs the government currently has in place just don't seem to be appropriate for small businesses.

Are there some specific programs that you think could make a difference? What would be the kinds of things we would have to take into consideration?

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: Well, I think what we need to do is sit down with government and work on something totally new.

Some programs right now, what the issue is—for example, the Skills Development Fund. We actually surveyed our members. Only 6% of our members have ever used it, so that's why we're not really focused on it. One of our interns looked into it and the guide—the application guide for the Skills Development Fund training stream—is 43 pages long. I mean, maybe there's an area that Minister Khanjin can look in. I recognize there's accountability in this, but 43 pages long—a small business owner, they're out automatically.

The other thing that program requires is partnering. A small business owner is saying, "Who do I partner with? I don't know. Where do I go to figure out where to partner?" And there are other criteria in that specific program, but I'm not saying that it doesn't work for the people that have benefited from it.

Another one is the Ontario Together Trade Fund. I've told Minister Fedeli this during a meeting: It's a great program for large businesses—a great program; not knocking it at all. It doesn't work for small businesses. One of the criteria is putting in \$200,000 of your own money, and I think if you understand a small business, I don't need to say any more; \$200,000—they don't have it.

We would like to sit down with government, but again, programs—you've got to go online; you've got to fill stuff out. In some cases, the business owner would have to hire somebody to do that, so that's an extra cost.

Again, the direct measures: That's why red tape reduction—that's a direct measure too, because it just happens; paperwork is cut. What does that mean? Does the form have to be 10 pages long? Can it be three pages long? Are there laws out there that are across all three levels of government?

Again, we know from our red tape reduction work that about one third of the rules, regulations, policies, docu-

ments, forms out there are red tape, but the other two thirds are needed for health, safety and environmental outcomes.

Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos: Thank you.

Ms. Julie Kwiecinski: You're welcome.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute. MPP Kanapathi.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: One minute. Mr. Chair, as I say, happy birthday to you. You're doing an amazing job.

Interjection.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): It's only one minute; don't waste it.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you to all the presenters and for your presentations.

My question is to Trynée from the CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals. You may have heard about how we have introduced several initiatives to break down systemic barriers and promote equity in education and employment. One example is additional investment we allocated. We did \$15 million over three years in racialized and Indigenous supports for entrepreneurs. It's called the RAISE program, which provides free access to business coaching, training and grants. How do you see this program? Is it helping you?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I'm afraid you didn't leave any time for an answer.

With that, I do want to thank all the presenters. That concludes the time for the presenters for this panel and also concludes the business until we recess until 1 o'clock.

The committee recessed from 1006 to 1303.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Good afternoon, everyone. We will now resume the 2026 pre-budget consultations.

As a reminder, each presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation. After we've heard from all three presenters, the remaining 39 minutes in this time slot will be used for questions from the members of the committee. This time of questions will be divided into two rounds of five minutes and 30 seconds for the government members, two rounds of five minutes and 30 seconds for the official opposition members, two rounds of five minutes and 30 seconds for the recognized third-party members and two rounds of three minutes for the independent member of the committee.

I will also provide a verbal reminder to notify you when you have one minute left in your presentation or the allotted time of speaking in the questions. Make sure that when I say "one minute" you don't stop, because the punchline is yet to come, and at the end of that one minute nothing more will come.

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The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): With that, we will have our first panel coming up. The first presenter is

Imperial Tobacco Canada, the second one is Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre and the third one is Ontario Federation of Agriculture—no, Habitat for Humanity Greater Toronto Area. Oh, I am going down one here. With the time that I'm late, I've already used up the seven minutes that Habitat for Humanity could muster up. Thank you very much.

We will start the presentations with Imperial Tobacco Canada, who will be number one. As I said, we'll give you a one-minute reminder when the time is up.

With that, we also remind everyone to make sure that you introduce yourself by your name to make sure that we can attribute the conversation that you put forward in Hansard to the proper person.

With that, the first one is Imperial Tobacco Canada. The floor is yours.

Mr. Eric Gagnon: Thank you for the invitation to be here. My name is Eric Gagnon. I'm the vice-president of corporate and regulatory affairs for Imperial Tobacco Canada. There are two issues I wanted to address with you today.

The first one is illicit tobacco and other illegal nicotine products. It has been a few years since I last appeared before this committee and, unfortunately, the situation has not improved.

We now estimate illicit cigarettes make up at least 34% of the Canadian market, robbing the federal and provincial governments of over \$2.5 billion in tobacco tax revenue annually. A recent EY Canada report estimated the illicit market share in Ontario to be at least 39% and possibly as high as 69%. The estimated lost tobacco tax revenue between 2019 and 2022 was between \$990 million and \$1.8 billion.

These are public funds fuelling organized crime activities. As a reminder, the RCMP says there are 175 organized crime groups dealing in illegal tobacco in Canada. In addition, almost every illicit tobacco seizure now involves cocaine, fentanyl and firearms. It is the same organized crime groups using the same trafficking methods.

Fortunately, Ontario has begun taking action with commitments in the last two budgets for increased fines and other measures to address illicit tobacco. These actions are very much appreciated, and the government deserves praise for recognizing the seriousness of this problem.

Unfortunately, Ontario's efforts will continue to be undermined by a federal government that has been silent on illicit tobacco since 2015, despite it being one of the most lucrative organized crime activities in Canada. Ontario has recognized this along with Alberta. Both have demanded federal action, particularly around online sales of contraband tobacco but also other products like vapes and nicotine pouches, an issue that is virtually impossible for a province to tackle alone due to jurisdictional considerations.

With this in mind, I want to provide recommendations. First, we recommend that your government not shock the market with large tobacco tax increases. If taxes need to be raised, we propose a moderate and predictable model

based on inflation, which is what the federal government has legislated.

Second, continued investment and illegal tobacco enforcement—it works. Quebec used to have an illicit rate of 40%; now it is less than 15%, and the province has recouped hundreds of millions in lost revenue.

Finally, demand that federal government take a leadership role because their inaction is costing you lost revenue and contributing to unsafe communities across the province. To put that in perspective, for every 10% reduction in the illicit tobacco rate, Ontario will generate \$143 million in additional tax revenue annually. Furthermore, under the terms of the tobacco industry litigation settlement, provinces now receive 85% of cigarette profits, so there is a double benefit to reducing the illicit rate. If the national illicit rate is reduced by 10%, the province will receive an additional \$65 million annually in settlement payments.

My second point is directly related to the imperative of providing smokers with new tools to quit cigarettes. Imperial Tobacco Canada made a huge impact on this goal in the fall of 2023 when we launched Zonnic, the first nicotine pouch authorized as a nicotine replacement therapy, or NRT, by Health Canada. Nicotine pouches work in the same way as other oral NRT products, such as nicotine gum and lozenges. In fact, the data provided to Health Canada to authorize Zonnic as an NRT demonstrated the delivery of nicotine to a smoker to be equivalent to the lozenge and is more effective than the gum.

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When we launched Zonnic, the product was available in convenience stores and pharmacies, like other NRTs. In convenience stores where our product was available, they saw a decline in their cigarette sales. Unfortunately, former federal Minister of Health Mark Holland did not see it that way, and he went on a crusade against Zonnic that resulted in a ministerial order that restricted the sale of Zonnic to behind the pharmacy counter under the supervision of a pharmacist.

This had five main impacts, all of which are relevant to Ontario.

(1) There was an increase in cigarette sales because smokers lost convenient access to the product. Many do not want to go wait in line to speak to a pharmacist to get it.

(2) Smokers in rural areas without pharmacies were completely cut off from access. No one is going to drive 30, 40, 50 kilometres or more to buy NRT pouches when cigarettes are available around the corner.

(3) Because of the access challenges, smokers are turning to the illicit market to buy pouches. We now estimate 70% of the market is made up of unregulated and potentially dangerous illicit products.

(4) Over 1.3 million hours of pharmacists' time is now wasted on Zonnic transactions across Canada, including 240,000 hours in Ontario annually. When this province is asking pharmacists to expand their scope of practice and provide more primary care, the federal government is instead mandating that they do the work of a convenience

store clerk. It is an enormous waste of health care resources.

Finally, this was another slap in the face from the federal government to convenience stores, who estimate an annual loss of \$75,000 per store since the ministerial order.

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

Mr. Eric Gagnon: It remains impossible to explain how convenience stores are trusted to sell age-restricted products like cigarettes, alcohol and lottery tickets but not a cessation product.

Also, retail point of sale is a provincial responsibility, and I encourage Ontario to demand the federal government respect that and amend the ministerial order to restore the sale of NRT nicotine pouches to convenience stores and gas stations, provided the product is kept behind the counter and requires proof of age.

If smoking reduction goals are to be met, including the Canadian target of reducing smoking rates to less than 5% by 2035, you need to make the alternatives to cigarettes as easy to obtain as cigarettes themselves.

Thank you again, and I look forward to your questions.

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

We will now hear from Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. There we are. You can come forward.

Dr. Rob Fowler: Thanks very much.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I believe you were here when we introduced and said I will let you know at one minute when your presentation is done.

With that, welcome, and the floor is yours.

Dr. Rob Fowler: Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak today. As mentioned, my name is Dr. Rob Fowler. I am the chief of the trauma and critical care program at Sunnybrook Hospital, Canada's and Ontario's leading trauma care and critical care facility. I'm here to highlight an urgent need that we as a hospital and also as a province must address, and that's specifically the development of a critical care centre at Sunnybrook.

As the country's busiest trauma centre, we are essential in delivering life-saving care, not only for people in the GTA but also for the province of Ontario. More than 70% of the patients that we treat for trauma come from beyond Toronto's borders. We are the province's relied-upon resource for individuals in their most critical moments in their health care journey, whether that involves a severe injury, a complex cancer diagnosis or care of a premature baby.

Ontario's population is growing, of course, and so are the demands on the health care system. Over the last decade, the need for trauma and critical care at Sunnybrook has increased more than 80% and we expect it to grow by another 40% over the next five to 10 years.

Sunnybrook's CritiCall cases—those requests that come from other hospitals to care for their sickest patients—have increased by about 30% over the last five years. This is the highest growth in the province. We accept more critical transfers than any other hospital in the GTA across most specialities. That includes 100%—so,

all—of the patients that have burn injuries in the GTA. That accounts for about two thirds of all burn patients in the province and about 65% of trauma patients that come from the GTA, just over a third of those province-wide.

These transfers come to us from other hospitals that aren't equipped to take care for them, and that's understandable. We're there to support patients in our partner hospitals across the province. If there has been a car crash in Woodstock, if there's been a car crash in Scarborough, if someone is injured in Ontario's growing Ring of Fire region, we are the province's—and, indeed, the country's—lead trauma and burn hospital.

Unfortunately, our spacing capacity to keep pace with this need is limited. Much of our infrastructure was built in the 1940s to care for soldiers who were returning back from World War II. We really can't keep up with the demands. The strain on the team grows each year. Our trauma bay, the busiest in Canada, has room for just three stretchers. On April 23, 2018, I was working at Sunnybrook in the trauma room when we had—not so far from here—a van attack. In a very short period of time, we had 11 people who came in, all of whom had either passed or were passing at the scene, and another 15 critically injured. We needed more than three stretchers on that day.

It's not just a Sunnybrook issue; it's a provincial issue. As the likelihood of major disasters and complex medical scenarios increases, we do need a provincial resource that can handle both the day-to-day and large-scale emergencies.

A new critical care centre at our hospital would do just that. We plan to include 400 new beds, enabling us to care for even more of Ontario's complex patients from trauma, cancer and burns. This would also encompass 18 new operating rooms that would be able to handle upwards of 10,000 more surgeries for the province in any given year. It would bring our critical care services together in a single state-of-the-art building, ensuring that when seconds count, we'd be able to deliver care to patients close to us.

The Ontario government has been a very strong supporter and a driver of this project since 2018, and have already shown their support with a \$5-million planning grant. We've made great progress working together with the Ministry of Health and Infrastructure Ontario. Our stage 1.3 submission is already in place and submitted. We are ready to, as our hospital engineers tell us, put shovels in the ground.

We'd like a confirmed commitment to move the project to the next stage and ensure that we can serve as the go-to location when people in the GTA—and, indeed, across the province—need trauma care, need burn care and need cancer care.

In closing, I ask you to reflect upon the rapidly increasing need for trauma and critical care services in the province, and the essential role such new capacity would play in that need. The facility won't just help to address the most urgent and complex needs across the province, but will strengthen our preparedness for whatever challenges may come ahead. I hope that we can count on your

support. Thanks very much for the opportunity to come and present today and to highlight some of these issues.

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

We'll now go to Habitat for Humanity Greater Toronto Area. Welcome. I think you heard the instructions: You start with introducing yourself, and I will let you know when it's finished.

Ms. Ene Underwood: Great. Thanks so much. Thank you for the opportunity for the opportunity to be able to speak to you today.

My name is Ene Underwood. I'm the CEO at Habitat for Humanity GTA. Everyday, we work with families who are doing everything right. They're working hard, they're raising their kids, they're contributing to their communities, but they still are not able to afford the decent, stable housing that their families need in this market.

At Habitat for Humanity, we help those families unlock the benefits of affordable home ownership when their children can benefit the most from them. Our innovative financing model enables families to buy a home with zero down payment and pay an affordable mortgage reflective of their household income. Each Habitat for Humanity GTA home remains affordable in the long-term, even after families sell.

Poll after poll, as we know, shows that young Ontarians are not ready to give up on their dream of home ownership, and neither are we at Habitat for Humanity. That is why we really do appreciate this government's support and attention to home ownership and particularly some of the changes you've made that have helped us. That includes Bill 23, which made development charges exempt for non-profit housing developments; the direct funding that's being provided with the city of Toronto new deal, that led to us starting at 33-unit home ownership development here, and we have a couple of others under discussion; and also your commitment to remove the HST for new homes bought by first-time homebuyers, which for us is \$70,000 less that we have to assemble to deliver these opportunities.

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Our board of directors had a retreat last weekend to discuss our five-year strategy, and at that retreat they have set a goal of us delivering 2,000 more of these opportunities under way, completed or under construction by the end of 2030.

I want to spend time talking about how you can help organizations like us achieve those kinds of goals. And I offer you two recommendations: The first one relates to land. This government and its predecessor government have made multiple commitments to make provincial land available for affordable housing, but to date, beyond very commendable projects under way in the West Don Lands and at Grenville site here in Toronto, we are unaware of any other provincial lands that have been designated and expedited for housing, let alone affordable housing.

Second—and this is where I want to spend the most time— incentivize Ontario citizens to be a bigger part of the solution by launching two time-limited tax measures:

an affordable housing philanthropy tax credit and an affordable housing investment tax credit. Canada is in the midst of the largest transfer of generational wealth in our history. And a very large share of that wealth was created through decades of real estate appreciation. The Ontario government does have limits on how much money it can bring to solving this problem, but you can use your tax system to help unlock much more of this generational wealth while it is in movement.

My written submission provides a bit more background, but let me highlight these two initiatives, first of all, the affordable housing philanthropy tax credit: Of course, Ontario already provides a standard charitable tax donation credit, but in a time of crisis, sometimes you need to aim incentives. You've done that before, in 2012 and continuing to this day, with a tax credit for farmers to donate food to food banks. That's a priority-specific top-up that says, food security matters, and so we're going to reward donations in that area.

Here's how a housing version of that could work: First of all, limit it to 2027-28. Make it available for eligible donations that would then receive an extra, say, 20% to 25% credit above the standard tax credit for donations, and this would only be available for eligible donations above the three-year average for each donor so that you are not cannibalizing donations they were giving to other causes like health care, education etc. So, this uses a tool Ontarians already understand. It's a targeted tax credit, and it points squarely at the generational wealth decisions that are being made right now.

Now, on the investment tax credit side: Again, Ontario has a history of using investment tax credits to channel private money into priority sectors. You did this in the past with the labour-sponsored investment funds, and other provinces use it today with community investment funds that support local economic development.

An affordable housing investment tax credit would apply the same logic, and here's how: First of all, set up eligibility criteria for new affordable housing impact investment funds, professionally managed, whose mandate would be to provide one or both of below-market construction and bridge loans—so, below-market interest, construction bridge loans—to non-profit housing and community housing projects in Ontario and/or low-cost first mortgages for programs like we offer at Habitat. Ontarians who invest in those funds would receive a non-refundable tax credit—so, for argument's sake, 15% to 25% of the amount that they invested—up to a defined annual maximum, and they would get a modest fixed 1% or 2% return on that investment. In exchange, investors would be required to a minimum holding period, say, of five to 10 years, so it's matching up with the realities of long-term housing construction.

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

Ms. Ene Underwood: As with the philanthropic tax credit, it's time-limited, you can put a modest cap on it, you can evaluate it and you can scale accordingly.

In summary, both of these tax measures use measures Ontarians have seen before and they understand, and you

have used them before. They're time-limited, you can build in evaluation, they respect the fiscal constraints of this province, and they signal to Ontarians that if they want to put their inheritance or real estate gains or their savings to work on housing, the province will back them up.

Canadians have a culture here of feeling that the need for affordable housing is the government's responsibility. We give to health care; we give to arts; we don't give to housing. This is an opportunity to use these two tools to signal to Ontarians: We need you, Ontario, to help us address this generational housing crisis. Thank you again for your time.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much for that presentation, and that concludes the presentation.

We will start the first round of questioning with the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you, Chair, through you: Thank you, Ene, for this presentation. I have to say, I really appreciate the work that the not-for-profit housing sector does in providing both affordable rentals and affordable ownership, in the case of Habitat for Humanity. If we want people to be able to be on the path towards also building generational wealth for folks who may otherwise not have that opportunity, I think the models and the work that Habitat for Humanity is doing—and other groups, like Options for Homes, are doing really incredible work.

This is interesting, this tax credit idea. Is this the first time that you've come forward with this here?

Ms. Ene Underwood: I think it is the first time, officially, coming forward. As I say in the background note, it's not fully baked. It would need more work. These things get complicated fast, but you've done them before.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: When I look at government spending and I look at construction, or lack thereof, of certain types of housing typologies and forms of housing, I really like the idea of almost putting out that challenge to folks who do have means, who may be thinking about, "Well, what happens when I die, and how do I want to donate some of that money, and how do I do that when I am living?" so you can have a greater impact now.

I think this is something that I would really encourage the government to think about. This is very innovative. I think it's different and it's saying, "Let's do more" and "Let's help people." So I would really, actually, commend you for coming forward with that today. I look forward to learning a little bit more about it and how it works and how I think we can put out that challenge, because it's an all-hands-on-deck challenge. There's so much more housing that we need to build.

Are there other things that the province could do in order to help increase the amount of affordable-ownership housing?

Ms. Ene Underwood: Yes. So, critically for us right now is let's get this HST done. It does create a lot of uncertainty. We don't have the same access to low-cost financing that affordable rental does. As an example, Infrastructure Ontario has a loan program that we cannot access. So being able to give ownership similar access to

the low-cost financing that's available and the land piece, as I said, is really, critically important to us. Those would be two that we are really trying to focus on.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Correct me if I'm wrong, but when we look at the Building Ontario Fund, the projects that Habitat would be putting forward would not be of a large enough size in order to access that program.

Ms. Ene Underwood: We talked to build Ontario, yes. I know they have an interest in us. As I think folks know, it's a minimum \$100 million. First of all, most Habitats in the province—we would be the only one that could pool together a portfolio that might be viable for that funding, and we haven't figured out whether it's too much effort to do so. So that's where we are at the moment.

It does mean that if you're in Oxford—you know, your Woodstock, your Windsor etc.—it would be more difficult to pool to access that kind of funding. This is a challenge for all non-profits, right? Most non-profits don't have the scale to access at the larger level.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I think maybe some changes around that—I understand the intention with it, that they want to do some really big projects and drive some really, really big impact. But when I look at not-for-profit housing sector and folks doing the work that you're doing, it's a little bit more difficult. I know we have such a strong entrepreneurial spirit within the sector, and I think the suggestions today around tax measures and tax credits really do help with that.

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How much more time left, Chair?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): You have 1.4.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I have 1.4? Okay, that's not too bad.

I guess most of the buyers that are going through Habitat for Humanity would be first-time homebuyers, right?

Ms. Ene Underwood: They have to be first-time homebuyers, yes.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Yes. Okay, got it. Do you think that if we extended that, taking the HST off new homes to pretty much anybody buying it for a principal residence, maybe not impacting you folks, that would also be a helpful step in terms of ensuring our construction and skilled tradespeople can continue to be working and building other forms of housing as well? Because even if we build more market housing, it does have some downstream impacts.

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

Ms. Ene Underwood: One minute to respond? Is that—

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

Ms. Ene Underwood: I think we all appreciate that having HST eliminated from all new homes would make a difference. I think everyone respects that the challenge of government is it still needs to be replaced by other revenues.

In our case specifically, we can have a family that's living in a rent-controlled apartment, and they're going to

think, "Okay. Well, we do not want to use up our first-time homebuyers' tax credit if I move into a Habitat home. Maybe we'll hold out and wait until we can jump farther," which means they are blocking that home that they actually don't need. They could afford to do more, but they're blocking it because they are trying to second-guess: "Will someday there be another tax credit?" So it does actually affect us as well.

But most importantly, we need a healthy housing sector for everyone. I don't envy the government at this level and the federal level trying to figure this one out. We got—

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

We will now go to MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you to our presenters this afternoon. Ene, I'm loving the tax credit ideas, but I'm going to turn my focus over to Eric here from Imperial Tobacco.

We know—and I have talked about it at committee before—that Ontario is ground zero for contraband tobacco. Unfortunately, my riding of Haldimand–Norfolk it is at the centre of this very terrible issue, so I'm very passionate about this. I believe that all levels of government have largely turned a blind eye to this despite the warnings, and now we have the second-generation problem that is giving way to things like drugs, guns, human trafficking in a lot as our smaller communities across the province.

You noted that roughly 70% of the nicotine pouches in the market in Ontario today have shifted to unregulated illicit products. Can you tell this committee what these illicit pouches are? Why are they concerning, and how have policies decisions contributed to the growth of this black market?

Mr. Eric Gagnon: Yes, no problem. The idea is that, as I alluded to, there's a ministerial order that was introduced by the federal government that has forced the only nicotine pouch that has been approved by the federal government, by Health Canada. So all the other NRTs can continue to be sold over the counter in convenience stores and pharmacies.

I've alluded to Mark Holland. He's a former anti-tobacco lobbyist. Some of the health groups did not appreciate that a tobacco company can also be part of the solution in helping people quit cigarettes.

That regulation in itself makes it very complicated. We understand the need for pharmacists to be part of the smoking cessation journey, and we don't disagree with that. But we don't believe that every time you need or want to buy a cessation product, you have to interact with a pharmacist. That's what creates all the barriers.

I've alluded to other issues, like proximity, but access remains, really, the priority.

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

Mr. Eric Gagnon: It doesn't make sense in a country like Canada that you can buy cigarettes, which is the most harmful way to deliver nicotine, at every corner store, but if you want to quit cigarettes, you have to interact with a pharmacist every time. That's really what created the illicit market.

Then the products are available online everywhere with a lot more milligrams of nicotine than what is approved by Health Canada, which is four milligrams. You can buy an illicit nicotine pouch for 20, 30, 50 milligrams of nicotine. The public health impact is major.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: So it's the content, largely, of these illicit products that is of huge concern as well to the general public and to our young people?

Mr. Eric Gagnon: There's the content, but there's also easy access. Our product is not purchased by kids. If you wanted to buy it when it was in convenience stores, it was behind the counter, age-verified. Today, I don't think illegal traffickers and organized crime are going to ask for your proof of age if you want to buy a vaping product, cigarettes or—

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

MPP Kanapathi.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you to the panellists for your presentations and for participating in the 2026 pre-budget program. Thank you for your voice and thank you for bringing your concerns.

My question is to Dr. Rob Fowler, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. Thank you for your leadership and your compassionate care for the patients and people of Ontario. I know Sunnybrook hospital does an amazing job. The centre's programs are cancer, heart and vascular care, high-risk maternal care and also brain sciences; also, your trauma unit is vital. So thank you for that leadership.

Our health sector's expenses are projected to increase \$92.8 billion in 2027. That growth is primarily due to investment to address what you were mentioning, growing demand; fund the hospital and cancer treatment services; and enhance the pediatric care as well.

My question to you: Are you supportive of this investment the government is making in health care? And is there an area you think—you were talking about service challenges and demand—it needs to focus on further?

Dr. Rob Fowler: Thanks very much, and I appreciate your knowledge of the programs at Sunnybrook. It's very kind.

Yes, we're very appreciative of the investments that the government is making across the sector. Even though I work predominately in an acute care centre and care for the sickest patients, I'll say, in trauma and critical care and burn, across the entire sector we need to, I think, have diversified investment, as the province is undertaking, particularly supportive of primary health care. Sunnybrook has an active primary health care team and is working with the province to meet and exceed the goals for our primary care teams in our region.

The acute care needs that we have are sometimes front-burner needs. I see that on a day-to-day basis, where there are patients that are critically injured and we have a hard time getting them to a place where they can survive their injury.

While I would say I'm so supportive of looking at a very diverse approach to supporting the needs for health care and health more generally, there are some pressing

needs that, unless they're met, I know, on a day-to-day basis, there's a high chance that we'll lose some people because of that.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Could you elaborate? You mention that you can't keep up with demand in terms of trauma centres and other prenatal treatment in the hospital. Could you elaborate on that, please?

Dr. Rob Fowler: Yes, sure. I mentioned in my remarks around the growing need, in terms of the small number of places in the province that can care for some specific patient populations. To highlight those, you've mentioned trauma care, so people that are falling, having injuries, car accidents that result in trauma and needing hospital—burn injuries etc. There are very few places that can deliver that kind of care, so there does need to be, I think, some strategic investment and increased investment in those areas in order to meet demands of the growing population.

Perinatal care and neonatal care—a similar story. There are very few places in the province that can meet those needs. I guess I'm speaking from a place of quaternary care, where, even though recognizing that we need to invest across the system—primary care, very importantly—there are some places that just can't do without more support.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Doctor.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate that. How much time is left?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): You've got 1.1 minutes.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Eric, I'm going to come over to you. It's good to see you again.

We've made some investments recently through the Solicitor General's office, specifically the OPP's contraband tobacco enforcement—that task force. I think that we've made some historic advancement on it. I'm going to touch on one in particular and that is the bust that happened in Tyendinaga recently. Can you expand on why that in particular was something that was very—I'll say historic, because traditionally on a territory they don't invite the OPP in. Do you mind expanding a little bit on that and what we can do to further that?

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Mr. Eric Gagnon: I think it's important that everyone understands that contraband tobacco is not a First Nations problem, it's an organized crime problem. The organized crime has infiltrated the First Nations communities and are benefiting from that. But because the production is on First Nations communities, people think it's a First Nations issue. Hopefully that's what went on in there, and to see that because organized crime is involved, and they are dealing other illegal drugs—like I said, fentanyl—every time there's a seizure right now, if you look in the public domain—

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

We'll now go to the official opposition: MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I have questions for Rob Fowler, the chief of the trauma program at Sunnybrook, and then I'll have some additional questions for Ene Underwood for Habitat for Humanity.

Talking just about Sunnybrook, one of the things that's come up lately is an issue around hospitals facing deficits. I'm wanting to know, does Sunnybrook face a deficit, and if they are facing a deficit, what would that look like to address the deficit, which I believe the government has asked hospitals to do?

Dr. Rob Fowler: Thanks very much. I would say a majority of hospitals are facing a deficit over the last year and this year. We are positioned, I would say, moderately well compared to many hospitals in terms of stewardship of the current budget. I know my own program has a goal to meet for this current year and we've been working hard both internally and, to a degree, externally to make things even. I think we'll be able to do that.

I think, from the current position, we're working hard to get where we need to be, appreciating that we would like to be in a different place where we could invest a little bit more and not have to cut back at a time when we really need to expand.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Just to clarify on that, you're talking specifically around the trauma centre. Are you expecting staffing levels to remain the same, go up or go down?

Dr. Rob Fowler: Front-line staffing—we are trying to maintain the same. There may be some shifting along job lines in order to meet the needs and to match care for job descriptions and full-time equivalence. I'm speaking specifically to my experience on trauma, critical care and burns but I think it's probably generalizable across the system.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for your answers. I appreciate it.

My additional questions are to Ene Underwood. Thank you so much for being here as well.

I just have a general question about Habitat for Humanity. What is the size and scope of Habitat for Humanity's work? How many homes are you building a year and who typically are they for? What would their income bracket be?

Ms. Ene Underwood: I'll speak first to our work at the Habitat GTA. We helped 31 families become homeowners this year. We have 60 homes under construction, 150 starting next year, and a pipeline, as I said, that takes us up towards 2,000 over the next several years.

As you would appreciate, in smaller communities, it's smaller numbers. I am guessing here—I think across the province annually it is probably 100, 120 homes across the province.

Who we are helping also varies across the province. I come from agricultural, small-town Ontario. There, the families that would be helped would be in the probably \$45,000 to \$65,000 range in total household income.

Here at Habitat Greater Toronto Area, because all the homes we build our condos and also have higher property taxes, the range of our families is \$80,000 to \$120,000. And yet, when we listen to those families, we hear about

the incredible hardship they are experiencing here in having a home that is safe, decent and works for them.

Ms. Jessica Bell: No doubt. I regularly hear about the need to identify housing needs not just for low-income and moderate-income people, but for people who are in that middle-income bracket who just are getting squeezed. I'm a big supporter.

Ms. Ene Underwood: When they move into a Habitat home, they are freeing up another home, and that's a ripple effect all the way down to our encampment and homeless challenge of those folks who don't have an appropriate option of where they can move to.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I have two other questions. The second one is around access to provincial land to build housing. You mentioned that there were two provincial lands that had been made available. Do you have specific lands that you have in mind, that you have identified, that you believe should be opened up?

Ms. Ene Underwood: Not necessarily, although I am conscious of the fact that there was an announcement, I think in 2022, about land in Vaughan that would be made available for affordable housing, and to my knowledge, that hasn't moved forward. The Wynne government earmarked land in Etobicoke—it's on Panorama—that we participated in an RFP for, and then that was changed when the government changed. There is, I think, long-term care being built there, but the full realization of that land opportunity, I think, is still quite untapped.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay, and then I've just got some questions about the financing piece. There're a few financial pieces that have been identified.

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: One was setting up the investment tax credit for affordable housing. There was mention about making it easier to ensure Habitat for Humanity is eligible for low-cost financing through Build Ontario. The third one that I hear a little bit about from the non-profit sector is having the Ontario government step in to facilitate access to federal government loan programs. If you had to choose one of them, which do think would be the best bang for the buck for you?

Ms. Ene Underwood: I'm just going to pivot over to the philanthropic tax credit—which I know is not what you asked, but that's what enables us to unlock money in addition to money that we can already access.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. So, just to clarify: Have you done an assessment on how much revenue you could generate through the philanthropic tax credit?

Ms. Ene Underwood: No, not extensively.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you. I really appreciate your answers.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll have to do that in the next round. Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thanks, Rob, for your presentation—good name, as well. How many critical care centres are there in the province right now?

Dr. Rob Fowler: I personally looked at that around the H1N1 pandemic and characterized all of the ICU beds in

the province. I can send you that report. We have many critical care centres in most hospitals across the province, but what happens in those critical care centres is very different from hospital to hospital, depending upon the services. In the GTA, for instance, most of our hospitals would have an intensive care unit veering in scope from 10 to 14 beds or so, but the services that are required to care for those patients in the bed are specific to the hospital.

For instance, to care for patients with major traumatic injuries that would need multiple complex surgeries—potentially trips to the operating room, interventional radiology etc.—there are only two: St. Michael's and ourselves. The province is doing a good job trying to scope levels of trauma care in different hospitals, but so far, we are left with major trauma centres, of which the GTA only has a couple. Just as an example, for burn care there are two: one in Hamilton and one at Sunnybrook. The work that is done in Hamilton is terrific but on a much smaller scale, and because of staffing, they had to shut down for a good part of the last few years. And so, for much of the last five years, Sunnybrook has been the only place in the province and regions of other provinces that can provide that kind of care.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. I appreciate that. I have to say, around Sunnybrook, I've had to go there with family members who have been there, and the care has been excellent. The staff, the doctors, the nurses and everybody that are there that have been wonderful. Very clearly, it's an older facility even going into—it's interesting, where you've got to go in the hospital and down the halls, and I know you folks are making a work.

This proposal that you have to build an integrated, new critical care centre—I guess you'd be serving people from the GTA and beyond. Would that be correct?

Dr. Rob Fowler: For those subspecialty populations that I mentioned, over 70% of the patients that we care for are not in the GTA, and that's because we are resourced for the province. On that it really is a GTA resource, but beyond that it is more a provincial resource.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Within the hospital sector—I hear this a lot, where the projected growth for health care cost drivers is over 4% and spending is projected to grow at only 2.4% a year—are you folks essentially in some ways doing more with less?

Dr. Rob Fowler: Thanks for that leading question. Yes, for sure. For many years, I would say, we've been trying to do more, because the demands are growing—you can't get around that—with a little bit less each year. The teams we have in most health care institutions are doing terrific with less support and knowing that there's more demand. At our hospital, I'm so proud of the team that we have, for the dedication on the HR side, in addition to the infrastructure that we can muster to do what we can for patients.

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It's probably not known so much outside of our local environment, but the trauma care that's delivered here stacks up at the very top in terms of quality care when you

compare it to care throughout North America—not just within Canada but across the US, and we know that by participating in benchmarks of quality of care across the continent.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. Are there any other innovative ideas or solutions that you think could help provide better care for patients and use resources more effectively?

Dr. Rob Fowler: One of the challenges locally is that because of the infrastructure—you said it dates from the 1940s—we have pockets of our critical care units that are spread out across the complex, and if you've been there, you know how sort of broad and horizontal a landscape that is. So we'll have six beds in one spot, 19 beds in another spot, a handful in another spot, and they may be separated by half a kilometre.

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

Dr. Rob Fowler: Bringing those resources together in one place creates enormous efficiencies with respect to staffing, being able to reduce the numbers of staff for the same number of patients because they're working in proximity to each other. So on the HR side it's huge. A similar analogy holds for disposable equipment, etc. If you can centralize that, as we hope to do, there are efficiencies to gain there. We see that; we just can't operationalize it.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: My colleague across the way mentioned the OPP contraband tobacco team. At estimates a few weeks ago, I questioned, I think, the Minister of Finance on how much Ontario was spending on fighting the contraband issue here in the province. We learned that we have about eight or nine full-time equivalents in Ontario, and we're spending about \$3.8 million. Quebec, in comparison, is spending about \$15 million, with about 60 FTEs.

Eric, you referenced Quebec's success in driving down their illicit tobacco rate from over 40% to under 15%. Can you walk this committee through what the access to tobacco model actually involves and why you believe it should be adopted here in Ontario?

Mr. Eric Gagnon: Yes, Quebec has been on a very good journey. I think the biggest change is, first of all, the coordination between the different ministers. Often in the provinces, what we see is that enforcement will work in isolation, where Quebec will work with finance, public safety, enforcement and health. I think Quebec has put that in place very well.

The other thing is that giving more powers to the enforcement branch is super important. Just as an example: In Ontario, you have to see the products in plain sight if you want to move forward with doing something. As for Quebec, if there's suspicion, you can act. In Ontario, it's very complicated: You need to call finance, then you need to get permission to act. So these are the types of things that really worked well in Quebec. ACCES Tabac has been a successful model. Some of the announcements in Ontario will help, but I think the model itself can just be copied and replicated for sure.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Absolutely. Okay. You also mentioned that provincial efforts are being undermined by a lack of federal action.

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

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Can you expand on what they could be doing federally and how we, as provincial legislators, could push Ottawa to help us out here?

Mr. Eric Gagnon: Yes. The first one is that they need to revise the federal mandate for the contraband tobacco issue. They haven't revisited this since 2015, so the mandate has to be clear.

The second thing is that we've asked for a commission or hearing on contraband for tobacco for more than a decade, and nobody has had the interest in doing that. I think it would be really important that the provinces could come in, invite the industry, some of the players, and really try to understand. But without that approach, it's going to be tough.

And also, address online: You have more than 200 online sellers today that are selling illegal nicotine products, and they need to be shut down. Without that, it's going to be very difficult to address.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: And those sites are selling other items as well, are they not?

Mr. Eric Gagnon: Yes, they are. You can buy pretty much everything on those sites.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Crystal meth, cocaine.

Mr. Eric Gagnon: Meth, cocaine, and it's not on the dark web; it's on the dot-com.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: That's right—shipped to your door.

Mr. Eric Gagnon: By Canada Post.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: That's right. Thank you very much.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: Thanks, Chair. I appreciate that. I just wanted to expand on what we were talking about earlier with the Tyendinaga bust, in particular, because you made an excellent point that it's not a First Nations problem; it's an organized crime problem that has found its way onto a First Nation to do this.

One of the challenges that we've had historically is the distrust between First Nations and the OPP. Where I want to go with this is, in the instance with Tyendinaga, wasn't it the band council who actually reached out and said, "Can you help us with this?" They are the ones who invited us on, and we're building towards that?

Mr. Eric Gagnon: Yes. I wasn't part of the discussions, as you can imagine, so I don't think I'm in a good position to comment. But I do know there was some action, and it was not only and solely focused on contraband tobacco; there were other products on there.

And when we talk about partnerships, for sure, First Nations have to be part of those discussions. What we have seen from a federal perspective, as I was alluding to, is, nobody has put everybody around a table to have those discussions. The First Nations community have an ancestral right to produce cigarettes and to deal with tobacco, and we recognize that, but when the product starts

leaving the First Nations communities and then is sold across Canada without any excise, that's where the problem happens, and this is where organized crime groups get involved. So putting every important player around the table and to have those discussions and come up with solutions, I think that would be the next step in the process.

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

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all the presenters for coming out this afternoon.

My question is for Ms. Underwood. Recently, our government passed the Fighting Delays, Building Faster Act, 2025, which is focused on cutting red tape and improving government processes so we can get more housing built across the province, and looking forward—I just wanted to know if you could share any ideas for cutting red tape to move us forward in that goal of building more homes here in the province of Ontario.

Ms. Ene Underwood: First of all, I would say it is appreciated, the amount of effort. I think this government has brought more effort than we've seen in so long at reversing well-intended but not entirely helpful red tape that we live with, anyone who's trying to get a home developed. It is starting to make a difference. It's hard and it's complicated on the ground for the municipal planners to kind of transact on it.

I'm going to duck a bit on your question of what else can be done and just point back to the Ontario Housing Affordability Task Force, of which I was one of the nine members that put it together. I think there still are some things of what we recommended that the government has not yet moved forward on.

And maybe one I'll just grab—and I confess, because I haven't paid as much attention over the last year or so, but we recommended to really rein in the ease with which an individual can appeal to the OLT. I think that has been partly done, but it still feels—we've just gone and dealt with this in one of our areas. One neighbour on a dead-end street with 12 people could still slow down our project for over a year because of an appeal of, "There's going to be way too many cars on this street with 12 homes on it now, because we're building another 12." That's just not okay. So I would encourage to look again at how are we doing in balancing democracy with local communities' ability to influence what gets built and the fact that we actually need a lot more homes built for the people that don't have that opportunity to live in these communities yet.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Okay. You have 1.5, MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, everyone, for bringing your presentations, and I really appreciate that.

My question is to you, Mr. Fowler. Our government is investing approximately \$56 billion over the next decade in health infrastructure, including over \$43 billion in capital grants. Our ambitious plan will support 50 hospital projects and deliver approximately 3,000 new hospital beds to enhance access, quality care and build a connected,

people-first health care system. How do you see investment like this impacting the work your organization does?

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

Dr. Rob Fowler: Thanks very much. First, I would like to say, I guess, since I've been in my role, I've been very impressed with the partnership that we've been able to have with the provincial government, including MPPs coming to visit the hospital, the Premier coming to the hospital, the finance minister being there yesterday morning. So, I'm acutely aware of that investment, including the \$5-million planning grant that we received to get moving on this work to get us to stage 1.3. We've done a lot of great work, functional planning. The whole hospital is sort of behind this project as the next thing, and we're looking for support to move to the next stage and the next stage. And so, we're terrifically pleased with all the partnership that we've had to date.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you very much.

Interjection.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Okay—17 seconds. Thank you very much.

We'll go to MPP Bell.

1400

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm going to go back to Rob Fowler and Ene Underwood. I, once again, have questions for both of you.

The province's biggest responsibility is health care and education—they're the big ones. When I look at what is happening with health care funding in the near term and mid-term, I have a lot of concerns.

A report came out recently by the Financial Accountability Officer. It showed that, while health care funding is looking to be increasing—it's about 0.7% a year—it's not as much as what we need. We should get to about 4% if we want to maintain current health care levels, because people are coming into the province; we have health care inflation, which tends to be higher than overall inflation; and, as you mentioned earlier, we are seeing people access the health care system, on the whole, more than they typically used to—this is what I hear.

What happens, in the case of Sunnybrook, if we don't address this funding shortfall? What kind of consequences would you see—that impact on Sunnybrook?

Dr. Rob Fowler: I can see the impact on a day-to-day basis. Although some of it is positioned at our hospital—I mean, it's really positioned at the level of the patients that you mentioned. The inability to get some patients into the hospital because we don't have beds to place them—from the rest of the province, not just the GTA—I see that real effect on a day-to-day basis. We know that we need to do everything we can to try to get patients back to the community—ideally, to avoid them coming into the hospital, if that's okay, and get them back to their home hospitals because we desperately need the next bed to get the next patient in.

That consequence is felt by someone not being able to get into our hospital for trauma care, burn care, from someplace else in the province. That's a very real and

present risk going forward. As we grow in population, that risk is only going to amplify.

The sort of investments that we're looking to make now—we know we'll be behind. But we're looking, really, if we go historically, at an investment that will be, over the next 100 years, building beds in a new building to try to, as soon as we can, get up to parity—we know we're never going to get there—to try to prevent ourselves from being in the situation that we sometimes find ourselves in now.

Ms. Jessica Bell: At one time or another, we're all depending on the health care system, so there's a lot of value in investing in it.

You came here to talk about the trauma patient centre and the capital expansion. I get the impression that you've had some funding, but you're still waiting for the necessary funding to get shovels in the ground. Can you give me a dollar amount? How much exactly are you asking for and over what time period?

Dr. Rob Fowler: That's a good question. I thought about that question ahead of time.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I bet you have.

Dr. Rob Fowler: Yes. We know these projects are not inexpensive. Certainly, they're north of \$1 billion; I'll just put that number on the table. The scope and the size of a project like this is something that is dynamic and that we need to work with government on to try to get the scope and the size that's possible for today, knowing that we need to do something that's probably greater than that for tomorrow and the next day.

We have partners that are ready to help out with the province in funding. Our foundation is terrific. We have people that are almost ready to commit to bring resources back into the system. We are looking to work and partner in any way we can to try to make this a reality.

We've recently had the infusion of mental health and brain sciences capacity at Sunnybrook, with a lot of private funding and philanthropic donations. I'd say we've been able to come in under budget and on time for that project. I think we could certainly imagine doing the same with multiple levels of support.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you.

My final question is to Ene Underwood. I'm a big fan of Habitat for Humanity. I think it's extremely important to identify housing options, especially when it comes to home ownership options for people who have really been priced out of the housing market. You serve a real need.

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: You've mentioned the tax credits. You've mentioned access to provincial land. You've mentioned speeding up approval times by eliminating access to the LTB. Is there anything else that you think would be useful for us to advocate for or recommend to scale up Habitat for Humanity's work?

Ms. Ene Underwood: What we want most is what this government probably can't afford to give us, and that is per-door funding. We are hopeful that that will be accessible to us through Build Canada Homes.

Unquestionably, we have a big gap to fill between what a homeowner first mortgage will cover and what the cost

to deliver a home is. Here in the GTA, it costs us about \$700,000 to deliver a townhome condo for a family.

Ms. Jessica Bell: A two- or three-bedroom?

Ms. Ene Underwood: Pardon?

Ms. Jessica Bell: A two- or three-bedroom?

Ms. Ene Underwood: Yes, that will be a three-bedroom.

Unquestionably, that's the answer. That's what we need. We get that that's probably not in the cards right now, and that's why we are trying to pursue other—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time for that question, and it also concludes the time for the panel. We want to say thank you to all for the presentations that you took your time to prepare and coming to so ably sharing them with us. We thank you very much, and we shall carry onto the next panel. Thank you very much.

ONTARIO FEDERATION
OF AGRICULTURE
REGENT PARK COMMUNITY
HEALTH CENTRE
THE ATMOSPHERIC FUND

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): The next panel will start with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, Regent Park Community Health Centre and the Atmospheric Fund. The first presenter will be virtual, from the federation of agriculture. I believe that Drew is already on the screen, ready to go.

Interjections.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We ask the committee to sit in their chairs or be outside of the room. Order; in your chair or outside. Thank you very much.

As with the other panels, you will have seven minutes. Each delegation will have seven minutes to make their presentation. At six minutes, I will give notice. Don't stop at six minutes because you have one minute left.

With that, we also ask each presenter to start with introducing themselves to make sure we can record the proper name on the Hansard.

With that, the first one is the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. My name is Drew Spoelstra, and I'm the president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of Ontario's 38,000 farm families.

Ontario farmers are facing rising input costs, high interest rates, growing debt, trade uncertainty and tariffs, all creating immense pressure on our sector. We appreciate that the 2025 Ontario budget included some positive measures to support agriculture. With the right investments in the right places, agriculture can continue to be the leading industry in Ontario.

I'd like to spend a few minutes talking about positive outcomes for agriculture in the 2025 budget. First was the Risk Management Program funding. The government in-

creased annual funding for the Risk Management Program from \$150 million to \$250 million over three years. This enhanced safety net will help farmers manage unpredictability, costs and market risks.

The rural economic development funding: The budget replaced the former Rural Economic Development Program with the new Rural Ontario Development Program and doubled its funding to \$20 million per year. This boost will help rural Ontario communities and businesses grow through cost-shared projects.

Infrastructure investments in rural Ontario: We acknowledge the continued commitment to infrastructure that benefits rural areas, including rural roads, bridges and broadband expansion as part of the province's \$223-billion expansion plan. Notably, funding for Connecting Links Program roads was increased from \$30 million to \$45 million to improve municipal roads that join provincial highways, a change that OFA have long advocated for. Expanding real broadband and improving transportation networks are critical for farmers and rural businesses.

Local food and procurement initiatives: We appreciate the new measures to promote Ontario products. The government has established an annual Buy Ontario, Buy Canadian Day, which will encourage purchasing of local food. The budget also introduced programs like the Ontario Grape Support Program to increase the use of Ontario grapes and wines and directed public agencies like the LCBO to prioritize Ontario-made products. These steps support a local supply chain of farmers by driving demand for Ontario grown food and beverage products.

Despite the good news on these issues, we have identified a few of our members' priorities that are still outstanding:

(1) Agriculture and labour shortages. Ontario's agri-food sector lost an estimated \$591 million in sales in 2024 due to unfilled farm job vacancies. We urgently need stronger targeted programs to recruit and retrain skilled farm workers. The general training funds in the budget are helpful, but without a dedicated agri-food workforce strategy, production and growth will continue to be held back by labour gaps.

1410

(2) The wildlife damage compensation for crops. Crop farmers across Ontario suffer yearly losses, yet no program exists to compensate crop damage as it does for livestock losses. We're asking for a wildlife damage compensation program for crop producers so that farmers aren't left bearing the cost of wildlife-related crop destruction.

(3) Veterinary access in rural areas. Large-animal veterinary services are increasingly difficult to access in many parts of rural Ontario and northern Ontario. Funding for the veterinary assistant program has not increased in 25 years, even as the number of livestock veterinarians in under-served areas has declined. We need to invest in rural vet capacity, supporting clinic operations and incentives for vets to serve in remote regions to protect animal health, farm livelihoods and our food supply chain.

(4) Soil health and conservation funding. The Ontario agricultural soil health and conservation strategy must continue to be funded and implemented. Continuity in its funding is critical because improving soil health yields major benefits. It increases farmers' knowledge of soil carbon management, strengthens climate resilience and boosts long-term productivity. We urge the government to maintain dedicated funding for soil health initiatives so that we can sustain the environment and the economic gains from healthy soils.

(5) The Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund. Rural municipalities depend on the OMPF to improve and provide services that our farm families and agribusinesses rely on. We are encouraged by the \$100-million increase announced, raising the fund to \$600 million, but this still is short of what rural communities truly need. Increasing the OMPF to \$875 million annually would bring the program to the same inflation-adjusted level of support it provided 20 years ago and ensure rural towns have the resources to maintain infrastructure, roads and essential services for agriculture areas. We ask that the province continue to work with the municipalities to achieve a stronger funding base going forward.

(6) Commercial truck driving training and insurance. Ontario's agri-food sector is facing a shortage of commercial truck drivers, which is creating transport bottlenecks and raising costs to get farm products to market. To address this, OFA has proposed a targeted program to train and insure new drivers for agriculture specifically: \$10 million for truck driver training subsidies and \$3 million for insurance support to help recruit and license more drivers. This investment is critical to keep goods moving efficiently from farms to processors and consumers, especially as demand grows.

I want to thank you and the committee for your time and consideration. We appreciate the steps taken in budget 2025 and look forward to continuing to work together to address these remaining priorities, ensuring Ontario's agriculture and rural communities are fully supported.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much for the presentation. Our next presentation is the Regent Park Community Health Centre and we ask, first of all, unanimous consent from the committee to allow the presenters to have two people at the table as opposed to one. If there are no objections to that we will carry on. We have a third one that will be involved virtually.

Welcome, and the floor is now yours. You were present when I gave the original instructions: At one minute I will give you a notice and we'll carry on from there. Thank you very much for being here and the floor is yours.

Mr. Fraser MacPherson: Thank you. Good afternoon. My name is Fraser MacPherson, here on behalf of Regent Park Community Health Centre, which is a non-profit that serves the downtown east Ontario health team region as well as the neighbourhood of Regent Park, since 1973. I'm speaking from my role as a registered nurse on the primary care team, which serves a population that includes young families, newcomers, refugees, non-insured, people without status, people with disabilities and chronic mental

health conditions, the majority of whom are tenants and people living in forms of low-income or supportive housing, including unhoused people, those who are sheltered and unsheltered, as well as people who use drugs. We're here to speak to three key budgetary concerns that impact our work, our clients and our downtown east community.

First, I just want to speak to the scale of the crisis that Ontario is facing in terms of mental health and homelessness emergencies. In 2024, there were more than 80,000 Ontarians experiencing known homelessness, which is a 25% increase in just two years. In Toronto alone, there were 15,400 people homeless in October 2024—which is more than double the 2021 levels—and Toronto shelters continue to operate at 100% capacity.

In the first half of 2024 in Toronto, 135 people experiencing homelessness died, and over half of those deaths were from drug toxicity. People experiencing homelessness are present across the city, but the Toronto-East York area bears the brunt of the outdoor homelessness crisis. Of the 1,615 people living outdoors in October 2024, 75% were in Toronto-East York. The Downtown Yonge East and Moss Park neighbourhoods recorded the most EMS calls for suspected opioid overdoses in both July 2024 and June 2025, which was more than 400 in each month.

Homelessness and overdose deaths are preventable. They're not inevitable, and they're the result of system failures. These failures are costing us money in emergency room visits, EMS responses, hospitalizations, shelter usage, policing, and repeated interactions with the courts and justice system. Ontario is already paying for this crisis; we're simply paying for it in the most expensive and least effective way.

Today I want to outline what investments might deliver better outcomes for us at far lower long-term public costs. Our first recommendation is around reinstating funding for overdose prevention services, including injection and inhalation sites. Approximately half of the overdose prevention centres in our Downtown Yonge East neighbourhood have been closed over the last six months, and as a result, our neighbourhood has experienced increased demand on the limited remaining sites as well as increased rates of substance use crisis in the streets of our community due to lack of services.

There is more than 40 years of research and evidence that back up overdose prevention centres. Harm reduction services are also proven to be cost-effective to reduce health care system burdens on emergency rooms, and also preventing long-term health problems, including HIV infections, hepatitis B and C infections, and other negative health outcomes. Our site has experienced a decrease in clinical encounters and engagement since our consumption site closed, with many clients who formerly accessed our services now lost to care.

Defunding of some kinds of harm reduction programming and services with a focus only on one treatment approach or model does not make sense economically. Often, the first step for many people who want to access treatment supports is access to harm reduction, which is crucial with the increased toxicity of drugs that exist with-

out a regulated supply. We want to see sustained funding for the existing overdose prevention centres and a robust reinvestment in the full spectrum of harm-reduction-based services, including injection and inhalation sites in our Downtown East region.

Our second recommendation is around expanding residential treatment beds. Harm reduction guides clients along a continuum of care that respects their readiness and autonomy. Supervised sites are spaces that build trust and prepare clients for treatment.

But there's a critical gap: When clients are ready to access treatment, there are not enough residential beds in Ontario. In many programs, clients wait up to six months for a bed. We cannot ask someone to leave a safe space, return to the streets and hope that a bed is available to them in half of a year. That's unsafe, ineffective, undermines the trust we've built and ultimately drives up public costs.

Investing in additional residential treatment beds is not just compassionate; it's fiscally responsible. Evidence and service data in Ontario show that each delay in treatment leads to increased EMS resources used for overdose or crisis stabilization, more emergency department visits and hospital visits, extended shelter stays and associated social service costs, as well as increased policing and justice system involvement.

Residential treatment beds are an upfront investment that reduces multi-system costs over time. It's the next step in the harm reduction continuum. Without sufficient capacity, trust built at supervised consumption site is undermined and investments in subsequent support efforts like HART hubs cannot reach their full potential. Expanding this capacity is both a public health necessity and also a smart financial strategy. The more beds available when clients are ready, the fewer lives lost and the lower the total cost to our health, social and justice systems.

Our final recommendation is around expanding supportive housing in the continuum of supports. Many clients who do manage to complete a residential treatment program are not ready for independent living. This is due to complex, intersecting challenges, including complex mental health needs and ongoing substance use care to maintain recovery, as well as challenging trauma histories and difficulty managing household responsibilities due to limited social skills or supports.

While HART hubs may provide essential services, the investment did not come with net new supportive housing units in our community. There are over 36,000 Ontarians currently seeking supportive housing for mental health and addiction needs. Supportive housing addresses a critical gap, because it provides stable accommodation with more wrap-around supports, reducing the risk of relapse or a return to homelessness. It can also offer assistance with tenancy management and interventions to prevent hoarding, home takeovers, rental arrears and other issues that can contribute to the backlog at the LTB.

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

Mr. Fraser MacPherson: It also can offer a safe environment for clients to gradually transition to independ-

ent living, while maintaining recovery and community integration.

Unfortunately, we've seen the introduction of legislation like the Safer Municipalities Act that threatens to exacerbate housing challenges for our community, that's been criticized for criminalizing homelessness and substance use and has increased police surveillance and removal powers, which threatens to disrupt clients' engagement with ongoing care and support systems.

1420

In closing, our three recommendations are interconnected steps in a continuum of care: Harm reduction stabilizes and saves lives; residential treatment addresses addiction and mental health needs when a client is ready; and supportive housing ensures long-term stability.

Ontario Health and the Ministry of Health have praised the importance of system integration and interdisciplinary collaboration. We see these benefits every day when mental health, substance use, employment and housing supports work together, outcomes improve and our public resources are used more efficiently. The Ontario government can take its own advice by working collaboratively across ministries to develop a coordinated strategy to combat these crises—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time, and hopefully, you can get the rest in on the question round.

Our next presenter is the Atmospheric Fund.

Mr. Evan Wiseman: Thank you, Chair and members of the finance committee, for allowing me to speak to you today on budget 2026. My name is Evan Wiseman, and I'm the senior climate policy manager at the Atmospheric Fund. We are a regional environmental agency that operates in the greater Toronto-Hamilton area, and we provide investments, grants and policy support to help scale low-carbon solutions.

Today, I'll be speaking to you on three issues that need provincial leadership and impact the affordability for Ontarians every day. The first is sustained investment in public charging infrastructure through the successful ChargeON program. The second is accelerating energy efficiency programs by automatically enrolling new homes in the successful IESO program Peak Perks while expending eligibility. The third is accelerating clean electrification with the provincial fund aimed at displacing American natural gas with local district energy resources, which brings me to my first recommendation.

I'd like to begin by thanking the government for recapitalizing ChargeON in budget 2025. It is a strong signal of leadership in modernizing transportation and supporting Ontario's EV industry. To keep momentum, Ontario should continue to commit to predictable multi-year funding to expand and maintain public charging infrastructure, ensuring confidence for businesses and consumers and equitable access in areas where EV uptake is just beginning.

Home charging is also critical: 80% of Ontarians expect to charge at home, yet 31% of Ontarians live in multi-unit buildings and face barriers. Ontario should introduce an

EV-ready requirement for new multi-unit construction and create a retrofit fund covering up to 50% of the cost for existing buildings. Expanding ChargeON to include a multi-unit stream would close eligibility gaps. British Columbia and Quebec offer strong models. Ontario can consider zero-interest loans for developers to cover upfront EV equipment costs, paid back later at little expense to the taxpayer but with big savings for homeowners.

This brings me to our second recommendation. Ontario's revised electricity forecast shows slower demand growth thanks to conservation and demand management, due in large part to the commitment of spending up to \$10.9 billion on demand-side management over the next decade. This is a major step forward, but a significant portion of this EDSM budget remains unallocated. Clear provincial direction is needed to capture further efficiency gains as the population grows and electrification accelerates. The Peak Perks program, administered by the Independent Electricity System Operator, is one of the most cost-effective tools available. With over 200,000 households enrolled, it has proven its ability to reduce peak demand at a fraction of the cost of new generation capacity, delivering more than 200 megawatts of peak reduction for the summer of 2025.

We recommend that Ontario automatically enrolls new homes in Peak Perks with an easy opt-out option. The program should also expand eligible loads beyond just the thermostats that it currently covers to include water heaters, EV charging and battery storage for deeper peak reductions. Specifically, we want to draw attention to funds currently unallocated in the new construction stream of the demand side management budget for 2027. We recognize that there may also need to be tax dollars allocated to accommodate an implementation of such a program.

Finally, Peak Perks and related programs should be extended to new and existing multi-unit buildings. Nearly one third of Ontarians cannot access these programs today—an unnecessary barrier that limits system-wide benefits and disproportionately affects low-income residents.

This brings me to our third recommendation, on district energy. As Ontario electrifies heating, transportation and industry, low-carbon district heating energy can cut peak demand, lower system costs and accelerate emission reductions, especially in growing urban centres like the GTHA.

District energy delivers heating and cooling through shared thermal networks, using local renewable waste heat resources like geothermal, sewer heat recovery and deep-lake water cooling. These systems achieve economies of scale and improve efficiency while reducing infrastructure costs. They also offer demand flexibility by shifting heating and cooling loads away from peak hours, easing grid pressures.

Our third recommendation is clear: establish a provincial district energy-enabling fund to help municipalities and utilities overcome early-stage barriers such as planning, feasibility and capital coordination. This fund should

support feasibility studies, integrate community energy plans and early design work for new thermal networks and upgrades to existing systems to transition away from natural gas.

The reason this matters is because American natural gas supplies up to 70% of Ontario's consumption and is increasingly used for electricity—up 28% just last year—reducing grid cleanliness from 96% in 2017 to just 84% today, eroding our competitive clean electricity advantage. Upgrading existing systems can deliver fast emissions reductions. For example, Enwave plans to install electric boilers to displace 50 megawatts of gas-fired generation, cutting emissions while adding demand response downtown.

Toronto offers proven models. Deep water cooling avoids 13,500 tonnes of emissions annually, and the Well, a major development not far from here, demonstrates how thermal storage can scale low-carbon heating and cooling while reducing grid strain.

TAF has been granted to municipalities working on district energy for years and has seen significant growth and interest in establishing municipal versions across the GTHA over the last year.

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

Mr. Evan Wiseman: Ontario has the opportunity to lead the next era of clean energy and transportation. By committing predictable funding for public charging infrastructure, expanding home efficiency programs, unlocking full potential of demand-side management and enabling low-carbon district energy systems, we can accelerate electrification, reduce costs and strengthen Ontario's competitiveness. These actions will ensure every Ontarian benefits from cleaner air, lower energy bills and a more resilient electricity system, positioning Ontario as a global leader in clean growth and innovation.

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

We start this round of questioning with MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you to all our presenters this afternoon. As the representative of a very rural riding, I'm going to focus on OFA and Drew this afternoon.

I see government investing heavily in an industry that is likely going to shift significantly over the next 10 years. We all know the demand for food is only going to grow.

I maintain—I'm like a broken record—that the best way to tariff-proof and protect Ontario is to strengthen our local food systems through farmland protection and increase domestic processing. I'm wondering if OFA would support that notion.

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: Thanks for the question. Through you, Mr. Chair, absolutely.

I think anything we can do, obviously, to protect our farms and protect our capacity to grow primary products here in Ontario is a good step forward in terms of our efforts to protect national security. We need to make sure that we have food security here, and to do that, we need farms, we need food production, we need food processing. So whenever we can look to invest in our food processing capacity here as well here in Ontario, I think that's only

going to benefit (1) our farmers and (2) the general public because we have that ability to produce that food right here at home and turn it into something that's needed here.

Moreover, I think there's an opportunity to add GDP to the sector, to add revenue to the province with strategic investments where we can turn that product into something we can export to other places around the world. We're very good here at producing primary products; we're not so good maybe at turning them into something else that can be used in other places in the world. That's the opportunity that I think we have right now.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you. Is there a sector that we would start with if we were to further invest in agriculture at this point in time?

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: I think right across the board, there are opportunities. There are opportunities in grains. There are opportunities in dairy.

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

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: There are opportunities in fruit and vegetable processing, things like that. There have been some good announcements recently in things like Chapman's ice cream and a soy beverage plant in eastern Ontario. But there are lots of opportunities to invest in a marketplace that's going to pay you back on day one. Having other long-term investments into other initiatives is great, but we need something to pay us back now, and that's going to be in the ag and food space.

1430

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Do I have time?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Twenty-three seconds.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Quickly, would creating an advisory committee on soil health be beneficial at the provincial level here?

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: It sure would.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Right. Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you.

MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you to all the presenters for coming out this afternoon to speak to us about the upcoming budget. My question is also for Drew and the OFA. It's nice to see you again, Drew, and congratulations on your acclamation as president recently.

I was with you—it's hard to believe—only at the beginning of October in Elora. Our government announced \$41 million in agriculture research and innovation, \$10.5 million for a new poultry research facility and \$15.5 million for a feed innovation facility in Elora.

Going back to your topic on training up the next generation and making sure we have the workforce, which is so, so important—I agree with you—how are these investments going to help bridge that gap, and then what else can we do as a government?

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: Thanks for the question. Through you, Mr. Chair, I appreciate you pointing out that investment. The research facilities in Elora—I gapped on that in my rundown at the start, but certainly critical investments are being made in research and innovation here in the province. It's only going to help us grow this industry in

the future, train those folks in universities and colleges across Ontario, get that skilled labour workforce that we need to be trained up and available for us when they get through their education period.

Like I said, going back to the labour strategy for agriculture, it's something that's critical going forward. I think some continued investment in that space and development of a plan for an agri-food and labour strategy will be important as we move forward into the future.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you, Drew. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you very much for presenting today. Drew is the most popular guy this afternoon, so my question is going to go to Drew also.

Drew, we know some of the great things OFA has been doing representing farmers, but also supplying a very high percentage of our food here right into our Ontario homes. You touched on some of the issues: the labour shortage, the crop damage. Some people don't realize how much we depend on the weather for certain crops and how much rain one week apart can make that much difference.

I know one of the big issues is definitely the veterinarian access. We know that shortage is out there, but we also know how important it is for herd health around the communities.

Moving forward, Drew, what's the number one issue you see facing your sector that you would like to highlight for the upcoming 2026?

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: Thanks for the question, PA Rosenberg. Through you, Mr. Chair: Obviously, the number one issue right now is trade and tariffs, the impact we're facing from decisions made elsewhere around the world, the US specifically but also China and other areas. There's lots of concern around what the future looks like for export products, sure, but also what the future will look like for CUSMA/USMCA and how we can contribute to that going forward. So we're certainly happy to work with the ministry and the government on next steps in terms of negotiations around different agreements and things like that.

You mentioned a couple of other key topic areas. For your area in the north, damage to crops has certainly been a consistent issue that we've heard about from farmers—wildlife damage and compensation. We really need to put our heads together, I think, and get a program put together for members right across the province but specifically for those in the north that continue to see damage from sandhill cranes, from bears, from moose and other "livestock," I guess is the term.

Veterinary access, again, becomes an animal welfare issue. We certainly don't want to see any challenges when it comes to animal welfare. We need to have access to veterinarians right across the province. It's not even in the north now; we're seeing more issues across southwestern Ontario where vets are fewer and farther between, large animal vets specifically. So investing in a program like the veterinary access program is critical going forward, and

continuing to invest in educational programs to train more large-animal vets is absolutely critical as well.

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

MPP Bill Rosenberg: That was great, Drew. No one realizes, when you invite 3,000 or 4,000 cranes to the field, how much they like to eat for that afternoon, right?

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: Cranes, bear, geese. I certainly get my fill of geese around our area, too, and they love soybeans.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you, Chair, I appreciate that. I know I've got about 30 seconds left.

Drew, you seem to be getting a lot of love today. First off, I want to say my daughter, Lindsay, says hi to you. She's no longer with OMAFRA, she's with MMAH, but she wanted to make sure that I said hi to you for her.

How do we get more people to get into farming? One of the challenges that I see in my riding is most of my farmers absolutely love farming, and they do it until they die. They're there until they are 70 and 80 years old.

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: Thanks for the question. Through you, Mr. Chair: It's certainly a challenge to keep people engaged in the industry. It's an expensive industry to get into; there's no doubt about it. We do have challenges when it comes to—

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

We will now go to MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you, all of you, for being here today. I have questions for each of you.

My first question is to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. As you probably know, the Ontario government is looking at bringing in a more comprehensive buy-Ontario procurement policy, which is something that we've been advocating for, for some time. I think we can do a lot more than have "buy local food" just one day a year, even though I think it's a step in the right direction. When we are looking at this buy-Ontario procurement policy, what would you like to see in it that would benefit the agricultural sector in Ontario?

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: Thanks for the question. I agree. I think we should focus our efforts on buying Ontario every day of the year. We certainly have Ontario Agriculture Week, the first week of October, which is very popular for us and a good time to advocate for farmers, but we need to do that all year round. We need to make sure folks like yourself and others from urban Ontario recognize the importance of Ontario farmers, of Ontario-grown food and the ability to continue to produce healthy, nutritious food right here at home in Ontario and support them, as families, right across the province.

Ms. Jessica Bell: One of the things I heard recently from the Canadian manufacturers that were here yesterday, I believe—they talked about how sometimes it's difficult for Ontario businesses to know exactly what municipalities want to buy, because it's not easy to access that information. Do you think, maybe if there was a portal of some sort so that businesses could understand what

municipalities or provinces want to buy, that it would be easier for farmers to get those contracts?

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: Yes. That might help, for sure. I mean, the one thing that we've been advocating a lot for recently and continue to do is advocating for increased processing capacity of our products as well.

Like I said before, we're very good at creating raw product; we're not so great at turning that into other things that we can use in this province. If we have that ability to turn that into finished products and finished goods that consumers can use, that municipalities can use, that other levels of government can use, I think that's only going to benefit us going forward and add value to those products.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for that. We also agree. We see a lot of need in making it easier for the farming sector to do more value-added processing and that it will require investment.

My next question is to the individuals from Regent Park Community Health Centre. In our riding, we continue to have a safe consumption site. It's safe to say, with the reduction of safe consumption sites elsewhere in Toronto, it has led to increased use, more open drug use, more complaints from neighbours in one area, because the need is not distributed.

I just want to be very clear: I think safe consumption sites are necessary. We need a harm-reduction approach to addressing drug addiction as we provide treatment to people. We absolutely need both.

With the closure of the safe consumption site in your area, what impact did you see it have on emergency room visits, hospital visits, calls from paramedics—what have you seen?

Mr. Fraser MacPherson: Thanks for that question. Yes, we definitely have seen—one of the biggest impacts has been people lost to care. People who we were seeing almost every day in our clinic and were connecting with care providers—either a nurse practitioner or a nurse or an outreach worker—are no longer connected. We're just not seeing them. They've been lost to follow-up for us, which is really troubling.

The other thing that we've seen is definitely an increase in—we had a controlled environment on our site where people would use substances. Instead, now, people overdose in the bathroom or in the alley, so that's kind of where substance use is still taking place.

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Ms. Juliana Coughlin: I'd also say that there are a lot of folks who aren't able to access shelter beds, aren't able to be connected—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): If you could introduce yourself before you speak.

Ms. Juliana Coughlin: Sure. My name is Juliana Coughlin. I'm a registered social worker at Regent Park Community Health Centre.

We've seen a lot of people not able to access shelter beds, not able to access applying for IDs, applying for housing, which you need all of those things.

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

Ms. Juliana Coughlin: I think also the stats are just not there yet to see the huge impact because the sites just started to close.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm also following those stats closely and I've reached out to public health to do so.

My final question is to the Atmospheric Fund—I'm sorry for talking quickly. I've got two questions; we can follow up if you can't answer them. One is around public charging infrastructure: Where are we at and where do we need to get to? My second question is, what's holding us back from signing up purpose-built rentals, multi-unit buildings to the energy-efficiency program you're talking about?

Mr. Evan Wiseman: I'll go in reverse order because it's quickest. The IESO just hasn't expanded the program to include them. They just need to be directed to be included. I'm sure there are some technical issues with it, but nothing that's insurmountable, particularly because we're talking about upgrades to smart thermostats and there's a networking point to that point. I'm speeding through the program a little bit; I can go into more detail, but that would be the biggest thing for—

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: We'll follow up.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll now go to Mr. Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thanks for your presentation, Evan. I really appreciate it and the work the of the Atmospheric Fund, of what you're doing to advocate for solutions that not only help protect our environment but actually help people save money.

I'm curious a little bit around the EV charging. It's something that I don't see currently in provincial legislation, because I know we're suggesting here that we provide some subsidies and some funding publicly. But with new builds, should we just be requiring that—in a house, for example—there's a 200-amp panel and in buildings that there is dedicated charging infrastructure in place?

Mr. Evan Wiseman: Yes, that's definitely our main ask, is an update to the building code to require that. The key thing here is, there's a safety element to this as well. If you have an EV—I've spoken with charging companies where you'll see photos of someone connecting two, three, four, five, six 20-foot extension cords to charge their EVs and it starts a fire, because people make decisions like that sometimes. So it's best to encourage them not to.

When we talk about the equipment—I think there's a key point here on it—we're not talking about the full charger that goes in for the new builds; we're just talking about the electrified outlet that goes in. It's like anything: It's cheapest to build it at the point of construction, not to go back and retrofit it. At the point of construction, it only costs around \$1,200 to put it in per stall. To retrofit it, it costs about \$4,900 to over \$5,000 per stall. That's a cost that is borne by the unit or homeowner; especially in a multi-unit residential context, that is borne by a line of credit compared to a mortgage. The financing is complete-

ly different. It's night and day in terms of what you're asking.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. Just around district energy and an enabling fund to support low-carbon thermal networks: In the long run, if we go down that approach, what do those cost-savings look like for folks putting in place district energy?

Mr. Evan Wiseman: Without overstating it, you're looking at the removal of gas bills—just a complete removal of an entire line item in a household budget. These types of places, you can think about it—bigger examples of it could be using waste heat off the Pickering nuclear plant; I grew up down the street from it. You're looking at data centres similarly partnering with private industry. Denmark is a great example of how they have something like 40 different examples of district energy that you just sign up for. If you're building a new development, you just say, "I'm picking number 32. I would like to install it," and then you get automatic approvals. You're also bypassing months or years of siting for natural gas infrastructure as well.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: It seems like a smart way of doing things, especially longer-term if we prepare for that stuff now. We will definitely see those benefits five years, 10 years, 15, 20 years down the road.

What's a little bit concerning, actually, is when I look at natural gas, 70% of it is coming from the US.

Mr. Evan Wiseman: Yes.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: So we're helping Donald Trump down south, essentially, with our use of natural gas, and having a diversified electricity system I think is probably pretty helpful in reducing our dependence on the United States.

Mr. Dave Smith: Call your friends in Ottawa.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I'm sorry? Were you—Chair? I mean—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Through the Chair and keep on with your questions.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Regent Park Community Health Centre, thanks for your presentation. I think it's some really challenging situation that folks are doing day in and day out to help support people and provide people with support.

Around supportive housing in particular—and this is something that I've spoken about before. I'd love to really be able to move away from shelters and just build the supportive housing that we need. Can we do that without necessarily going back to, I guess, safe injection sites?

Ms. Juliana Coughlin: Without going back to safe injection sites?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Yes.

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

Ms. Juliana Coughlin: I think what we're trying to advocate here today is that you need safe injection sites for people to—it's an avenue for people to access care. It's a way for people to build trust with providers, to access low-barrier care, access health care, access getting IDs, taxes done, which all contribute to supportive housing and making

supportive housing successful. We're trying to advocate that it's connected.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Okay. Because I would really love to see us ramp up supportive housing so that we can skip shelters, so that we can skip some of that and really provide some of those wraparound services.

Maybe in the second round, I want to pick up a little bit about the residential treatment beds, because I think that can probably be a pretty good solution to help in the short term. So maybe I'll pick up on that in the second round.

Ms. Juliana Coughlin: Yes. And if it's okay for me to say, I think it's also important that with the HART hub funding, there was no investment in residential treatment beds. You can't just have HART hub supports without investing.

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

MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I'm going to go back to Drew and OFA. You spoke about rising input costs for farmers, with inflation pushing up everything from the cost of fuel, fertilizer, labour, machinery and feed, meaning that a farm's overall cost of production increases. Farmers have suggested to me, while grateful for the boost to RMP at the beginning of 2025, they're thinking that RMP needs to reflect those increased production costs.

I'm asking you whether or not you think RMPs should be reviewed sooner rather than later, given the current state of the economy?

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: Thanks for the question. I think we actually probably need to do a wholesome review of all of our risk management programs—so that's both federal and provincial.

Certainly, again, we're appreciative of the additional investment in the RMP program. Has it gone far enough, considering the rate of the increases we've been seeing in terms of cost of production and rising input costs? I'm not sure that I'm qualified to say. But certainly, those costs continue to escalate rapidly and we're seeing declining market conditions and things like that.

We're certainly happy to work with the ministry, work with the government on any effort to increase program funding for RMP, and any effort to look at the overall risk management picture for farmers in Ontario.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Great. You mentioned the labour shortages, and I see them in my riding as well. You suggested stronger targeted programs and I'm wondering what a strategy might look like.

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: I can certainly provide some more information on that, but the focus definitely needs to be on the agri-food workforce. We need a specific strategy just for agri-food.

As I mentioned, that \$591 million in lost revenue because of the shortage of agriculture workers is concerning for us.

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

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: It should be concerning for the province as well, because that's potential tax revenue lost and things like that, and potential food lost from the system,

and our ability to be food secure and continue to export a lot of that product.

Certainly, again, I'm happy to continue to work together and support an overall agri-food strategy for the workforce in agri-food and I can provide some more information on that after.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: And quickly, the wildlife damage compensation program—there was a resolution at your AGM last week. What has gone wrong with that program?

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Mr. Drew Spoelstra: We just don't have one. We're certainly looking to develop something specific to wildlife damage compensation. We do have adequate production insurance and things like that for weather perils and whatnot, but there's no coverage for wildlife damage, and that is a concern for many right across the province.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you.

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

MPP Saunderson.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I want to thank all of our presenters for taking time this afternoon to come and give us your important feedback on our budget consultations. It's an important process.

My questions are going to focus on you, Evan, at the TAF. I appreciate your comments about the government's efforts so far. As you know, EVs are a big part of our plan moving forward, and also the home renovations savings program I mentioned that was initiated in January of this year and is a big program, as you say, to make us more energy efficient. We know we have huge energy grid demands. We have one of the cleanest grids in Canada, if not North America. Despite having about 40% of the population, I think we're about 22% of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions. There's always work to do, which is part of our energy project moving forward.

I was formerly a mayor in the town of Collingwood, and district energy was a big topic there. When you talked about the EV—wiring them in—you talked about the up-front cost being a little less. District energy is a great thing, but the up-front cost can be a big issue. Retrofitting is prohibitively expensive, as I found out. We were trying to use energy from our arena to heat our town hall, and that was quite exorbitant.

I'm just wondering if you can give us your thoughts on not so much the retrofitting but how, moving forward, we could put programs in place to incent district energy for new developments because, as you say, it's a great thing, but it's a change of thinking. In a climate like ours, heat and cooling are a big topic. So maybe you could give me your thoughts on how we might incent district energy for future developments moving forward.

Mr. Evan Wiseman: Yes, absolutely. TAF works with a number of municipalities, small ones and big ones. We have Brock as well in our catchment, which is 1,500 people. We have Caledon which is in our catchment. Toronto, obviously, is on the upper side of our population.

It's really about forward planning. That's the big key one, which is the focus of the requests for the fund.

We grant to municipalities. We had a 2018 grant to Markham that worked with Mattamy Homes to create a zero-emission community. It was a \$215,000 grant. Like you said, it's not cheap to do—we built 400 homes—but it's one of those things where, when you plan ahead, that is where you save all the cost, because the mixed-use developments are really the name of the game.

If you're putting in a data centre nearby, be intentional; have that data centre's excess heat then be put back into the community that is going to be hosting the data centre. That way, you're basically eliminating the need for natural gas to be piped into that community. You're also avoiding timelines on expansion of the network, which takes upwards of three years for greenfield developments. This way, you're also incentivizing further growth in industry, because a data centre, while they might think up front, "Well, we're not going to see a ton of return initially," it helps mitigate their ongoing costs, which makes it absolutely of interest for your major companies.

So, to your point, retrofitting can be expensive. It depends on the tech. But also planning ahead and enabling communities to make those decisions, and then giving them the powers to be able to enforce those plans as well—that would be how to get it done.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Thanks for that. My follow up question—I'm going to change tacks a little bit. Since this is a budget consultation, you probably know that Ontario is the largest and most frequent issuer of Canadian-dollar green bonds. I think we've issued 19 issues over \$22.5 billion since 2014, and there are about 17 outstanding at this time. This allows us an opportunity to attract green investors and to use that money to reinvest in green technologies and environmental and economic objectives.

I'm just wondering what your thoughts are on our green bond program that we announced new in the fall economic statement. How do you see that operating and do you see it being beneficial?

Mr. Evan Wiseman: Yes, it's innovative. We like it. We often try to create financial assets as well to help encourage better developments. The green condo loan made—it was many years ago now that we had initially partnered with Tridel, another developer, to cover the initial up-front costs of building better efficient buildings so that the developer didn't have to handle it but that we would then be paid back over time—so, creating these innovative financial assets as well as a way to encourage better behaviour. Similarly, the city of Toronto would give DC rebates to developers who built better—\$150 million over about 10, 15 years—and it helped really reduce the grid demand in Toronto as well.

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

Mr. Evan Wiseman: So we really encourage the use of these types of green bonds and more financial assets and being more creative than just strictly asking for tax dollars, because I can appreciate that everyone asks for that. I would say as we move in the transition, there's a lot of

opportunity, and it's the better way to encourage better behaviour.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Thank you very much, and thanks to the panel. Those are my questions.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thirty-one seconds.

Interjections.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): If you discuss it long enough, we won't have enough—

Mr. Dave Smith: Thanks, Chair. I appreciate it—

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

Mr. Dave Smith: We're probably down to about 20 seconds now, so I will just drag the puck for 20 seconds and say thank you very much for coming out today to do the presentations. We greatly appreciate it. A lot of this—it seems like it's really fast. It seems like we're doing speed dating. So if you see it in the budget, consider that a swipe to the right.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much, because that's all the time there is.

We'll now go to MPP Shaw.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I'm going to pick up where MPP Bell left off with the Atmospheric Fund. My question is also similar: Where are we at with public charging stations, and where do we need to get? You've put it here, but I'm just going to share with you my personal experience, whether it's useful or not: I have been an EV vehicle driver for about five years now. In fact, I have one at home, but I find the public charging infrastructure seems to be getting worse, if that's possible. It doesn't seem to be expanding with the number of vehicles that we see on the road. You talked about very specifically maintaining those public charging stations—because very often, I'm in the middle of a very serious range-anxiety moment, where I have 20 kilometres to go and I drive to a charger station that I found on one of my apps, and it's broken.

So if you could speak to people that are considering buying an EV—because when people ask me, I say the EVs are fantastic vehicles. They shoot off the mark. There's no maintenance. They're incredible vehicles to drive. But also, as an owner, I'm concerned with recommending them because it's difficult unless you have one at home and one at your workplace.

Mr. Eric Wiseman: Yes, absolutely. My boss, Bryan Purcell—we've had at length conversations with similar experiences also in Toronto, which is always a concern. If we're having problems here, then I can only imagine what it's like elsewhere.

Definitely, we think that room for improvement, for sure, would be one-tap paying for charging instead of always having to sign up for different accounts.

Definitely, reliability requirements as part of any ChargeON, which—it wasn't actually yet included in the recent recapitalization of ChargeON through OVIN as a part of it as well—to ensure that when you get to a charger that it works properly and if it's not working properly that gets either fixed very rapidly or the charge operator has to pay some sort of fine, especially if there are public dollars around it.

Another key point I would say is specifically to address the range anxiety. I think it was a good point you bring up. I was recently in Vancouver, and we were discussing BC Hydro's charging plan and after 10 years of leadership in the space what it's like to drive an EV in BC. The reality is that charging anxiety doesn't really exist in BC nor Quebec. They have had a plan, and they've implemented it over the last 10 years.

So we very much appreciate the ChargeON funding. We would like to see multi-year as part of a strategy, but we definitely see the pain points when it's left to the regions to develop individualized plans, and there isn't an Ontario charging strategy. I would also even add a national charging strategy for the feds, but obviously, we're at Queen's Park.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Yes. Okay. Thank you. That really speaks to my experience.

It's expensive for people. I think those level 3s are anywhere from \$50,000 to \$200,000 to invest in, so it is a huge commitment for a private business, let alone public sector. So I'm happy to see that you're working on that.

I like your recommendation to expand it to multi-unit residential buildings. My understanding, from the ChargeON program, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, is, unless they're making it public to others to use—so if you're in a condominium or a small co-op building, you can invest in this, but you have to make it accessible to people in the public, and that can be very complicated for different reasons. Is that correct?

Mr. Eric Wiseman: Yes. That's part of it. I think that's probably why the MURBs have been left out of the program so far: There is that element of it's closed off, which does create problems.

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I would say that one of the things at TAF is that we invest as well in burgeoning businesses, especially Ontario-based businesses. There are really clever folks that are coming up with ride-sharing ideas, where it becomes part of like a condo fee so that people can sign up and use an EV communally, so you don't even have to buy an EV in order to access an EV.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Oh, I like that. That's good.

Mr. Evan Wiseman: There are these really clever ideas that are coming up and scaling, but there does need to be some support for these types of things in order to be more accessible. Again, we're not talking about every single stall in a retrofit, but a couple of stalls goes a long way.

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

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I'm sorry that I've run out of time. I just wanted to say to the folks from Regent Park: We see your work from the official opposition NDP. In Hamilton, our HART hub was closed. In the Hamilton urban core, we're seeing exactly what you're seeing. There are so many pieces to this, but the lack of shelter beds—I want you to know that we have proposed that we need to build 60,000 supportive housing units over 10 years, and we're not even anywhere near that.

Can you very quickly, because I've run out of time, say how supportive housing would support the work that you are doing?

Mr. Fraser MacPherson: Yes, 100%. It's so difficult to get our clients into housing, and supportive housing just offers that extra level of wraparound support. Once somebody is in supportive housing, there's a way to contact them, to get them reminders for appointments, to engage them with social services like getting—

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

MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Just to pick up on where we left off around residential treatment beds: How many residential treatment beds do you think that we need?

Mr. Fraser MacPherson: I wonder if maybe my colleague on Zoom wants to respond. Nicola? Just around how many residential treatment beds.

Ms. Nicola Holness: Hello, everyone. My name is Nicola from Regent Park Community Health Centre.

In terms of how many beds, I think that would be reflective of what we're seeing in terms of overdoses, so I would think potentially somewhere around 20,000 residential beds. I know that's a huge number and I don't think that would happen in one shot, but I think it would be reflective of the numbers that we're seeing in terms of homelessness in the city of Toronto.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: What impact would a residential treatment bed have on an individual, I would say, dealing with substance abuse?

Ms. Nicola Holness: If we talk about even the process of when we did have consumption sites, a lot of times if there is a potential overdose or anything that just needs some observation, they will go into a detox centre where they will be monitored to make sure that they don't go into any overdose. A lot of times, that is that entry point, where somebody can counsel—whether they're speaking with a nurse or a social worker, and eventually getting to the point of treatment.

We're looking at all of these things as bridges into full-on treatment, because a lot of times, just trying to come up to somebody off the street and asking, "Is this something you would be interested in," knowing that there's no additional support after treatment, is the biggest gap. We need to be able to get people right at that moment when they've expressed an interest in treatment but then also have those supports for once they come out and they'll be able to maintain that recovery piece.

That's a lot of the aspect of where HART hubs were funded for, treatment and recovery. But if people don't have a place to stay, there's only so much that a day withdrawal management program can do. Once we close, they're right back out into the streets. And once they're out in the streets, that's that—

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thanks. So I'm hearing there are a lot of gaps, I think, in the current approach of the provincial government. If we really want to effectively help folks who are dealing with some very challenging situations, we need to fill those gaps. Those gaps need to be filled in and

then hopefully we should be able to get folks going back to being, I would say, active members of the community in a positive way.

Okay. I appreciate that. Thank you.

Drew, thank you very much for your presentation. I appreciate the work that the Ontario Federation of Agriculture is doing in advocating for the agriculture community.

I don't think we spoke about that much, the risk management program and increasing it. What would be the cost to not doing this?

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: Well, I think the cost would be significant pressure on farms across Ontario. As I mentioned in the opening, we're seeing rising input costs, we're seeing high interest rates, we're seeing high costs of land and things like that, so we need to ensure farmers have the tools available to them to protect their farm businesses; to manage things out of their control like trade and tariffs, market conditions, that we certainly have no control of. Weather is another issue, but not one that's covered by the Risk Management Program.

If we didn't have this program, I think we'd see farms lost. We'd see challenges producing food and other things across the province, and we don't want to go there.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I'm curious, in terms of getting some of our agricultural products into more international markets: From a transportation perspective, do you see a need in expanding infrastructure related to rail and port to help with that?

Mr. Drew Spoelstra: Absolutely. It's critical that we look at every option available to us to expand not only our trading partners around the world, but infrastructure here, and—

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

Mr. Drew Spoelstra:—ensuring that the infrastructure that we have can be utilized to its best capacity. We have some world-class ports in Ontario: Thunder Bay, Hamilton, Port Colborne and other places, as well. We need to use those to our best ability. We need to make sure that the workers there continue to work and continue to move that product, as well. We need to be a reliable trading partner around the world, and to do that we need to have the mechanisms in place to make sure that that reliability stays strong.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I appreciate that. I'm really big into our ports, because I would love to get trucks off the road and off the 401, so that we can move more goods like we used to, on water. Thank you for that. I appreciate it.

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

We want to thank all the participants for your participation and all of the time you took to prepare and so ably present it to us. I'm sure it will be helpful.

With that, we go to the next panel.

MODERNA CANADA
 TADDLE CREEK FAMILY HEALTH TEAM
 FILMONTARIO

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): The next panel coming forward will be Moderna Canada, Taddle Creek Family Health Team and FilmOntario. As with the other panels, if you weren't here to hear the instructions, you will have seven minutes to make your presentation. At six minutes I will say, "One minute." Don't stop. Finish your presentation, because at seven minutes, it's over.

With that, we'll start with Monderna—Moderna?

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: Moderna.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): That. Anyway, you know who you are.

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: Yes, and I'm in the right place, so that's a good start.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): That's where we will start, and the floor is yours.

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: Thank you. Honourable members of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, I just want to say thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Bryan Walchuk, and I am representing Moderna Canada.

Many people know Moderna because of the pandemic, but many people may be less familiar with us today. During those times, we started as an employer of one in Toronto here, and I'm incredibly proud to say that we've grown, with our Toronto headquarters here, to a workforce that indirectly or directly employs hundreds of employees here in Canada, through our domestic manufacturing in Laval, Quebec, and our fill-finish partner in Cambridge, Ontario. We support high-value employment and invest in Ontario's life sciences sector through R&D and clinical trials as well.

Before I speak further about Moderna's role in the province and our partnership with Ontario, I wanted to begin with the issue that continues to put real pressure on the Ontario health care system and, critically, on Ontario's budget. Even though the emergency phase of the COVID pandemic is over, COVID-19 remains the single-highest-burden respiratory virus in Ontario. Public health data shows that COVID-19 continues to cause more hospitalizations, emergency department visits and deaths than influenza or RSV. These pressures come with direct and indirect fiscal consequences through overtime expenditures, cancelled procedures, delayed surgeries and additional staffing needs. For that reason, maintaining funding for COVID-19 immunization is not simply a public health choice; it's a cost-avoidance strategy.

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This is reinforced in the 2025 update in July of the Canadian Immunization Guide, where the Public Health Agency of Canada concluded that the negative health and economic impacts of COVID-19 can be reduced through immunization. Because vaccination maintains health and results in cost savings, their conclusion was that including these vaccines in publicly funded programs is straightforward. That's why I want to reiterate that immunization

is not a cost line, but it's one of the most effective cost-avoidance tools that we have available to us as a government and public health.

I will say from a personal perspective, as an Ontarian, I'm very proud that Ontario continued to make COVID-19 vaccines readily available so that my parents and my children, both on opposite ends of this age spectrum, were able to get their COVID-19 vaccines this fall.

Ontario is a cornerstone of Moderna's global business. The province provides the stability, talent and infrastructure required for advanced biomanufacturing. Our partnership with Novocol Pharma in Cambridge is central to that foundation. Through this partnership, we are now filling and finishing COVID-19 vaccines right here in Ontario, giving the province reliable domestic supply.

Ontario Health officials have come to depend on Moderna because we have consistently demonstrated the ability to deliver quickly, efficiently and reliably. We are proud to have delivered 100% of doses on time in full throughout Ontario's vaccination campaign and often turning around requests and delivering next day. This level of reliability helps Ontario avoid costly and disruptive delays.

This fall marks an important milestone for us at Moderna Canada, one that we're extremely proud of: Ontario's vaccination campaign now includes Canada's first made-in-Canada COVID-19 vaccines, all filled and finished here in Cambridge, Ontario. This domestic capability has already helped Ontario avoid supply issues and it demonstrates what a resilient Ontario-based vaccine supply chain looks like.

Looking ahead, respiratory season pressures will not disappear. Ontario will continue to face COVID-19, influenza and RSV that drive emergency department demand. To help Ontario manage these pressures, Moderna is expanding our Ontario-based manufacturing capabilities. Over the next few years, we will be producing additional made-in-Ontario vaccines, including RSV and new combination vaccines. This expansion will allow us to supply products more quickly and predictably, ensuring that Ontarians receive the vaccines they need, when they need them.

We support Ontario's ambition to become a leading global hub for biomanufacturing and life sciences. The Buy Ontario approach strengthens sovereignty, creates high-level, high-value jobs and reduces reliance on foreign supply chains. Moderna is already one of the strongest proponents of this vision and action. With a domestic footprint, advanced manufacturing jobs and a track record of rapid, reliable supply, Ontario has an opportunity to build on this leadership.

To fully realize the benefits of made-in-Ontario vaccines without requiring new spending programs, we recommend four targeted measures that make smarter use of existing health care dollars:

(1) Prioritizing procurement of made-in-Ontario vaccines. Once vaccines are filled and finished in Cambridge, including RSV vaccines and next-generation mRNA products,

this will support local jobs, strengthen supply security and keep more economic value in the province.

(2) Integrating innovative vaccines into immunization schedules quickly. The timely adoption for high-risk populations will prevent avoidable emergency department visits and other health care utilization costs associated with it, all which carry significant direct and indirect fiscal costs.

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

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: (3) Making data more available to inform manufacturing and procurement lead times. During the pandemic we had the ability to view dashboards that showed vaccine uptake. This greatly helped manufacturers plan for demand and plan proper lead times to secure reliable and cost-efficient supply.

(4) Maintaining stable predictive funding for COVID-19 vaccination programs helps prevent further downstream costs to the health care system. To quote the Public Health Agency of Canada: “demonstrating that maintaining funding for COVID-19 vaccines is one of the most straightforward cost-avoidant strategies available.”

In closing, Ontario invested early in innovation, and that decision is already paying off. Moderna is ready to continue supporting Ontario by expanding domestic capacity and helping ensure that the province remains a global leader in vaccine innovation.

Thank you for your time, attention and consideration. I look forward to questions.

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

The next presenter is Taddle Creek Family Health Team.

Ms. Cheryl Dobinson: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Cheryl Dobinson, and I'm the executive director of Taddle Creek Family Health Team. We serve over 20,000 patients in downtown Toronto.

Family health teams already deliver the outcomes that this government is seeking. This model of team-based primary care is cost-effective, lowers emergency department use, provides better prevention and chronic disease management, and ensures consistent access to care. We keep people healthy while at the same time reducing system costs.

The historic \$2.1-billion investment in primary care teams and \$142 million in workforce funding from your government demonstrate strong leadership. However, without urgent action to stabilize the existing primary care infrastructure, the province risks building on a crumbling foundation that cannot support the weight of expansion.

There is a critical staffing crisis right now in primary care, as evidenced by high turnover, difficulty recruiting and staffing shortages. This stems from a widening wage gap between primary health care workers and health care workers in other sectors. Primary care allied health professionals earn 15% to 50% less than their hospital counterparts. While the 2.7% increase in HR funding provided this year is appreciated, it is not enough. It doesn't bridge the structural wage gap that must be addressed to stem the tide of staff turnover and burnout. Up until this summer,

our staff had had no salary increases for five years, while the cost of living continued to rise year after year.

In the past 18 months, 10 of my staff have resigned; this is almost half of our 23 staff. Staff who leave repeatedly tell me that although they enjoy working here, they need to take higher-paying positions to support themselves and their families. The vacant positions are getting harder to fill.

The funded wage for a medical secretary at a family health team is \$43,776, which falls almost \$10,000 short of the current living wage in Toronto. It's no wonder we have difficulty attracting and retaining staff for these positions when the amount we can pay isn't enough to meet basic needs. We were recently recruiting for a registered nurse, and comparable positions listed salaries at 15% to 40% higher than what we can offer. For social workers, recently posted hospital positions pay up to 50% more.

Not offering competitive salaries limits how many candidates apply, what level of experience they bring and how long staff stay. When publicly funded positions are not paid at the same rates, the system continually draws staff away from family health teams towards other publicly funded institutions. If this continues, we risk the collapse of our primary care teams.

Challenges in recruitment and retention also affect remaining staff who have to continually train new staff, participate in hiring and cover necessary tasks during vacancies. This contributes to burnout and is a cycle that we can't break without funding for appropriate wages.

Staff turnover also impacts patients' access to care. In the last year, half of our social work team resigned. When a social worker leaves, the wait time for mental health services increases until we can recruit and train someone new. When we're at full complement, our wait time for this is six to 12 weeks already, but when someone leaves, for social work it goes up to 16 to 20 weeks.

Given these challenges, I have three key asks:

(1) I ask that the province release the remaining \$115 million in already-committed funding to support the primary care workforce. Only \$27 million—or 19%—of the committed \$142 million has been disbursed. No new funds are required for this, and releasing this funding would prevent further attrition and stabilize our teams.

(2) I ask that the province invest an additional \$430 million over five years to close the wage gap in primary care to align primary care compensation with market rates and to attract family physicians, nurse practitioners and allied health into our teams.

(3) I ask that the government shift existing family health team budgets to global budgets for greater flexibility. No new funds are required to make this change, which would support teams in meeting their unique organizational needs.

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These actions would provide immediate relief for family health teams that are struggling by preventing further staff losses and increasing our ability to provide and care for our patients. It would also mean staff could

focus on what they do best, caring for patients, rather than on training new staff and filling gaps.

System-wide, these investments would result in an estimated \$1.2 billion in avoided hospital costs by reducing emergency department use, improving chronic disease management and expanding preventive care. Investing in team-based primary care is fiscally responsible and provides system-wide value. Team-based primary care is the most cost-effective part of the health care system, saving millions in downstream costs.

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

Ms. Cheryl Dobinson: Ontario is rapidly expanding primary care, which is important and necessary, but expansion is outpacing the system's ability to support the teams already in place. We need a stable foundation to build on to support those already doing the work, and those we need to recruit to join our efforts. Urgent action is necessary to close the wage gap for primary health care workers. Without the resources to stabilize our teams, we can't provide the level of care for patients that family health teams are intended to offer.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present today. I look forward to your questions and continuing to work together in support of the health of our communities.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much for your presentation.

Our next presentation is FilmOntario, and I see we have a number of virtual participants. We just ask that, if the virtual participants are asked to speak, make sure you identify yourself before you start.

With that, the floor is FilmOntario's.

Ms. Cynthia Lynch: Thank you, committee, for having us here today. My name is Cynthia Lynch, and I am the managing director and counsel for FilmOntario. We are an industry association representing all of the Ontario-based unions, producers, studios, visual effects and post-production houses, equipment suppliers and financial and legal service providers in the province's \$2.6-billion film and television sector. All together, our members provide employment for 45,000 workers in Ontario.

With me virtually today are the following FilmOntario board members: Jane Tattersall, managing director and senior vice-president at Picture Shop and the Formosa Group Toronto, who is also an internationally acclaimed sound editor with countless Canadian Screen Awards and Emmy nominations to her name; Magali Simard, vice-president of government and industry relations at Cinespace Studios, a global platform of production facilities and Ontario's largest film and television production hub; and Victoria Harding, the executive director of the Directors Guild of Canada Ontario, who represents over 3,700 members who work in the categories of directors, assistant directors, production managers, location managers, production designers and art directors, accountants, picture and sound editors and post-production supervisors.

Over the past little while, DGC Ontario's members have worked on international productions such as *Frankenstein* and *Star Trek*, as well as Canadian productions like *Murdoch Mysteries* and *Heated Rivalry*—the recently

released Canadian show that was made for Crave, has been picked up by HBO Max for distribution in the US and is currently blowing up the internet.

Over to Victoria.

Ms. Victoria Harding: These productions Cynthia referenced exemplify what gives Ontario its strength as a filming jurisdiction. We provide a welcome home for global productions, and we also have production companies here at home that develop and exploit their own original intellectual property, creating Canadian content for audiences around the world.

Today, we are here to provide some context around the changing global environment for film and television production and highlight some opportunities for investment that will help Ontario maintain and strengthen its competitive position. Like many sectors, Ontario's film and television industry is highly integrated with our American partners and clients, and we have been affected by a changing trading relationship with the US, disruptions in the international market for screen content, and uncertainty in the Canadian regulatory environment.

Worldwide, there has been a 24% decrease in scripted series commissions from the top streamers between 2024 and 2025. In Canada, television production spending decreased by almost 13% in the 2023-24 fiscal year, and in Ontario, spending on the production of domestic television content decreased by 29% in that same time period.

At the same time, jurisdictions around the world and across Canada are either introducing new or enhancing existing film and television incentives. This includes recent improvements to the California, New York, New Jersey, British Columbia and Quebec tax credits. Other Canadian provinces are also investing more strategically in Canadian content production, an area traditionally one of Ontario's strengths. In 2023-24 Ontario companies produced only 26.6% of all Canadian content in Canada, representing a 5% decline from the previous year.

Over to Jane.

Ms. Jane Tattersall: Thank you. I'm Jane Tattersall, from Picture Shop and Formosa Group Toronto. FilmOntario is currently doing research into improving our competitive position as a jurisdiction. Early results show that while we compare with other provinces and states, there are a few strategic improvements that can be made to strengthen our position. Both global and Ontario-based companies choose to work here because we have stable and predictable incentives, excellent facilities, beautiful locations, and extremely talented and well-trained workers in front of and behind the camera.

Maintaining a solid foundation is key to building on the current success. The government's commitment to stable and collective tax credits and all-party support for our sector are key to global competitiveness. Production schedules can spend months and even years, and knowing you can count on the tax credits at the end of that work is crucial.

Premier Ford continues to state that he would like to see us grow to be a \$5-billion industry, almost double what we

are today. We won't get there by staying still. We need to make sure that the package we offer as a province is second to none. Our budget submission includes suggestions to make the tax credits more effective at bringing business to interior and making Ontario-based companies more competitive.

Ms. Magali Simard: We will spare you the technical details today—these are complex files—but in general terms for you to start thinking about and things we will be putting forward next year, we're really looking at bonuses to incentivise particular activities, to expand what the tax credits currently do for the film and TV industry and its business power—for example, regional production and repeat businesses in the province. We are also looking at the types of expenses and types of productions currently eligible for the tax credits compared to other jurisdictions. This can include things like travel accommodation and additional location related expenses competing jurisdictions allow.

In addition, Ontario is the only jurisdiction in the world that treats its visual effects tax credit as a separate—

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

Ms. Magali Simard: Thank you—visual effects and animation studios, rather than as a bonus for the producer. So we're looking at how to bring Ontario in line with our competitors to change the OCASE credit, the effects credit, to a producer-based credit, which would be at no net new cost to the government.

We are also looking at ways to pay out the tax credit sooner. The processing times have been long—compared to our competitors. We've had great commitments from Minister Cho and the team at Ontario Creates to have committed to a 12-week processing time on the tax credit applications, and we are already seeing much improvement and progress towards this goal. However, we want to ensure that this becomes a systemic solution, a permanent one. We want to make sure that the funds that are advanced are paid out quicker, instead of having production companies have to stop-gap finance what they will get later as a tax credit return. What we really say is finally—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time, and that also concludes the presentations.

So we'll now start with the first round. MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you to all the presenters for coming out and sharing your important insights as we get ready for budget 2026. My question is for Cheryl. In the fall economic statement, we announced \$1.1 billion over three years to expand home and community care, helping ensure that residents get the care in the right place for them. There was a partnership with my local hospital in Fergus that's going to be doing that.

My question is: How does this investment help primary care delivery, and what further supports would improve access and integration for your patients?

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Ms. Cheryl Dobinson: Thank you for that question. I think that these are things that, in parallel, improve the health and well-being of Ontarians: the home and com-

munity care side and the primary care side, both being lifted up together. I think that some of the ways that I can see integration or more working together be beneficial.

Right now, we have, in a family health team, a community care coordinator from Ontario Health atHome who is assigned to work with us. They're assigned to a lot of other places, as well, and so sometimes not able to work with us on our patients as much as would be desirable. And so, I think that having more connection between primary care teams and our counterparts in Ontario Health atHome would benefit the care of those patients that we're both serving.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Okay. Thank you, Chair.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm going to go to FilmOntario. Obviously, I've had a relationship with you guys when I was in the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport back a couple of years ago. I'm going to throw this back out there again, because you keep missing it on me. And I've offered more money to you if you can just bring back *The Littlest Hobo*. It was my favourite TV show—a Canadian and Ontario production—and I keep throwing it out there to you. I'll advocate more for the money, if you can get me *The Littlest Hobo* back.

My simple question, to start off with, is why can't we get that one back?

Ms. Magali Simard: Let's make a deal now.

Laughter.

Ms. Cynthia Lynch: Can we recommend to you the Ontario production company Shaftesbury's Hudson and Rex? It does have a dog detective.

Mr. Dave Smith: Sure, yes, but it's not the same.

Ms. Cynthia Lynch: It shoots in Newfoundland, but it does do its post-production here in Ontario.

Mr. Dave Smith: It's not the same. You're bringing back those childhood memories for me, if you bring back *The Littlest Hobo*.

In all seriousness, though, I know that you have pitched to us a few times on this: a southern Ontario tax credit, similar to what the NOHFC has done for northern Ontario for film productions. One of the concerns I have on it is, would we be taking away from the production that is going right now in northern Ontario if we were to do something similar to that in southern Ontario, with a series of tax breaks and so on, to have that production brought to southern Ontario? Is there a risk of damaging what we have already gained in northern Ontario through the film production and through the post-production services?

Ms. Cynthia Lynch: I think that if we are going to go to \$5-billion industry, we do have to bring the whole province into having thriving jurisdictions. We are looking at different options to add a regional bonus to the production service credit. What we find now, for domestic producers who do have access to a regional bonus in addition to NOHFC, is that they need that funding to keep the business in Ontario. It's not necessarily southwestern Ontario competing with northern Ontario; it's northern Ontario or southwestern Ontario competing with Winnipeg. We want them to come to Ontario, of course.

We also see some municipal incentives that don't cannibalize the production and other activities. Recently, we had a show from a FilmOntario member company called Neshama Entertainment. They filmed a production called *Very Merry Mystery*—I think that you can guess what that's about—in London, Ontario. They had a little bit of help from the city of London, and they were able to create over 100 local jobs on that production.

Mr. Dave Smith: How much time is left, Chair?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): It's 1.4.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you. One of the things that—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): It's 1.04.

Mr. Dave Smith: One of the things that hasn't been brought up on it, and I'm asking this because I think if we are going to be supporting the film industry, we have to be doing it in a holistic approach to it. There are some significant multi-storey-but-single-floor warehouse facilities all across Ontario that would make fantastic studios. I know that there have been a number of companies that have come and taken a look at the GE property in Peterborough and the 900,000 square feet that's there. It needed more repair than what we could be doing.

Should be also be looking some kind of incentive, then, for those smaller municipalities that have that warehouse capacity of 100,000 square feet or so that are 100-year-old buildings that are two- and three-storey, but only one room in it. Should we be looking at working with municipalities in a way that those could be converted into studios, so we could—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you, that concludes the time.

We will now go to the official opposition. MPP Shaw.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I'm going to start my round of questioning with FilmOntario. It's really a pleasure to see all of you here today.

I'm going to see MPP Dave Smith's *The Littlest Hobo* and raise you the *Murdoch Mysteries* that was filmed in this building; I don't know if you've all seen that episode, but it's pretty great.

I'm very familiar, from the Hamilton perspective, with the economic impact that your industry has in Hamilton. We have a film office and a tourism office together in the ec dev department, so that is showing the understanding of the importance of this industry. Hamilton is in some ways a microcosm of what you're trying to do for Ontario. At one point—I don't if we've given up—Guillermo del Toro was going to open up a production studio in Hamilton. I don't know if that's—we're still holding out hope that that will happen.

Can you talk to me a little bit about the synergy—you have, but the synergy between film, tourism and the impact it has on economic development in Ontario?

Ms. Cynthia Lynch: Sure. Thank you for that question.

I would like to congratulate the city of Hamilton; I believe, during some of the COVID shutdowns, they did set up a location tour of the city, which won a tourism award because it was a self-directed tour where people

could be outside and do and visit all the sites. Those types of things do generate a bit of tourism.

The other overlap, of course, is when film production goes to a different location, or even when they bring people into the city of Toronto. People are put up at hotels; they eat; they build sets; they buy costumes; they buy supplies. All of those things contribute to the economic impact.

It depends on the show—I think *Murdoch Mysteries* has done a little bit of work on tourism related to their sites in the city of Oshawa. It does depend on how invested the fans are, I will say, in how much that drives the tourist activities, but there's definitely a synergy. People like to see where movie magic is made

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Absolutely.

I want to just drill down on what you were talking about, the idea of, in the circumstance we find ourselves, keeping this industry competitive. You've talked about the tax credits. Can you describe if there are other financial incentives—I'm particularly picking up on what I think it was Madame Simard said about permanent solutions and this not being a stopgap, and people not having to temporarily finance production with a hope and a prayer that they will get their tax credits. Can you talk about other ways that financing could be more permanent and more stable for your industry?

Ms. Cynthia Lynch: Certainly. Thank you for that.

I would like to say that this government's commitment to keeping the tax credits stable has been very welcomed by our industry, but the process is long to qualify for a tax credit. As Magali mentioned, the processing time to certify your eligibility has come down, but you can't apply until later in the process and then you have to file a tax return.

We would love to see some sort of advance system where you could receive a portion of your tax credit when you file your tax return or when you file your application for eligibility, just to—you know, not everything, so hold a little bit back to keep everything safe and above board, but put 50% to 70% of that money into producers' pockets earlier and then they will not spend that money on bank fees and can hire more workers.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Then I just would like to focus on maybe something you haven't brought up exactly, but you talked about creating a job stream—it's a job strategy for your industry. We've had a lot of cuts to college programs, and we've had a lot of cuts to hospitality programs, in particular. I know that, for example, Queen's University has a fantastic film school. I know there are so many technicians and trained folks that go through our community college sector.

Do you see the cuts that we've seen to these programs impacting your ability to offer a career to folks and making you less competitive?

Ms. Cynthia Lynch: We have seen some cuts to publicly funded college and university programs in their film-specific programs. I think I'm going to ask Magali to talk a little bit about some of the private institutions that also support the industry and the importance of supporting them.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Sure. Thank you.

Ms. Magali Simard: Yes, there's such a gamut of ways to come into the film and television industry. A creative industry like this is not necessarily the obvious pathway for everybody; it comes from a bit all over the place. For us, the health of that pipeline of workers is really the sum total of healthy traditional institutions like colleges and universities that do longer high-end programs for film and TV production and executives and—name it—we have our unions, who have really come, I would say, to the rescue of that pipeline of workers by doing so much more training than they used to, and then not-for-profits or private institutions really—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. I hate to do it to the same person every time—

Ms. Magali Simard: Me again?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): —but time is up
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MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Why don't we let you finish what you were saying on that. How's that?

Ms. Magali Simard: By the grace—thank you. Just to finish: The gamut is wide, and to have cuts to colleges and universities is a big deal. This is the largest pipeline of workers for us, but I would say I would really put in your minds that the support of the government to colleges and universities, to not-for-profits—the major ones—and to the unions who really push out the workers for this creative industry is really crucial. Our talent is our fame.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. I appreciated meeting with FilmOntario last week and having some really good conversations about what the film and television sector needs.

I did hear something concerning—

Mr. Dave Smith: The Littlest Hobo—

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Yes, The Littlest Hobo, absolutely. We'll sign onto that. How's that? We can make it an all-party thing.

But what was concerning when I did speak with a studio owner: He told me that he lost out on probably about a \$200-million or \$300-million project because of the current tax credit situation here in Ontario for film and television. When I look at other jurisdictions, whether it's in the United States or in Canada, it seems like we're not able to compete nearly as well as we might have been able to before on tax credits.

What would FilmOntario be looking for from the provincial government around tax credits so that we can compete for projects and keep a fantastic sector going here?

Ms. Cynthia Lynch: So, as Magali mentioned, we are looking at a suite of things, in no particular order of importance, and we will have costed examples of this in our budget submission.

We are seeing other jurisdictions introduce a repeat-business bonus, so if you bring back the 20th season of Murdoch Mysteries or if you bring back the fifth season of Star Trek, you get a little bump. Other jurisdictions have done that to great effect.

As Magali mentioned, streamlining our visual effects credit as well as, I think I mentioned briefly, a regional bonus in our production service, so for the foreign productions that come here in that credit—and I will look to the team to see if I missed anything, but I think that's sort of the suite of things—not necessarily large-cost items but things that would just give us a little bump.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. I think what I'm hearing as well is that we need the government to be a bit more flexible and a bit quicker with some of these changes and supports so that we aren't losing productions that are going elsewhere now instead of here.

Given that we've a lot of people employed in the sector, it also provides a lot of relief, maybe The Littlest Hobo or some other things as well that—some joy for individuals. You're in the business of providing entertainment and joy and also talking about sometimes challenging issues, so I really thank you all for what you're doing there.

For Cheryl: Thank you for your presentation. I recently just looked up how many family doctors we still need in this province, and it's a lot more. We've got about 2.5 million Ontarians without a family physician right now. What would you like to see happen, maybe in this upcoming budget, so that we can bring down the number of people unattached and give everybody a family doctor?

Ms. Cheryl Dobinson: Well, I can certainly speak to that a little bit. Not being a representative for OMA or for our family physicians I'm more limited in what I might know about that side of things, but what I understand from the family physicians who are affiliated with Taddle Creek Family Health Team is that there are pieces around not having the negation for patients going to walk-in clinics, which I believe is going to be removed in the FHO+ model that's coming through, being able to bill for the administrative and non-direct patient contact time that they put in to make sure that the care is well rounded and that they're doing all the pieces of paperwork and documentation and consults that are necessary.

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

Ms. Cheryl Dobinson: Something that my physicians have also said would be extremely helpful is a centralized referral hub, that a lot of the ways they need to manage referrals end up with things coming back, and then they reach out again—there is a lot of administrative burden put on the individual physicians and practices around that. Having a central referral hub to take the lead on that and take that off of their plates would allow them to have more time for direct patient work.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll go to MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you all for your presentations. I'll turn to Cheryl. Thank you for speaking about the staffing crisis and the wage gap. I have a daughter in the health care sector so I understand this very well. I've spoken about this over and over at committee, and I've spoken about it in the House—and I use the saying, "A tree cannot stand if its roots are rotten." If we don't have a strong workforce to uphold our health care system, it

doesn't remain very strong. I can support the release of the \$150 million to support primary care workforce.

I'm curious, if we don't invest that \$430 million and we continue to kick the can down the road with respect to the wage gaps, what do you foresee happening to our entire health care system?

Ms. Cheryl Dobinson: I would say there are two main outcomes that come to mind for me. One is that we already see family health teams becoming more and more—unfortunately, that staff are coming in and out. I have half my team resign, so how much of my time do I spend hiring, recruiting new people? We have the gap in patient care for the time that those staff positions are not filled. When admin staff positions are not filled, then we have primary care providers stepping in to support admin work to keep things running and keep things open, so I think just continuing to have those not work as efficiently and as well as possible to the maximum capacity of primary care teams and what we can do.

The other piece that I would speak to is just in terms of what it means in terms of avoided hospital costs and the way that by investing in primary care—it is expected that an investment in primary care has about a one-to-three ratio of reducing costs at the hospital level in more acute care.

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

Ms. Cheryl Dobinson: Not investing that money means that those expenses would come out in later downstream in the system—for hospital care for chronic diseases that go unmanaged and then require more specialist or hospital care, and not having as much preventive care to help keep people healthy and out of hospital or other acute care. There's the cost there and then there's the issue of the primary care teams becoming less effective because of not being able to maintain our staffing components.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: How much?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Twenty-two.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Should we be expanding the scope of nurse practitioners in this province?

Ms. Cheryl Dobinson: I would say that I don't have information to speak to that competently so that's something I can get back to you on in terms of what that could look like.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Great, thank you.

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

We will now go to the government side. MPP Triantafilopoulos.

Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos: Good afternoon, and thank you for being with us today. I would like to address my first question to Cheryl. I think that we can all agree that the family health team model is, in fact, the most cost-effective one and closest to the community and to, in fact, patients. You will have heard through our last Ontario economic statement, 2025, that we had announced an additional investment of \$1.1 billion going towards home and community care over the course of three years.

I wonder if you could speak to that in terms of how that actually complements the work that you would be doing

in your family health team, perhaps to alleviate some of the pressures that would exist and whether there are further supports you could see where they could be complementary to the kind of work that you do in your clinic?

1550

Ms. Cheryl Dobinson: Yes, I'm happy to speak to that. I think that the parallel work of both of these streams in health and social services is really important, and there are a lot of common patients that are supported by both members of the family health team, Ontario Health atHome or other community care. I think that finding more ways to integrate—we have a community care coordinator that is assigned to us at Taddle Creek, and she's assigned to many other places to be able to support us with our patients who are homebound. Being able to expand on what the role of those staff could do or to have them have less of a load so they can do more accompaniments to the patient home visits with my staff to really coordinate the care that our common patients need, and to be really in the loop with each other about what those patients require and where they are at would continue to build that and be valuable.

Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos: Another program that our government has invested in over the last few years is a paramedic program, where people who are on the wait-list to get into long-term care but are currently in their homes—paramedics are able to visit them to do some procedures, including taking their temperature or looking at their pulse, trying to identify ways to continue to maintain them in their homes as long as possible. All of these measures collectively will produce better health outcomes for our patients.

Thank you. Those are all the questions I have.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: My question today is for Bryan. It's great news that we have you guys here, state-of-the-art, still continuing to fight COVID. In the future, we will be more prepared with quicker access.

My question is, in 2025, in our Ontario budget, our government invested an additional \$90 million in venture capital through Venture Ontario, including \$40 million for life sciences and bio manufacturing. How do you think this will support Moderna's growth in Canada, and what else could help strengthen Ontario's leadership in this sector?

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: That's a good question, so thank you for that. I think I'll go back to some points that were in my opening address, where some of that—I think strengthening the transparency in terms of data. That, as I mentioned, is a huge part of how we can attract additional investment and grow the life sciences sector here: by giving manufacturers the ability to see the impact of vaccines but also have a better idea of the prevalence of diseases that exist in the world.

Oftentimes it's hard to bring some products to market if you don't have a clear surveillance network that supports that. I think data is one of the biggest things we can strengthen here in Ontario. Actually, Ontario is quite poised to be leaders in data, just with the networks that exist here and some of the data surveillance systems that

have been in place that were implemented during the pandemic.

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

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: That is probably the biggest area we would like to see strengthened. I think also just supporting front-line immunizers and continuing to provide access to where our patients are and combining the ability for vaccines to be administered in those locations.

Again, I think Ontario is doing a great job of leading the way here. We know that patients depend on the access to vaccines, especially less mobile senior patients. Having pharmacists involved in administering a wide range of vaccines is extremely helpful in bolstering that life sciences sector.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you very much. I guess we will give up the last 15 seconds of debate.

Mr. Dave Smith: How much time do we have left here?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thirteen, 12, 11—

Mr. Dave Smith: I just want to say, it's great to see you all. It's wonderful, and let's keep up the dialogue.

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

We'll now go to the official opposition. MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: My first question is to Bryan Walchuk from Moderna Canada. Thank you so much for coming in. I think a lot of us probably have the Moderna vaccine because of COVID, and I'm certainly one of them. Thank you.

My question is around your references to "made in Ontario" and your request that we prioritize made-in-Ontario vaccines in government procurement. As you probably know, the government is moving ahead with bringing in a more stringent buy Ontario procurement program, a measure that I think makes a lot of sense. Can you tell us a little bit about how much Ontario typically spends on vaccines, how many jobs it would create? Flesh it out for us.

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: It's a good question. It's hard for me to comment on how much Ontario spends on vaccines just given the fact that it's a federal procurement process and oftentimes confidential in terms of what those awards are or how much is being spent total on vaccines. But I can say just from our perspective, in terms of how we've been able to grow and have an impact on indirect or direct jobs here at Moderna—and I think if you use a StatsCan ratio of 2.1 times, which is generally accepted—we have generated roughly hundreds of jobs associated with bringing vaccine domestic manufacturing here in Ontario. That's all the way from direct jobs at Moderna to the manufacturer site itself but also third-party logistics and that type of thing. I would estimate in the hundreds.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Where do we typically get COVID vaccines from now?

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: All over the world—they're imported from all over the world. The point that I'd like to make and just to stress: This was a big roadblock during the pandemic when every country was lining up for their

turn to get vaccines imported. So, really, the importance of domestic manufacturing—not just the efficiency and how quickly we can get vaccines into pharmacies or doctors offices but it's that biosecurity of supplies should there be an event in the future that requires us to implement vaccines quickly, we wouldn't have to wait in line behind other countries.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I think everyone in this room remembers the rollout of vaccines and where Canada was in that order. Anyway, thank you for your work.

My second question is focused on Cheryl Dobinson, the executive director of Taddle Creek Family Health Team. Thank you so much for being here. Taddle Creek serves many patients in University–Rosedale; it's one of the largest family health teams in downtown Toronto.

My question is around the rollout of the primary care expansion that the government has initiated under Jane Philpott. I'm curious to know what you like about the rollout and where you see some areas for improvement.

Ms. Cynthia Dobinson: Thank you for that question. There are many things that I like about that rollout, and it's extremely positive and reassuring to see this work happening with the primary care action table and Jane Philpott's work. I think that right now, the expansion is very important, and we need the expansion in terms of increasing the attachment for the Ontarians that are not currently attached to a primary care provider.

I think that what got a bit left out, in terms of that expansion, is support for the teams that are already in place in terms of being able to staff those adequately to pay people enough that we don't have the level of turnover. It is building on something, it's offering and creating new opportunities, but if you can hire another medical secretary but you can still only pay them \$43,000 a year, you may not be able to fill that role.

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

Ms. Cheryl Dobinson: I think, for example, needing to build up the foundation for the existing roles, being able to adequately support new team members that are coming in with teams that have received interprofessional primary care team funding, they really need to go together to have the stable foundation to build the really important expansion of the primary care teams.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Let's aim for one more question here. The Auditor General just came out with their critique on the rollout of primary care. Some of the things they raised were that some organizations applied for funding under the primary care rollout, but they only got a percentage of what they asked for, and they were put between a rock and a hard place because how do we rollout something when we weren't expecting to get that amount of money. They've got some concerns about not many medical professionals or patients using the Health Connect program, which is meant to connect patients with doctors. There was not a good understanding of where doctors in Ontario are practising and where there are actually shortages.

1600

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

We'll go to MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Bryan, just so I understand, are the vaccines that we are filling here in Cambridge being manufactured at your facility in Quebec?

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Okay. And then it's bringing it over here.

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: Yes.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: That's fantastic. Do we see a need for further expansion right now here in Ontario?

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: That is one of the benefits of the mRNA platform, that the applications are very widespread. We have very exciting preliminary results in different therapeutic areas, such as oncology, such as other latent viruses.

If there is a need from a public health perspective, I think that there is certainly a possibility for the requirement for expansion as well.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Excellent. I don't really have any other questions for you, so that's good.

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: Thank you.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I appreciate it. Thank you. I think I definitely have at least one or two Modernas in my arm and in my body.

Cheryl, I just want to really pick up again on your family health team. How is the current primary care crisis in unattached patients—is that affecting your team's ability to deliver patient-centred, timely care? What are the challenges, or what are you seeing? I guess you can report back to us on that.

Ms. Cheryl Dobinson: Absolutely. The primary care crisis—I would say there are two kinds of different levels minimum that I can speak to on the family physician level.

When we have physicians retire from their practices, increasingly they are not able to find someone to take over their practice. So then the patients are discharged and have to find new primary care elsewhere. That is a big issue, trying to support those patients in accessing primary care because there's not a physician for whom family medicine is as appealing to be able to take on those roles.

Then I think the other aspect, as I mentioned before, is that the turnover in the teams—so our end support, the nurse practitioner support, the social work support—means the patients that do have a family doctor there can have increased wait times for access to the other parts of what makes team-based care a team, those kind of benefits that are brought to be able to really deliver on the promise of team-based care. That's impacted when there are increasing and repeat turnovers in positions that cause there to be gaps in the staffing and having to retrain new folks to be able to bring us back to a full complement and full service delivery.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Lastly—just FilmOntario and some of the workforce development that I think that we can do here in the province. I think we're talking a little bit about colleges and universities.

How do we, in some ways, inspire folks to want to choose a career in film and television?

Ms. Cynthia Lynch: Encourage them to watch great Ontario-made shows and learn from that. Some of our members have also done a lot of outreach at the high school level just to get people when they're starting to think about what they want their careers to be.

One of our members, Pinewood Studios, held the Futures Festival down at their studio and brought high school students through all day, which was great. I believe the Durham regional film office holds a very big career fair that I think Victoria's organization has participated in. I don't know, Victoria, if you wanted to add to that. I believe there are thousands of students that go through that fair.

Reaching out at a younger age, certainly, and letting people know that you don't just have to be a performer, writer or director—there are lots of other jobs—is a great way to reach people.

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

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Great. Thank you all for coming here today and presenting.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: It's too bad my colleague across the way maybe had to run to the House because I didn't star in *The Littlest Hobo*. My acting career was cut short just as the pandemic rose its ugly head back in 2019, and I was on a show called *Grand Army*.

Anyway, I applaud your efforts and everything you do. We have so many beautiful locations across this province that we could be filming in, especially in rural Ontario—a little plug for rural Ontario—instead of always going to the cities. I do support the idea of tax credits, but—I'll just leave it at that, because I don't have much time.

I want to turn to—speaking of COVID, I'll go over to Bryan. When you talk about expanding, you are talking specifically about mRNA?

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: Yes, that's correct.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: This might seem a little confrontational, but I want to ask you: With respect to regular flu shots and the COVID vaccine, we know that regular flu shots also take care of respiratory illnesses, and things like that help guard against those. Do they help with respect to COVID-19? Do regular flu shots also protect against COVID-19?

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: I think if we look at the national recommendations, both have their individual recommendations for the populations that—NACI has provided those recommendations, both of which are separate. I would say that aligned to a lot of the public health strategies, and what NACI has publicly commented on is that both are important—both the flu shot and both the COVID shot are important for the respiratory fall season.

As I stated in my remarks, COVID still though, however, is the highest health burden in Ontario, but I would say they both are important.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: When COVID vaccines were deployed—

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

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: In 2021, there was concern with respect to the Moderna vaccine in the age bracket of

18 to 24 with respect to myocarditis and pericarditis. I'm just wondering how Moderna has waded through that.

Mr. Bryan Walchuk: That's a good question. I think a lot of the risk-benefit is widely studied. These vaccines now have been one of the most administered vaccines globally, just given all the administrations throughout the pandemic to now. That is to say that all medicines carry a risk-benefit and an adverse-event profile, and I think what has come through, though, is that the benefit of COVID-19 vaccines far outweighs the risk of the complications that exist from acquiring a COVID-19 infection.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you, and thank you to the panel. That concludes the time for that question and this panel. We thank all the participants for the time you've taken to prepare and the time you've so ably presented to the committee. Thank you very much.

ONTARIO SOCIETY OF
PROFESSIONAL ENGINEERS
SURREY PLACE
TORONTO ELEMENTARY
CATHOLIC TEACHERS

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Our next panel consists of the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers, Surrey Place and Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers association. With that, if they will come forward.

As with the others, for the presentation they will have seven minutes. At six minutes, we will mention that your time is expiring in one minute. The Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers will be virtual. If there's anyone else who wants to speak, they have to introduce themselves, as will you—all the presenters, introduce yourselves to make sure we get the right name on Hansard.

With that, we'll start with the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers.

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: Thank you. Distinguished members of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, my name is Sandro Perruzza. I'm the CEO of the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers, or OSPE, as we call ourselves. For those who don't know who we are, we're the advocacy and member services organization and the official voice of Ontario's engineering community. We represent engineering students and graduates who work in every sector of Ontario's economy and in every nook and corner of this province.

Ontario stands at a defining moment of both enormous tension but also opportunity. Population growth, climate risk, trade barriers, tariffs and technological disruptions are rewriting the rules of our economy and testing the very systems we rely on. Ontario's needs are growing faster than ever, and emerging industries, electrification and digital transformation are reshaping our economy.

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Engineers are the designers of Ontario's future. If this province truly wants a thriving, fair and resilient new economy, it must consult engineers and invest in their

expertise. This is because engineers are trained to solve the hardest problems societies face. Engineers know how to weigh cost against risk, how to make systems work better and how to protect public safety while pushing the boundaries of innovation. When governments set ambitious goals for growth, affordability and sustainability, it is engineers who translate those goals into designs, standards and solutions that actually work in the real world.

However, engineers are not just problem-solvers, they are the creators of prosperity. Engineers sit at the very centre of every major government priority. From building homes, to modernizing our energy systems, expanding transit, escalating critical minerals exploration, strengthening advanced manufacturing and preparing for floods, wildfires and extreme weather events, engineers design the systems that keep Ontario moving, working and its citizens safe.

When governments task engineers with a challenge, they are asking the very people who understand how to balance risk, cost, performance and safety over that asset's entire life cycle. Without engineers, Ontario will not meet any of its economic goals. Quite simply, without engineers, there's no economic or societal progress.

My members, through their involvement on OSPE's numerous task forces and working groups, have dedicated thousands of hours of engineering expertise into developing solutions to the economic challenges that this province and this country are facing. They are the ones that have built the systems we rely on and they know how to adapt these systems for the future economic realities we are now facing.

Here is a key statistic I wish to share: Ontario graduates thousands of engineers every year, yet only about 25% of those graduates actually pursue engineering careers. That's because their skills are so valuable that they're aggressively recruited into the finance, logistics and tech sectors, leaving critical gaps in infrastructure, energy, mining, manufacturing and national defence, just to name a few industries.

Therefore, as the need for engineering solutions is exploding, the supply of engineering practitioners in these critical areas is falling well behind, leaving gaps in the very sectors that build and maintain the backbone of our economy. Without deliberate action, projects will slow, costs will rise and opportunities will go elsewhere, simply because there are not enough engineers to deliver.

Did you know that a substantial amount of Ontario taxpayer dollars will go to engineering firms that farm out their work to engineers in other countries? When it is the practice in Ontario to pay the lowest fees for engineering services, some of that work gets outsourced to engineers in countries that charge out much lower fees, resulting in lower quality and higher risk for these critical projects.

Government has a simple choice: treat engineering as an afterthought or treat it as a strategic asset. Choosing the second path means:

—investing in the full engineering pipeline, including bridging programs and lifelong learning, so that talent is ready when the province needs it most;

—valuing competency, quality and long-term performance over short-term savings when procuring engineering services, so that public money rewards excellence instead of encouraging a race to the bottom or outsourcing services;

—creating conditions that attract and retain a diverse engineering workforce, so that talent, regardless of race, sex, religion or background, can lead and succeed; and

—bringing engineering voices to the decision-making table early so that policies are built on sound technical foundations from day one.

These are investments in prevention instead of repair, in smart planning instead of crisis management.

Global tariffs, supply chain disruptions and climate pressures are driving up costs and increasing complexities. These challenges demand evidence-based, engineering-driven solutions, not guesswork. When engineers are consulted at the start, we get infrastructure that lasts, engineering systems that are affordable and policies that save billions over the long term. When they are not, we have experienced inefficiencies, cost overruns and missed opportunities.

Our engineers don't ask for the spotlight; they simply ask for the tools, the data and the mandate to do their job properly; they ask to serve. Ontario's future, our homes, our roads, our clean energy, our health, our digital security and our national defence depend on this engineering excellence. When governments partner with us, projects are safer, dollars go further and communities are better protected from the shocks of the future.

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

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: So here's your call to action: Make engineering expertise a core pillar of this economic strategy, not a box to check at the end of a project. Invite us into the room at the start when priorities are discussed, fund the talent and training my members need, and empower them to design the systems that will carry Ontario through to the next decade and beyond.

If this province chooses to bet on engineering, it is choosing to bet on resilience over fragility, on prosperity over stagnation and on a future where every Ontarian can count on the systems that support their daily lives.

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

Our next presenter is Surrey Place.

Ms. Terri Hewitt: Good afternoon. My name is Terri Hewitt. I'm the CEO of Surrey Place. I would like to start by thanking the committee members for the opportunity to present here today and share our story.

Surrey Place is a not-for-profit organization that helps people of all ages with autism and developmental and sensory-related disabilities push the boundaries of what's possible, achieving incredible new personal victories for each of our clients. We work with our clients throughout their lives, creating inventive and innovative programs so they can keep building their skills, grow their self-confidence and set their sights even higher so that they may live long, healthy and productive lives.

For over 60 years, Surrey Place has supported people with varying and complex needs in the Toronto region and, more recently, in northwest Ontario, where we deliver services, in partnership with Community Living Dryden-Sioux Lookout and the Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority, to those who would otherwise need to travel long distances away from their homes to access these kinds of supports.

In Toronto, we have four full-time locations serving the communities of Etobicoke, Scarborough, North York and downtown. Some of you may have walked by our facility—it's right next door to the Frost building—and I'd certainly invite each of you to come in and see the work that we do.

We've been proud partners of the Ontario government since 1987, mainly through the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services; however, some of our programming has also benefited from support provided by the Ministry of Health. This partnership has helped Surrey Place grow to support over 10,000 clients, families and caregivers a year.

Beyond supporting our own clients, Surrey Place has also become a key systems partner, coordinating for regional services, training, other agencies, and collaborating with hospitals and school boards on behalf of the intellectual and developmentally disabled—or IDD—community.

We appreciate the level of commitment that the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services has provided to Surrey Place over these years. We are an example of a long-standing, successful partnership, and they've been great to work with, especially as Surrey Place, like many social service providers, has struggled with growing and unavoidable expenses.

IDD and autism are sometimes referred to as an invisible disability. Our clients require an immense amount of specialized care, which is not always available. This problem is even more acute in rural and northern communities, which is why Surrey Place has prioritized establishing new partnerships like the one we have in northwest Ontario, which allows us to better serve the neurodiverse community closer to home, where they may not otherwise have access to these services.

Surrey Place is one of the few agencies that provide specialized supports to this population. Without us, critical clinical supports, mental health supports, primary care supports, psychiatric care and transitional supports for moving from childhood to adult services would most likely not be available.

The challenge is, we can only do so much with the resources we have. We are here today to ask that the committee include a recommendation for a targeted approach for building capacity among primary care providers, hospitals and other health care providers to deliver care for IDD and autistic patients. Surrey Place has the expertise to support this work. We partner with UHN, Unity Health, Michael Garron Hospital, Scarborough Health Network and Humber River hospital.

Admittedly, as an organization, we often take on too many responsibilities that result in the need for us to go and find funding so that no one is left behind. The increasing reliance on IT for secure data management, remote service delivery and interagency collaboration has amplified our operational costs. Ongoing investments in cyber security, cloud services and system maintenance are essential to safeguard client data and keep pace with service demand. These costs are largely unfunded and have created financial pressures.

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To create resiliency and a long-term sustainable future, we're working collaboratively with the ministry to recalibrate ourselves, utilizing lean modelling to ensure we're continuing delivering the best services to the individuals who need them. Currently, we are not directly funded to provide capacity-building initiatives to other health care providers. In the past, we were funded through our developmental disabilities primary care program to develop clinical practice guidelines for primary care physicians, as well as over two dozen tools to better support health care with people with IDD. Although the funding ended, our team continues to create tools as required, as we did during COVID. But to provide the best level of care, these guidelines and tools need to be updated regularly, which we have been unable to do.

Addressing regional health service gaps and building a health system across Ontario that ensures better access to specialized and health services for our population will create tremendous economic and social relief in the long term. This includes reducing the need for future emergency room visits, reducing reliance on shelters and reducing the number of alternative-level-of-care patients that are left in hospital. Milestones like these are possible because of diverse partnerships and collaboration across sectors.

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

Ms. Terri Hewitt: Thank you for welcoming me here today to present to this consultation.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much for the presentation. We will now hear from the Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers, and this will be virtual.

Ms. Deborah Karam: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Deborah Karam, and my organization is Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers. I'm a Catholic teacher and the president of the Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers, TECT, a local unit of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, OECTA. I'm here representing more than 5,000 permanent and occasional elementary teachers who serve approximately 60,000 students from kindergarten to grade 8 in Toronto's publicly funded Catholic schools.

Catholic teachers in Toronto want nothing more than to do the job we love in learning environments that fully support the students we serve. To be at our best, we need a government that makes real, sustained investments in resources and supports that students require to learn, grow and thrive. Everything we value in our province—our

economy, our health system, our democracy—begins in our classrooms.

According to the Conference Board of Canada, every dollar invested in publicly funded education produces \$1.30 in economic benefits for Ontario. Yet, over the past eight years, this government has underfunded education by \$6.3 billion. Each one of those dollars removed from our classrooms undermines Ontario's future.

Real investment in education today ensures that our students graduate with the knowledge, confidence and skills to enter the trades, innovate in technology and contribute to our economy, as well as strengthen their communities. Underfunding does the opposite: It contradicts the government's stated goal of protecting Ontario.

Rather than addressing what students need to succeed, we're seeing increasing centralization of authority, the reduced role of locally elected trustees and fewer opportunities for parents, teachers and communities to have meaningful input. Families and educators are frustrated not by the challenges of teaching, but by the government's refusal to prioritize the needs of our students.

Every day, teachers in Toronto see the direct impact of chronic underfunding, including overcrowded classrooms where students no longer receive individualized support they deserve, and a growing teacher recruitment and retention crisis, leading to more classes being covered by unqualified and uncertified individuals. We have reduced allocations for special education, ESL, EML and mental health supports, leaving vulnerable students without essential assistance.

We also have lost programs and services. One heart-breaking example is students from families among lower socio-economic groups are being left behind, literally, as our schools don't have the funding to support their participation in field trips.

We have a rising balance in insufficient mental health supports with more students in crisis and too few professionals to help, a shortage of educational assistants and specialized staff leaving our most vulnerable without necessary support. We also have inadequate technology, from unreliable Internet to broken or outdated devices. In some schools, there are carts of 30 Chromebooks to be shared among three classrooms—not enough for a class set. We have a lack of basic supplies, forcing many teachers to pay out-of-pocket for essentials such as paper, pencils and textbooks.

Every student, regardless of need, deserves access to the supports that enable them to thrive academically, socially and emotionally. That requires investments in reading and math supports, special education, mental health services and school-based professionals. Students do not need more control exercised from Queen's Park. They need smaller class sizes, more one-on-one time with teachers, qualified and certified teachers in every classroom and real, sustained investment in our schools that keeps children safe and supported.

Front-line teachers have shown time and time again that they know what students need to succeed. We encourage the government to engage meaningfully with teachers and

value our expertise as schools and students thrive when policies are shaped in partnership with teachers. The 2026 budget is an opportunity to change course, to invest in publicly funded education, strengthen local decision-making and give every student the learning environment that they deserve. Ontario can't afford another year of missed opportunities.

TECT stands ready to offer our professional judgement, experience and commitment to ensure that every student in Toronto has the resources and supports required to succeed. Thank you, and I will be happy to answer any questions.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you. That concludes the presenters.

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you, all three of you, for coming in here today, and I have questions for each of you.

I'm going to start off with Deborah Karam from the Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers. Thank you for being here online. The announcement of the EQAO results came out—I believe it was two days ago—and it showed that Ontario students are really not meeting targets when it comes to reading, writing and math. A lot of us have opinions about EQAO, but, at the end of the day, it is a snapshot of how well students are doing. What do you think school boards and schools need to improve outcomes on reading, writing and math?

Ms. Deborah Karam: Currently, as many of the math programs are online—Edwin is one of the programs online, and because of the lack of resources—technology, that is—for every student, perhaps improvement, if you offer to use it online, more technology is needed. In the past we had programs that were used across the board. Once you went from one school to the next, the program was consistent. With Edwin and the lack of technology, students are falling behind with that and, I guess, the inability to achieve success. I'm thinking perhaps if you want them to go with online textbooks then you should provide the technology needed to allow the students to participate fully.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for that answer.

My next question is to Terri Hewitt from Surrey Place. Thank you so much for being here. Surrey Place is in University–Rosedale. It's one of the largest providers of autism services, I believe, in Ontario. I have some questions for you. One is, I recall us meeting a few years ago and you talked about how the funding model for Surrey Place has changed. Could you talk a little bit about how the funding model has changed and how it has impacted the services that you've been able to provide families?

Ms. Terri Hewitt: Well, I'm sure that you're all aware that the funding model for autism is now allowing families to receive funding directly, so that they're able to purchase services from different agencies. That's changed all of the agencies who provide services, because now we're making sure that we're engaging with those families, finding out

what their needs are and creating those programs that are addressing their needs.

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In some ways, it's been really helpful for families because families who haven't been able to access those services and had been waiting for a very long time are now getting access. In other ways, the earlier interventions that were provided are less available to the younger children, and that's important as well. There have been changes in the model, and different kinds of services are getting to children and some services are less available. That's been an adjustment, for sure.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Do you think that it's overall improved the care that families with kids with autism are getting? Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad, or it's complicated?

Ms. Terri Hewitt: I think that it's improved the care for the children who are getting those services. I think that that's definitely a challenge for families who are still waiting for those services. There are pros and cons for everything, frankly.

Ms. Jessica Bell: This is a bit of a blue-sky question, but I think it's really important because the issues around funding for kids with autism is something that's talked about frequently here in the Legislature. Parents often come in to raise concerns; we often see protests outside from parents who are very concerned.

So blue-sky: What could the Ontario government do differently to meet the learning and support needs of children with autism and their families?

Ms. Terri Hewitt: I think one of the things we have to remember is that early intervention is important to change the trajectory for children, and so being able to access that is key. At the same time, that ongoing support that families are getting now is also so valuable and was something that people were getting at older ages. Coming up with plans to integrate and align those would really be the best option.

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

Ms. Terri Hewitt: The other piece, I think, is that children don't stop having autism at 18, so as they transition into adulthood, it's ensuring that they're getting opportunities to continue receiving services.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay, my final question is to Sandro Perruzza from the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers. You talked a little bit about procurement and how you can go with local engineers or you can go with engineers that might be working in other countries. How much more, if any, does it typically cost to go with a provincial engineering firm, and why would Ontario want to do that anyway, if it did cost more?

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: I think it's a practice where you hire an Ontario firm, but they may have offices internationally, and because of the cost—let's say it costs about \$100 an hour to do the engineering service. The province pays \$80 because they go with the lowest bid, so then I'll hire someone in a different jurisdiction to do the work for \$60, and that's what happens.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you. We'll have to finish that in the next round.

We'll now go to MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair: Thank you all for presenting and being here today. Deborah, I really appreciated your comments on behalf of the Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers. I think we're going through a challenging time in public education right now, and we have been for quite some time. When we talk about violence in schools, we're not talking about kids bringing knives to schools; we're talking about incidents that happen in the classroom because kids aren't getting the support that they need because sometimes there aren't enough adults in the room. The challenges that our students are facing are more multi-layered now than what might have been 10 or 20 years ago.

What would you suggest that we need to do to bring down those violent incidents in the classroom?

Ms. Deborah Karam: Like you said, you need more supports, more human resources—the EAs, CYWs—because the CYWs are very few and far between. Smaller class sizes, too, would certainly help because students would like to get that—not always one-to-one assistance from a teacher, but they need that. The students who are coming in today—and it's very different from students we had in the past—require much more attention. We need more help in the classrooms. Provide that and lower the class sizes. That will help.

With regard to the EQAO, those two would also help. I think definitely lower class sizes and more human resources—EAs and CYWs—in the classrooms.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. I appreciate that.

In our school system right now—I'm going to share a story. When I was knocking on doors in the summer, I had a constituent who said to me that he was thinking about putting his kids in private school. The reason why he said that was because his two kids in different classes weren't getting the support that they need—and they want to achieve academically—because there were some other challenges in the classroom.

I'll be very frank: What I fear is the current approach of this government is driving folks to be thinking about that, as opposed to strengthening our public education system and ensuring that every kid, no matter where they are in the province, no matter where they're from, no matter their financial background, has the opportunity to succeed. To hear that come up at a door, for me, was very, very concerning, because it reflects about how bad the situation has gotten, where we see educators leaving the sector because they're burned out, because they're tired.

What else do you think we could do to help support retention for your members and for educators in the classroom?

Ms. Deborah Karam: That's a very loaded question, but I'll try my best to answer it. Several factors: One would be to make sure that the teacher candidates have more training, so that there are more teacher candidates who become teachers in the system. I think, too, that even though the violence in the classroom is rising, like I said, the more EAs and CYWs you have to help those students would make it more attractive. Who wants to come to

school—no one should come into school expecting to be hurt, and many, many of our teachers just say, "Well, he just pulled my hair once today. He didn't do it three times; he did it only once."

I think if we focus on helping those students—making the classroom safer for not only students, but also the teachers in the classroom—that'll be more attractive to teachers.

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

Ms. Deborah Karam: I know we have a two-year program; perhaps bringing it back down to only one would be helpful with bringing teachers back into the fold, so to speak. Also, people are leaving because they're also leaving the city because it's more expensive to live here.

So I think across the province, it's more resources and help in the classroom.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. Do you think that there is an ability, if we were able to do this with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services around supports—

Interjection.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Sorry? I think we're probably done on time anyway, so we'll go to the next round. We'll be done on time.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you.

MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you very much. I'll continue on the line of questioning with respect to education, as well. I spoke about this in the House a few weeks ago. We have a crisis in the classroom. I hear it from teachers. I hear it from parents. I hear it from students. Until we rein all of that in, I'm afraid that we are going to continue to see poor testing results.

I'm glad you mentioned the one-year teachers' college. I really do believe we need to return to a one-year program. I think that a two-year program is sucking unnecessary funds out of some of our students.

How are workload pressures affecting teacher retention and morale? Not only in our schools, but are you seeing the concern at the teachers' college level as well? Is enrolment down? Do you know that?

Ms. Deborah Karam: As far as I know, enrolment is not down as much as before. I do work with OISE on the teacher education committee. Many students are opting for certain subjects, so there is at the moment a lower—how should I put it? There's more need for certain subjects, but there are fewer teachers doing it.

I think also bringing teachers into the fold through incentives such as perhaps allowing, like I said before, class sizes, more human resources in the classroom, making it more attractive in the sense that you won't always be hurt when you come into the classroom. That would bring people in—I would imagine so, definitely—

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: We are looking at a gap—sorry. I only have a few minutes in my line of questioning.

1640

That's going to take some time, because a lot of our EAs, a lot of the support staff in this province have left, and they're not coming back. That's what they tell me. So

until we make things better, there will be this gap with respect to support staff. Am I correct?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): One minute.

Ms. Deborah Karam: Yes, but they're leaving mainly because, again, I imagine, either they are getting hurt or they're leaving the area. I think if we provide the assistance now and we lower the violence in the classroom—no one wants to be hurt, so find a way to do that by helping students who are in the classroom who need that help. Hire more people—

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: And with respect to—I'll switch to curriculum changes. We've seen some curriculum changes over the past few years. Have teachers felt supported by this government? Were they given proper instruction on how to implement that curriculum?

Ms. Deborah Karam: Not enough training is provided. I think you're being thrust with the new curriculum, and not enough training is being given to teachers to really follow the program, and also, not enough technology. You need the technology in many cases to allow that, and there isn't enough technology for teachers to work in the classroom. It's lacking, and—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): That concludes the time. Thank you very much.

We'll go now to the government. MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, everyone, for the presentations.

My question is for you, Terri. Thank you for your presentation and all the great work that you and your team do.

As announced in our 2025 budget, the government is increasing funding for the Ontario Autism Program by \$175 million in the 2025-26 season, bringing total funding to \$779 million. This additional investment will help more children access core clinical services and strengthen sector capacity. How do you see this increased funding impacting Surrey Place and the families you support?

Ms. Terri Hewitt: Any increase in funding will allow more families to be able to purchase the funds that they're asking for. So I think it will be supportive, for sure.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: To enhance the programs that you're already providing?

Ms. Terri Hewitt: Yep.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Okay. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): MPP Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: This question is for the Catholic teachers. As a graduate from a Catholic high school, I always appreciate Catholic teachers. They were my example; they taught me a lot. They were very kind to all of us—at least, most of us.

To support student success, this government is investing \$30 billion over the next 10 years, including close to \$23 billion in capital grants—hardware—to build new schools and child care spaces and organize school infrastructure. It also includes \$2 billion for the current school year to support repair and renew needs of the school. From the hardware perspective, do you support these invest-

ments from the government, and where do you envision the largest impact?

Ms. Deborah Karam: The more money you put into the system, the better it is, most definitely. Like I said, if we focus on the classroom and see what's needed there, right now the greatest deterrent to anyone in the classroom, any teachers and EAs, would be the violence in the classroom. I was asked a question earlier about how would we retain more EAs and CYWs and the like: Increase their salary, for sure.

With regard to the money being spent by the government, we have to look at where it's going. If it goes back to the classroom, where it's needed, where we get more supports there, I think things will improve, definitely. You came from a Catholic high school; I'm sure you enjoyed it there. Times have changed—very much so. When I was in the classroom—I'm now president of the Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers—at the time, students were different. So I think we have to recognize that the classroom today is very, very different and see—ask us. Ask us teachers where the money should go within the school system. Ask us where the money should go within the classroom and we'll certainly give you that. Like I said, focus on the students and what they need. They need support, human resources, technology and more mental health care in the schools, and hopefully that will help improve the situation.

Mr. Billy Pang: What support do you find has been the most important that you have received for the time being? After this, we will talk about what you need, okay?

What you have is very helpful, especially for your elementary Catholic students. In what areas do you think that more could be done? What is most helpful to you for the time being, which is very targeted to Catholic elementary schools? And what else do you think, other than what you have mentioned earlier?

Ms. Deborah Karam: What we are looking to see generally—yes, that's helpful, and across the system, that's good. We've had new schools that have been built and modernized, and that's a good thing because it helps the whole community, but we also have to focus on what we need.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): One minute.

Ms. Deborah Karam: What are the needs right now? Kids keep bringing more, because more money is needed for the classroom itself, and that the more you help the students and reduce divides in the classroom, the better it is for everyone concerned. So more human resources, for sure—I think that's great—and technology.

Mr. Billy Pang: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Dave Smith: How much time?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): Thirty seconds, MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Obviously, with 30 seconds left, I don't have an opportunity to really get a question out, so I just want to say thank you very much to everyone who has come out to present today—tonight, now. This type of feedback is invaluable for us when we're trying to develop

the budget, because if the budget doesn't meet your needs, then we're not doing what we should be doing, so thank you very much for the input on all this.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): Now to the official opposition. MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I just want to follow up on my first question to Sandro Perruzza. The question was around—we've got this scenario where you've got an engineering firm, the government gives you \$80 and you go find someone for \$60. Can you help me understand the consequences of that? And what's the solution here?

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: The way most of the country but Ontario procures engineering services is based on lowest bid. I attended the public buyers' conference, and I spoke at that and I attended the sessions. I was flabbergasted that Ontario public buyers purchase pencils with the same process as they do engineer services. And it's not this government; it's the way it's always been.

When you hire lawyers, you don't go with the cheapest lawyer. The province doesn't go with the cheapest lawyer. You want to purchase engineering services based on the most competent and the most qualified to do it. That way, your projects aren't delayed, because they're designed properly. You're specifying the right materials, so the right gauge of steel that contracts and expands with the extreme temperature changes that we face here in Ontario, so that you're not having transit that goes off the rails during cold weather. There is a cost to that.

If you procure it by the cheapest price, you're going to have people who don't know what they're doing. They're then going to either put their youngest engineers doing it, because they're the cheapest cost-wise, or you're going to outsource to maybe a division that you have in another part of the world that can do it for cheaper, because in the end, engineering businesses are businesses.

I've got another quick stat—I'm a numbers guy. If you look at the cost of an infrastructure project—let's say it's a condo. Of the entire cost of that condo, all the engineering costs involved in that are about 4% of the cost of that condo. The real estate agent that sells that condo makes more money than all the engineers involved in that condo. We're not paying fair value for engineering services, and because of that you're having issues with some infrastructure.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thanks for raising that. The reason why I bring this up is because, as I've mentioned previously, the government is looking at moving forward with a stronger procurement policy for Ontario. I hope it goes to committee. I very much would like it to go to committee. Out of the next month or so, they're looking at writing regulations, so these kinds of details, I think, are really important for the government to hear about right now.

1650

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: Can I make a comment around that?

Ms. Jessica Bell: I've got one more question for the teachers' union—

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: Okay, go ahead.

Ms. Jessica Bell: But we can always follow up, okay? And I'd like to.

My second question is to Deborah Karam from the Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers union. Thank you so much for being here. I have two kids in the public school system, so I'm very concerned about what we're seeing in the school system and the impact of these cuts.

My question to you is, with the budget changes we've seen from 2018 and the takeover of the Toronto Catholic District School Board by a supervisor, how has that impacted your school board and student learning?

Ms. Deborah Karam: Well, the impact of the supervisor is lack of trustees. What we've had is we've found that parents don't have that medium by which to make their concerns known in a way, I'd say, more efficiently, because they would often go to the trustees and the trustees would then perhaps encourage them to delegate at the school board meetings. Well, there's no such thing as a school board meeting, *per se*, that everyone is allowed to observe. And they would often help the parents navigate the system as well. I understand that they do have access to the supervisor, so I'm hoping that they have that same process—something similar anyway.

As far as the classroom is concerned, we still have a lot of lack in the schools.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): One minute.

Ms. Deborah Karam: We need smaller class sizes. We need to have—I keep saying the same thing: The violence in the classroom is rising. Lack of technology—you asked a question earlier about what we need in the schools; I said technology.

We also need more people helping the students in the classrooms. Understand that because of the violence, it's very difficult to teach one-to-one when students need our help, so the more help we provide in the classroom with human resources, the better it is. You will see an improvement.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you very much. I don't have a lot of time left. I want to thank you all for coming today in person and online, and I'd like to follow up. If you have written submissions, please make sure to send them to us so we can review them in more detail. I appreciate it.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): Thank you. Now we'll go to the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. Through you, Chair: Deborah, one last question for you, then I think I'll move on to the rest. Around technology in the classroom and innovation and supports from a digital aspect to support educators, what more do you think needs to happen?

Ms. Deborah Karam: You're saying apart from technology?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: No, technology—what else needs to happen? What is the province maybe missing the mark on or what do they need to do so that your members can be better supported in the classroom on technology?

Ms. Deborah Karam: Provide the funding for that. Years ago, there was a five-year cycle for receiving—each teacher would get a computer that's workable, that was up

to date, and that stopped. Again, lack of funding: On the board's part, they said they didn't have the money to roll that out.

I think more funding in that area would help teachers access—a lot of things are going online, and we need those. We just need that more up-to-date technology in the classroom for the students and also for the teachers. Sometimes the WiFi is down; sometimes it just does not work.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: In terms of supporting your members, whether it's with AI tools—in Toronto Catholic, is that being used yet? Are we using AI software tools and different things to help educators identify learning gaps? Are you seeing that happen in the classroom, or no?

Ms. Deborah Karam: AI is being used within our guidelines provided by the TCDSB, and that's forever changing. It's not a policy, *per se*, because things are changing every day with AI. There is advice given to the teachers about use of AI in the schools: how to use it, what's appropriate.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: In terms of specific software or programs, is that finding its way to your members, or no?

Ms. Deborah Karam: There are programs that we would like to see that they have used in the past with one-to-one communication with parents that are no longer allowed. ClassDojo is one, for example, where you could communicate with the parent directly without them knowing your phone number or your email address. That was very helpful, but that's no longer being allowed in the schools, so perhaps—

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Why is that not being allowed? Do you know?

Ms. Deborah Karam: The claim is that for student privacy, this no longer exists. When I was teaching in the classroom, we used a variety of types of programs when each of the parents would allow their emails to be given out.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Okay. More work to be done there, for certain.

Sandro, I really appreciated your presentation. We've got a big challenge when we're delivering big infrastructure projects, not only the length of time it takes for them to be completed but the cost, when we compare it to other jurisdictions, I would say, in the Western world, that also use unionized labour. Why do you think that is and what do you think the province can do to help bring down the cost of these major infrastructure projects?

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: You're going to laugh, but it's better engineering. We're part of an organization called the Construction and Design Alliance of Ontario, CDAO. About five years ago, we commissioned a study by then-Ryerson, now Toronto Metropolitan University, to look at it and they identified that for every additional dollar you spend on good engineering, you save \$100 in construction costs.

The model we're suggesting is something called qualifications-based selection. It's the law in the US; it's called the Brooks Act. It's the law in a number of other jurisdictions, where you don't go by cheapest price; you go by

most qualified. With better design, you get less scope changes, you have less fixes that happen and you have infrastructure that's delivered on time and cheaper.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I like the sound of that.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): One minute.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Just lastly, thank you very much for your presentation, Terri. What do you think the province needs to do to bring down the backlog in kids with autism that are waiting for supports?

Ms. Terri Hewitt: I think that it's really important. I'd just like to pull this back into what I was talking about at the beginning. If we can have physicians—children see their doctor all the time. If they have the information that they need to understand that population, if we can update those guidelines and every single one of those children is getting the right health care, then they're not ill, they're not getting those challenges that turn into classroom problems, hospital problems—problems that families feel they need to purchase services for. That's a key and, I think, a small investment to really get the right information into the broadest—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): I'm sorry, but that concludes your time.

We'll go now to MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I don't have anymore questions for you, Deborah. Thank you for your time today. But I just want to give you a word of warning, perhaps. We see, as my colleague here has talked about, the adoption of digital tools and technology in the classroom, and while we might think that that is a great idea, I fear, when we see little attention being given to the crisis in the classroom, that there is the potential for technology to replace our teachers. Today, the trustee; tomorrow, the teacher. I just send that off as a word of warning as I wrap up.

Sandro, I'll turn to you. Thank you very much for being here. It's just kind of following up on, instead of the dollars and cents with respect to shopping in Ontario for engineers, do you have any concrete examples of some of the safety risks where projects have gone wrong in this province when we have outsourced?

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: I'm going to tread carefully here, because some of my members don't have another choice except to outsource because of cost. Look at the Nipigon bridge; some of that design was done outside the country. That's one example I'll use.

The other one: The city of Toronto just did a study; they hired KPMG to look at their procurement processes on the infrastructure side. They did a huge study, and their conclusion was, they recommended the city move to a QBS system as well, qualifications-based selection for engineering services. The city of Toronto is now doing a pilot project. If there is a committee that is doing this, I'd recommend you look at that report.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: And just a quick question: I get the feeling that our engineers feel that they're kind of an afterthought—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): One minute.

1700

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: —in the process here in Ontario. I'm sure that perhaps you being here today is a bit of reaching across the way and asking to be a part of the conversation.

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: We do these breakfast sessions around the province—we did one in Barrie and MPP Saunderson was there—where we have engineering leaders talk about those struggles, what keeps them up at night. Being able to track and retain talent is our biggest challenge because they just can't afford to pay them because of the fees that they are charging out.

That's why 75% leave engineering right out of university to go to other industries and then they are losing an additional 15% of their talent every year to those industries. If we don't have the engineers to build, then we have to outsource and there are risks with that. We have the best engineers in the country here and the best engineers in the world here. But if we don't have enough to do it, then we are going outsource that work and that is Ontario taxpayer dollars leaving the province.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): That concludes the time; thank you.

I will go to the government. MPP Saunderson.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Thank you to all our presenters for taking time today to come and share your expertise and experience in this important process to getting put on the upcoming budget.

My question is going to be to you, Sandro, to tug the thread that started as a result of my colleague MPP Brady's question, and that is on the retention. You said the stat that basically 75% of the graduates coming out of the engineering programs and university aren't getting into the profession. They're not seeking the P.Eng. designation. Where is that brain drain going? Where do they end up?

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: They are going to banks, they're going to logistic companies, they're going to financial management firms and tech firms. A lot of them are going to the US as well. They probably double their salary right out of university going to the US. So that's a big challenge.

We just did a benchmarking survey where we asked our members what is keeping them up at night. Last time we did this was in 2022, and we had about 550 responses; this year we had almost 1,500 responses. The biggest thing is they don't feel valued. They don't feel valued by their clients, they don't feel valued by the government, they don't feel valued by society, because—another number—their salaries over the last 11 years have grown by about 14% and costs have gone much more than that. Their fees have only gone up about 10% and, meanwhile, for their colleagues who have left to go work for banks, their salaries have gone up somewhere of 30%.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: So in those other careers like a bank, they are doing computer cyber security and AI, or they're doing engineering work?

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: They're doing engineering work and they're doing project work, but it's not tradition-

al engineering work. They are still applying their engineering principles so they're still doing that, but looking at supply chain management, that's another thing that they're doing. Canadian Tire hires a lot of engineers and Canada Post hires a lot of engineering grads. That means that they're not going into not just infrastructure, but mining, electrification—I spoke to three power companies, amongst them, they need 3,000 engineers and they're all under our help to find them because one of the things that we do is we help engineers find jobs and we help engineering companies find engineers, and I said, "Good luck. They don't exist."

Mr. Brian Saunderson: That leads me into my next question then, because this government is investing heavily in infrastructure. We think that the linear infrastructure into the ground to support growth is probably a deficit of about \$200 billion over the next 20 years. We're doing that work on roads, atomic energy—big into that; all of which is going to require a strong feeder pipe of the type of excellent engineering that we see across this province. In my community of Simcoe-Grey and in Collingwood, there are a number of engineering companies that are there—at least a half a dozen that I can think of. As an advocate group for the engineering profession, what are your recommendations to try to stem that flow and to be able to ensure that the grads of the engineering program are going to get their P.Eng. designation?

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: Engineering firms need more money to be able not only to attract but retain their talent. This isn't an Ontario issue. I go to the Canadian engineering executive conference—I spoke at it last year—and it's their number one issue right across the country. Bidding on lowest price is the practice in Canada, except for Quebec and Calgary, but we need to change that. It's an incremental cost to the government, but you'll save on the back end and you'll support that supply chain of talent. We need to fix the procurement.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I know we've talked about the procurement issue, and this is something that the government is going to be looking into and we appreciate your recommendations on that. But in terms of the budgeting process, what are your recommendations then to strengthen that?

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: This is a good question. We haven't submitted our budget yet because, as I said, I've got about 12 different task forces all looking at everything from mining, energy etc., and we're still putting on the final touches.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): One minute.

Mr. Sandro Perruzza: But here's the thing: Government needs to bring us in before and say, "Here are the outcomes we're looking for." When engineers know the outcomes you're looking for, they can develop a plan to help you achieve those outcomes.

What happens often is you decide what the outcome is, you decide which technology you're moving into—"We're going to do this, we're going to do this, we're going to do this"—and then you come to engineers and

say, "Okay, make it happen." All the decisions are made so then we're limited in how much we can help.

My recommendation is, on all these big issues around how to do mining exploration, which energy—energy is a good example. We're investing in nuclear and we 100% agree that we need to invest in nuclear. But we've got to capture the off-gases and all the off-heat that happens with nuclear plants—capture that heat and pipe it into cities' district energy systems. That's not part of Ontario's—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): Unfortunately, that concludes our time, and it concludes our time for this session. Thank you to all the presenters for coming out this afternoon; we really appreciate it.

ONTARIO MUSEUM ASSOCIATION

ONTARIO PUBLIC SERVICE EMPLOYEES UNION

ONTARIO AUTISM COALITION

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): I'll now call up the Ontario Museum Association, JP Hornick and the Ontario Autism Coalition as our next presenters. Please state your name for Hansard before you speak. You'll have seven minutes each to present, and I will interrupt you when you've got one minute left.

We will start with the Ontario Museum Association.

Ms. Alison Drummond: My name is Alison Drummond. I've been the executive director of the Ontario Museum Association since January of this year. It's a full-circle moment for me because, exactly 30 years ago, I was the new researcher for this committee in the pre-budget consultations for the 1996 budget. So I'm very honoured to be on this side of the table.

The Ontario Museum Association was established in 1972. It's a not-for-profit member organization that represents more than 700 museums, galleries, historic sites and Indigenous cultural centres, 9,000 museum professionals and 35,000 museum volunteers across Ontario. We strive to be a leading professional organization, advancing a strong, collaborative and inclusive museum sector that's vital to community life and the well-being of Ontarians.

We do four main things: We advocate for museums across Ontario; we provide professional training through the certificate in museum studies—this certificate was established in 1982 and it's the only museum studies program in Ontario offered on a part-time basis for paid and volunteer museum workers. Some 191 students are currently enrolled in it. It's key training to support the museum standards that are recognized by the province.

The other services we provide, like other advocacy organizations, are networking, professional development, resources and best practices for priority issues such as digital training tool kits and tourism support.

Finally, we do some public engagement. We champion the value in public visibility of museums to Ontarians and visitors. May is Museum Month and that's something that we've been running for many years.

I think there are four key elements to the value of community museums that I want to point out. For tourism, museums attract Ontarians who want to stay in the province and tourists who want to visit. We're actually developing training to help rural museums work with regional tourism organizations and improve their digital planning and presence.

For development, museums help attract skilled workers and visitors and renew downtowns. For identity, museums enhance community cohesion and identity. Museums are community hubs for gathering and having an open dialogue about past, present and future.

Finally, and I think most important in many ways, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made specific recommendations for Canadian museums, and the sector is very engaged with this issue. We're actually modernizing our certificate curriculum and working in partnership with the Woodland Cultural Centre to develop and deliver a key course in that program.

1710

I was lucky enough—I don't get out to see museums as much as I would like; I spend a lot more time in the office managing our cash flow. But I did get to the Chair's district, to the Norwich and District Historical Society, which operates a museum which presented on the liberation of the Netherlands in the Second World War and settlement from the Netherlands in that region after the war.

Ontario provides operating support to museums and professional standards in museums through the Community Museum Operating Grant program, CMOG. It's delivered by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming. Funding to each eligible museum has been frozen since 2009, and the program has been closed to new applicants since 2016. This has created two unintended consequences: It discourages new programming since new ongoing spending to improve online services or support the Ontario curriculum is not recognized under the grant. It also discourages new community museums since they have no route to receiving operational funding from the province. Of 166 museums that receive CMOG, only one is specifically focused on Indigenous history and culture, only one focuses on the history of a specific immigrant community and only two steward and interpret Black history in Ontario. I think we can all agree that that doesn't reflect the current day in Ontario or the past of Ontario. With real support under the program shrinking over time, CMOG's share as a source of museum funds is also shrinking.

The association itself also receives a Provincial Heritage Organizations Operating Grant, along with several other province-wide heritage groups. It currently makes up about 28% of our revenues, with the remainder coming from membership, course fees and some federal grants for special projects. Applications and payments under the PHO come later and later in the fiscal year, which has created cash flow issues for us. The 2025 grant application is actually not even due until January, so the funds won't flow until 2026. This creates an issue for us because the

special projects we do—we're doing the tourism project with FedDev—often require upfront spending, and then that's reimbursed in the following quarter. It just makes those cash flow issues difficult for us to manage.

This year, for the 2026 budget, the OMA would like to make some quite modest recommendations. We think the government should review CMOG, approve a reasonable increase, such as a return to real 2009 spending, and prioritize how that net new spending is distributed to focus on new museums who meet standards, especially Indigenous cultural centres; new programming by current CMOG recipients; and clear economic development and community identity outcomes.

The second thing we'd suggest that the province do is promote museums. The federal government last summer—

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

Ms. Alison Drummond: —had a Canada Strong program which offered reduced admission fees during summer 2025. It drove a 15% year-over-year increase in attendance in national museums.

Finally, we would suggest launching the PHO applications in the first quarter of 2026-27, with the goal of flowing funds in the second quarter. Thank you very much.

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

We'll now go to JP Hornick.

JP Hornick: Good afternoon and thank you. I'm JP Hornick, president of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union. Thank you for this opportunity to speak on the 2026 Ontario budget. I'm here to represent my members, who include close to 200,000 Ontario workers in the Ontario public service, our community colleges and right across the broader public service, including museum workers and those who work with families who are part of the Ontario Autism Coalition.

This is my third time at the pre-budget consultations, and each time I point out the desperate need for this government to do more for workers and their families: to protect jobs, to reduce the cost of living and to offer real support for the public services that every single one of us depends on. I have been disappointed every year so far.

Right now, Ontario is facing a high and rising unemployment rate and an affordability crisis. This is not the Ontario we have been promised every year since 2018. We know that US tariffs are hitting this province hard, but our biggest problems predate Donald Trump.

Since 2017, real provincial program spending per capita has declined steadily. That decline has meant layoffs, understaffing, growing wait-lists for services, rising food and housing insecurity, and worsening quality of life. Ontario continues to spend less per capita on programs than any other province. For many of our workers, many of our members, this year has been the breaking point.

Care workers have been looking after the most vulnerable among us, and they're facing increasing insecurity. Many rely on multiple jobs and food banks to survive, all while serving clients who are equally insecure. Workers in community agencies, mental health and addiction ser-

vices, developmental services, and youth corrections are particularly low-paid. Most are women, and thousands are not even earning a living wage. They are struggling because of this government's policies.

That is why thousands of our members are demanding a real remedy for the wages that they lost under Bill 124. While the government has funded Bill 124 back pay for some groups of workers, social services workers, community service workers, developmental service workers and youth corrections workers have largely been ignored. Meanwhile, workloads have skyrocketed as working conditions deteriorate, staffing levels grow more unsafe and there is an increasing reliance on outside agency workers.

The Financial Accountability Officer of Ontario agrees and has warned that the sector cannot continue to function without emergency funds. Current spending projections are far below what is needed to maintain service levels. Real per capita funding for social services is on track to fall by 16.5% over the decade from 2017 to 2027. We estimate that the government owes OPSEU/SEFPO members at least \$51 million in wages as a result of Bill 124. Budget 2026 must finally deliver the funds that are needed to make up for the money that our members have lost.

Make no mistake: Our members have been organizing. If they do not see the funding that they need to deliver fair wages and protect jobs and services, they are prepared to take coordinated strike action. That is not our desired outcome. Our desired outcome is wages these workers can afford to live on and that allow them to provide services appropriately to the most vulnerable Ontarians. This government can help. This government must help.

Turning now to our members in the community colleges, you would have to be living on Mars with no WiFi to not know about the crisis they're in. Our colleges are economic pillars of this province, yet we have seen 10,000 college positions wiped out in one year alone. This is a disaster for workers and communities alike, particularly the northern and rural communities that the Conservative government relies on. College education helped lift Ontario out of the 2008 recession, and it can do so again in the current economic crisis if funded properly. Instead, this strategic sector has seen mass job loss, program closures and even campus closures.

This disaster has nothing to do with tariffs; it is all about this government's well-documented underfunding of the system since 2018. In recent years, much of the money that could shore up our colleges has been diverted to untested, private training centres through the Skills Development Fund. The Auditor General's report this fall highlighted the lack of transparency and fairness in allocating SDF to private providers while colleges starve for funding. This must end. Short-term, poor-quality training cannot substitute for robust public education that trains and re-trains Ontarians during times of job loss and massive technological change like we're seeing now.

High-demand and world-renowned programs like hospitality and culinary programs, nursing and mining technology programs, and hundreds of others have shut down. This hurts us all. Education must remain public, accessible

and rooted in our communities. That was the vision of former Premier Bill Davis who founded the system, and it is appalling to see a Conservative government tear it down. This next budget must immediately increase per student funding to bring Ontario up to the Canadian average for post-secondary education. We do not believe it is a big ask to expect our great province to be average.

Looking at health care, underfunding and understaffing have brought us to a breaking point. Ontario now funds its public hospitals at the lowest rate per person of any province in Canada. The consequences are severe: more hallway medicine, a backlog of nearly a quarter of a million surgeries, and more than two million Ontarians without a family doctor.

1720

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

JP Hornick: Between 2017 and 2027, real health spending per Ontarian will be down by \$560. The Auditor General's report this week found that the government is failing to properly monitor doctors' billings, with some physicians charging for more than 24 hours a day. The Auditor General says this wasted money could fund more family doctors instead. Meanwhile, the FAO's spending review shows a \$19.4-billion funding shortfall based on projections in the 2025 budget. This means gaps in funding hospital and long-term-care beds, reduced staffing levels and less spending on public drug programs.

In the Ontario public service, the government has ordered an end to OPS workers working from home, while there is no evidence that forcing them back to their offices and centralizing work in Toronto will improve services. It's yet another misguided policy.

To sum up, underfunding across the public sector is preparing us for collapse—

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

Our next presenter is the Ontario Autism Coalition.

Mr. Bruce McIntosh: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, committee members, for this opportunity to provide input to the 2026 Ontario budget from the Ontario Autism Coalition, which I'm now going to refer to simply as the OAC from now on.

I'm going to begin my remarks by shocking you: I'm not here to ask for more money. Everybody okay with that? Thought you would be. I'm here to address some problems with the core services part of the Ontario Autism Program, which I'm now going to refer to as simply the OAP from now on: P for program, C for coalition. Members of the governing party should find those letters easy to remember.

I'm here to beg you to use whatever tools you can bring to bear in the budget to make the money that has been dedicated to the OAP work more efficiently. The government has increased the budget for the OAP to well over \$700 million, and we're very grateful for that. But only a little more than half of that money has been spent on core services: the core services of applied behaviour analysis, speech-language pathology, occupational therapy and mental health services. These are the parts of the program

that change the lives of children and youth for the rest of their lives.

Of that roughly 50%, a large and growing amount is being spent on red tape and bureaucracy. This is happening in two ways. First, the so-called determination-of-needs, or DON, process is being done every year for every young autistic in the program. As more clients have been brought into the program, the number of these interviews being done annually increases. This has required more staff, and it will require even more in the future. DON interviews are being done by highly paid, non-professional bureaucrats who do not provide a millisecond of therapy.

It's understandable that the government would want to understand the needs of new entrants to the program when they first come in. After that, though, care coordinators should not have to do these interviews, because in the normal course of therapy, the clinical supervisor is already doing regular assessments, paid for with OAP dollars. They could easily provide that information, eliminating the duplication and waste. According to both families and care coordinators at AccessOAP, the third-party company that administers the core program, the DON process is slowing down the entire program and directly contributing to the enormous wait-list, which presently sits at well over 60,000 children and youth.

The OAC has made this request for change, and savings of time and money, repeatedly. What has happened instead is that the average time for a DON interview has been reduced from three and a half hours to about three hours and 15 minutes. At the same time, a pre-DON interview has been added to the process, which takes much longer than the 15 minutes saved in the DON itself. So now two meetings per kid have to be scheduled every damn year—pardon me, but it's pretty frustrating.

The DON process is unnecessary red tape, and it has led to a mini bureaucracy that is growing quickly, with absolutely no therapeutic benefit to program clients. The OAC's fear is that this is the cause of the decrease of 364 young autistics with signed contracts for funding between June and August of this year. We await FOI responses for the period since, but we've got no reason to think that the trend won't continue.

A second way to make budgeted money work more effectively is to revise the way the funding is disbursed. This flaw is the convergence of age caps, an unscientific DON process, a failure to invest in capacity building and disbursing funds regardless of whether a service provider is available.

The DON questionnaire is administered to parents by a care coordinator who has had no observation or interaction with the kid. Inexplicable results happen as a consequence. Let me give you two examples from moms who sit on our board of directors.

One stated explicitly at the end of her last DON interview: "Please just give us the minimum, because that's all he needs." She was awarded the maximum for that age group.

Another mom, who has two kids on the spectrum, the older of the two has very, very high needs, and just because

he turned 10, his funding was cut by a large amount. The younger child was awarded a higher amount that won't actually be used, and that extra will sit in a bank account until the end of the funding period. The mom would dearly love to use that excess money for her higher-needs child, but she cannot, and that's crazy-making.

Other families in rural and northern areas have funding in hand that they cannot use because there are no service providers in their area, where the owner is—the result is costs of travel that are not covered by the funding, making it very difficult to actually use the funding.

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

Mr. Bruce McIntosh: These are just some of the situations we're made aware of.

We understand that funds are limited. We also understand that the wait-list has tripled under this government and that the wait time has more than doubled—to be more now than five years. None of us wants to see funding used inefficiently, and I don't think any of the members of this committee do either.

Here are a couple of solutions: Resume the previous level of investment and capacity building. It was \$9 million less last year than in the 2023-24 year. That was a bad move. Provide travel assistance funding for families in remote areas, particularly the north, where there can be a three- to four-hour drive involved in just getting a kid to therapy and another to get home. It's not covered; it should be.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time. We thank you very much for the presentation and we thank all three of the presenters. That concludes the presentations.

We now will start our questions. We'll start with the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you, Bruce. Do you want to finish your recommendations, Bruce? You're more than welcome to my time.

Mr. Bruce McIntosh: I'm happy to take questions. I will send in the written portion.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Okay. Thank you all for being here today and sharing your presentations with us.

Bruce, I have a question as to why you think the government has not made these essentially non-monetary changes to make the Ontario Autism Program more effective.

Mr. Bruce McIntosh: That's a really hard question to answer. I think that there is a belief—the minister has said words to this effect—that people are happy with the services that they're getting between entry into the program and when they come get an invitation to core. Well, I think that's a misunderstanding, because if it's all you can get, you'll be happy with it. What they really want are core services, because they know that's what's going to benefit their kids in the long haul.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Okay. Because when I talk to parents in my riding and advocates in Durham region, I hear a lot of the same things that you've mentioned. To me, they seem like no-brainers that these changes should be made. Let's make the program work more effectively.

Let's reduce the amount of time that it takes for people to receive funding. Some individuals have had to wait multiple months, and then it gets closer to the end of the fiscal year and then they can't even spend all of the money that they've received.

1730

These just seem like things that—it's frustrating, because we have the wait-list, and frankly, the wait-list is way too long. But then, the people that are receiving funding are not able to use that funding, either because of how inefficient, bureaucratic—whatever it may be.

I appreciate you sharing the suggestions here today to do that. I really do hope that the government listens to yourself and advocates, because it needs to work, and it needs to work a lot better; because with that wait-list we are failing, frankly, as a society and a government, if we are not providing the therapy and the support for kids with autism at the most crucial stage. I have had parents in tears at the door, talking to me about their challenges in accessing this. You're not asking for more money; you're asking for it to work better.

I hope the government listens and makes those changes, because to have this conversation over and over is frustrating for myself, and I know it's even more frustrating for those that access the program and the services. So, thank you very much for sharing that, and I may come back to maybe some other questions.

Mr. Bruce McIntosh: Thank you, but I can't improve on that.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: No.

JP, thank you for your presentation. What is the differential, if you know off the top of your head, between per-student funding in Ontario versus other provinces in the college sector?

JP Hornick: We are the lowest by a significant margin, and the investment that it would take is somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$1.2 billion in baseline funding. So when we are looking at this, that investment would particularly go to rural and northern communities, whose community colleges have been hit hard.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I want to thank you, and I want to thank your members as well who were out on the picket lines and advocating so that we support students in the college sector and folks in their local communities. I think you make a really good point around rural and northern colleges, and I have spoken to many of them so far, or people who work in them. We are seeing programs close where there are literally job opportunities in those sectors. A good example is in Loyalist College, in Belleville.

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

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: There are folks in the county—employers, hospitality, culinary. Is it just the funding piece? What else would you like to see in the college sector?

JP Hornick: I would like to see the money that is being funnelled out into the Skills Development Fund come back into public sector training, to be honest. That education benefits us all. It does not go into the hands of private corporations. It has a proven track record, and it was

designed to feed skilled workers into the communities where they live and learn.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. I think the numbers that I remember most recently—I think it was \$6,500 per student that the provincial government provides right now. If you take all of the other provinces combined, minus Ontario, it's about \$19,000. So it's saying that an Ontario student is worth one third of a student elsewhere in the country.

I'll leave it to the next one.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you, JP. Thank you, Alison. I was heartened to hear you were at the Norwich museum; I know that is in Chair Hardeman's riding. It's right next door, and I know the museum well. I invite you to come to some of our wonderful museums in Haldimand–Norfolk as well.

Bruce, always a pleasure to see you, and I want to thank you for your fierce advocacy. I've gotten to know you and your son a little bit and I am sickened, I am disheartened that the OAC has to come here and, as you said, beg. It's terrible.

One of the things I wonder: You talked about red tape and bureaucracy. Do you believe that much of what is happening on the autism file is purposeful? I say that because parents have said to me the longer a child remains on the list, the shorter it is that government actually has to provide those supportive dollars for them.

Mr. Bruce McIntosh: Yes, it's not just a shortening of the length of time that they need to be provided. Of course, the longer they're waiting, the more birthdays they have.

At each birthday, for some reason, and it escapes me—the OAC turned 20 this year, and we have been saying for 20 years that there is nothing magical about blowing out birthday candles that lowers a child's needs. It is just wrong to do this. There are more words that I could use. I will restrain myself somewhat, but it is just simply wrong to believe that. To implement that in public policy is just outrageous.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I actually had that written down, Bruce, that autism doesn't know a birthday; it doesn't know the number of years.

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

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Case in point, I spoke to a father yesterday who wasn't even from my riding. I spoke to him for an hour, and he was pretty much in tears. His son is 20, and he said, if you don't have those proper supports in place when the child is young, now you have an adult. What does the future look like for that adult, especially when a parent is staring down the barrel of—perhaps they have health issues, or their wife has health issues, and they are fearful of what is going to happen to that adult with autism at this point in time.

Mr. Bruce McIntosh: We will be here for a lot longer if I begin on adult issues, but the chickens roost really soon. If a kid doesn't get therapy when they are diagnosed at age 2 or 3, knowing that the wait-list is now on average 5.19 years—longer in many parts of the province—they're

going to get to school without ever having had behavioural therapy.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): That concludes the time for that question. Maybe we can finish that.

MPP Saunderson.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I want to thank the panel for their passion and their commitment.

My questions are going to be for you, Alison, on museums, because in my riding of Simcoe–Grey, we've had the Nancy Island there for many, many years. It was established in 1967, and now the government has brought it over to tourism, so it will be treated like Discovery Harbour and Sainte-Marie among the Hurons.

Really, with the \$25-million update and refurbishment, we're looking forward to seeing that. It was very frustrating for me to watch my kids get on the bus and drive over to Sainte-Marie among the Hurons or beyond to go to a museum exhibit and drive right by Nancy Island because it's only open four weeks during the summer. So I agree with you that museums are critical to maintaining our culture and promoting our history with a lens that does it inclusively.

I'm wondering if you have seen in your organizations, because you talk about your funding through government supporters, but also attendance—have your numbers come back since the pandemic? How is that going?

Ms. Alison Drummond: We don't have particularly reliable attendance numbers. In fact, one of the things I found challenging since I arrived is just a general lack of data in the sector. My sense is that in-person attendance has substantially recovered. Things like the Canada Strong program actually did make people more aware of the option of going to museums.

What I've heard from members is that people pivoted to online programming during the pandemic. As the shutdown ended, people wanted to come back to in-person, but there isn't really funding to maintain the online presence that museums were able to develop. That's one of the reasons we're looking for new funding: to recognize new services. In 2009, when the funding was frozen, there weren't really a lot of online visitor experiences available.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: We've heard that from many business groups coming in. We had CFIB here—yesterday, I guess it was—talking about their Digital Main Street program during the pandemic.

So, are you seeing then now that there's been a big rise in terms of virtual visits that might help to offset the in-person visits if you have the capability?

Ms. Alison Drummond: I'm not sure I'd say that, because I think the museums are really struggling to support the digital experiences, because people were more interested in returning to the in-person experiences. So we're trying to provide some support for that, some tool kits for some smaller museums to keep that ability up with not too much cost.

1740

Mr. Brian Saunderson: This government has been looking at tourism and destination tourism. There was Destination Wasaga. Then we heard today about the mu-

seum in Norwich and how critical they are to developing and fostering local community spirit and history.

Is there an opportunity there, do you think, through the tourism model to try and promote that?

Ms. Alison Drummond: We're really looking at that. I think that in a lot of ways, that's the economic development argument for museums over and above the community identity. The program that we're developing with the federal funding is actually to provide training for rural museums in providing more online services but also better linkages with their local RTOs and destination-marketing organizations.

But also, the RTOs really vary in what kind of programming they fund. Sometimes they won't fund not-for-profits.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: How many member museums do you have across the province?

Ms. Alison Drummond: I think we have about 800 members, and I think we probably have about 200 museum members.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Just in terms of infrastructure funding, then, and updating, I know one of the big issues at the Nancy Island is going to be on the Indigenous front.

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

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Much of the placards or displays are phrased in verbiage that probably goes back to the 1970s.

In terms of updating and maintaining those exhibits to make sure they're current and appropriate, how much of a drain is that on museum funding?

Ms. Alison Drummond: It depends on the museum, obviously, but it's a real priority for us. That's why we're updating our training program that the workers can take part in.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: How much time is left, Chair?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Twenty-eight seconds.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Twenty-eight seconds.

JP, I would just comment in terms of your commentary. I did teach at Georgian College. To say that the 10,000 layoffs across this province are a result of provincial funding cuts—I don't think you can support that.

You've seen what has happened with the federal funding. It's come in cuts on two levels, not just the foreign students, of which they were always aware and approved every foreign student application for. They've also cut the number of programs that the students—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes that.

I'll go to MPP Shaw.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I appreciate all of you being here. I've got questions for all of you.

JP Hornick, I'd like to give you some opportunity to respond to the comments from MPP Saunderson, if you'd like.

JP Hornick: Yes. Not only can we support it; we can back it up with evidence. We'll be happy to submit that to this government. It is not just the international cuts to immigration that have caused this problem.

Your government, upon its inception, when you came in, actually froze the domestic tuition rates and allowed for the private-public partnerships with colleges that had been cancelled prior to that. That allowed for the predatory nature of targeting international students as an incentivized funding source for the public colleges. Effectively, one might argue, this Conservative government set up exactly the cascade that we're seeing here and have been warning about for well over a decade. I would say that we would have to agree to disagree on the evidence that underlies that.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: And I would agree to agree on what you've just said. What we're seeing with this government is a jobs disaster. It's an unfolding set of layoffs that was completely preventable and was a direct result of this government's actions.

I want to start out with the layoffs in colleges we were just talking about. At Mohawk College in Hamilton, for example, there are 400 people being laid off. All across the province, we're losing those jobs.

I've been having meetings with folks in unusual sectors, I would say, that have said that these closures of these programs are impacting their industries. Tourism, hospitality—people that you wouldn't expect said, "The closures of these programs are going to negatively impact our sector." What do you have to say about that?

JP Hornick: I would say that one of the things that we're looking at is a kind of short-term Band-Aid. The government likes to talk about how many additional dollars have been invested. That doesn't even get us up beyond the lowest per-student funding in Canada. When we look at the types of jobs that are being lost in the communities, they are not related to foreign student drops, international student drops. We're seeing things that will collapse economies within rural and northern communities. We're looking at the things that support workers in those communities, like early child care education. We're looking at things like a loss of EAs. We're looking at things like a loss of mental health services. We're looking at mining jobs that are effectively creating company towns that are beholden to private industry, rather than public college systems that allow people to develop and transfer skills. We are in the middle of the largest labour market adjustment we will see in a century.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Yes, I agree. And to carry that argument to our public hospitals, we are seeing layoffs all across Ontario: 50% of our publicly funded hospitals are in deficit and they are laying off health care workers right now, while we still have a health care crisis. In Hamilton, there's layoffs happening there.

Can you just take that argument of why are we laying off people in health care when it is also one of the lowest per capita funded systems in all of Canada?

JP Hornick: It is mind-boggling. I would share Bruce's point earlier, that this is a difficult question to answer, because it seems to be one that is rooted in the values and choices of a government that would prefer to channel money into private systems, rather than adequately fund

public systems that benefit us all: the social safety net that these folks rely on.

When we're looking at hospital layoffs, we're looking at lab technicians. We're also looking at public health labs. These are decisions that make no sense. Ontarians do not want longer hospital and service wait-lists, period. That is not why government was elected; that is not a good investment; and it is not good governance, frankly.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I'm going to go back to the notion that this is the privatization of health care and the privatization of our education sector. We have seen the complete scandal that is the Skills Development Fund; there's nothing else to call it other than scandalous. The Auditor General said it wasn't fair, transparent or accountable. I have had constituents who have sought training in private colleges and they were fly-by-night. They spent their money; they didn't get the training; they didn't get the certificate.

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

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Can you again speak about why all this money going through the skills development funding, which seems to be clearly only directed to friends and family of this government, how that is another way that we are undermining public sector training in Ontario?

JP Hornick: Sure—friends, family, dentists and wives, we might add.

The question of this is again one of values. This is about putting money in your donors' pockets rather than your average Ontarian's and making sure that we are all elevated and able to access good-quality public education in our communities that benefit our communities in the short and long term. Investments in public education and investments in students are a long-term investment in Ontario.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Yes, and it's community building. These public institutions are legacies that we would expect a government to protect for the next generations and not to be tearing down with their personal and private interests.

With that, I'll conclude my remarks.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll go now to MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Alison, thank you for your presentation. What would return to real 2009 spending mean for the Community Museum Operating Grant? What does that mean in a dollar amount?

Ms. Alison Drummond: Well, in a budget context, I would always defer to the Ministry of Finance, but a 2009 dollar is worth about \$1.50 in 2025. The grant was \$5 million in 2009, so it would be \$7.5 million, to take it back to real 2009 spending.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: So not very much in the grand scheme of things, when we look at how this government tends to light money on fire with certain issues or things. That's not very much.

I appreciated, actually, the suggestion to try and have new entrants into that program who meet standards: Indigenous cultural centres, Black community groups, racialized groups and other folks. We have a lot of history here in this province that transcends generations, that

transcends ethnicities, races, people. To have more of a focus on that so people can learn and understand our history I think would be a good thing. So if that's the amount and if we look at everything else that's happening, I think that's a pretty reasonable request, quite frankly. We can have more of these museums in communities across the province that act as another thing to do when people are going there for tourism or even as a draw for school groups or other things as well. I think it's really important that in Ontario, we understand our history—all of that history—and I think this is a very reasonable suggestion that you've made.

1750

You're suggesting a provincial program to promote these museums, correct?

Ms. Alison Drummond: Yes, I am. The federal program offered free admission to national museums for young people or a reduced price for slightly older young people. Of course, there are a lot of community museums in Ontario that don't charge admission. I think the 15% increase in attendance was more about awareness and promotion.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Great. Thank you.

JP Hornick: I'm wondering if we can talk a little bit about the correctional system and some of the challenges that your members are experiencing day to day.

JP Hornick: Sure. I think that, again, this is another area where we don't have appropriate funding. We don't have appropriate mental health supports. We have seen 13 deaths by suicide in this sector over the past three years. We are actively in bargaining right now looking for these supports, looking for that investment. When you look at the types of things that public services support, those create the conditions that allow corrections officers to be focused on corrections and rehabilitation, rather than the downloading of mental health services and addictions.

There is a crisis in corrections. Again, there has been report after report made about what could do it. Increased funding is part of that; increased supports for the workers in there; increased rehabilitation programming for the folks who are incarcerated, so they have a greater chance of success and less recidivism.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I've had some conversations with folks who work in the system to learn more and to understand more. It appears to me that we're asking some of our correctional officers to deal with situations that they haven't been provided training for and do not have support in.

In terms of our provincial jail system, we're pretty much three to a cell everywhere, right?

JP Hornick: At least.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: At least. That's, in my view, putting your members in a very difficult position, putting those individuals in a very hard position to be able to manage a challenging environment.

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

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I hate to say it, but do you think we need to build more jails?

JP Hornick: I think we need to think about what kinds of services we can put in place that would help people to not have to go to jail.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Yes. The root causes at the end of the day—100%.

JP Hornick: Yes.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: We wonder why there are folks that are out on bail sometimes as well. It's also because the jails are full. That is one of the reasons why people are released early. This is going to be a bigger crisis in the making once the federal government bail reform change happens. I don't know what's going to happen—because how do we fix that? I think you've outlined a lot of ways that we can do that, especially on the mental health piece, because correctional services officers should not have to be doing something that they haven't been trained for and don't have expertise in.

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

We'll go to MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I just want to say, as a fiscal conservative, I'm always concerned about throwing more and more money at problems or at issues when we don't reimagine the system and make it better from bottom-up, top-down—that type of thing.

Going back to your first point, Bruce, when you said, "I'm not here asking for more money," I think that's great. I think, though, the system, the autism file, needs to be reimagined. When we look at the 60,000 wait-list—I had some speech pathologists come to me recently and say, "We could help with that. We could actually help diagnose. Families bring their children to us for supports and we help them. We could actually help clear that wait-list up."

Is that an ask of the OAC, that perhaps we expand those who can diagnose?

Mr. Bruce McIntosh: The government has spent more money each year on diagnostic hubs, and they seem to be doing a good job, except in certain parts of the province where it is just simply too difficult to staff them, northern Ontario being one of those. The reality of it is that it's just another part of a multi-part wait-list. The single biggest bottleneck is getting children into core services early. The way to do that is to build capacity, to use the funding that's there more efficiently, and between those two I think you can do it reasonably well.

We've offered alternatives to full core funding at the choice of the parent. We hear parents in our Facebook group—30,000 people—who say, "I don't think my child needs ABA."

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute

Mr. Bruce McIntosh: Well, let's give them what they do need for less money and move on. It doesn't seem to be in the cards.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you, Bruce.

Alison, quickly: I fear for our local museums and some of our smaller museums, especially in a riding like mine, like Haldimand–Norfolk. In Delhi, we have the Delhi Tobacco Museum and Heritage Centre, and we have many

cultural programs, and they do a great job of programming to our school-age children.

I'm wondering if perhaps including our local museums in the curriculum would help sustain some of those small museums across this province.

Ms. Alison Drummond: I think it would, yes. I think many museums are very involved with their local school boards, but others are not, and that's something we're looking at: how to support them. But also, of course, it would be from the curriculum side.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: That could be—

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

MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you to all the presenters for coming out this evening to share your perspectives on the upcoming 2026 budget.

My question is for Bruce. Thank you for your advocacy and for your concern about red tape. I'm the parliamentary assistant to red tape reduction, so that's important to me.

Mr. Bruce McIntosh: We should speak.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: I was just going to say, we do have a red tape portal, if you go to the ministry website, where you can put in your comments—and thank you for sharing your comments today. If you would put them in there that would be great. It goes right to our ministry officials, so we would appreciate that.

My question is about the supports provided by the Ontario Autism Program, and I'll list a few of them here: applied behavioural analysis therapy, speech language pathology, occupational therapy and mental health services and equipment. My question is, which of these would you say are some of the most popular or in-demand with families and individuals living with autism?

Mr. Bruce McIntosh: Without a question, ABA. ABA is the service that the autism program, in its original incarnation 25 years ago, was created to provide, because there was no other program in the province that was doing that. The problem at the time, and the one that has ballooned into where we are now, is that there wasn't good enough epidemiological data to tell the government what the uptake was going to be, and it has been a surprise.

But adapting to that surprise and recognizing it and dealing with it hasn't been all that well done. I do not hold any party blameless in this, by the way. We did battle with the Liberals from our inception in 2005 until now. We turned 20 this year. I really wish you people would put us out of business. I don't want to be doing this. I'm semi-retired, and I kind of like that, but here I am.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: Alison, I'm going to come back to you. I'm in the middle of doing a PhD in taxation policy, but it's in Canadian studies. Ironically, I've had to do some humanities courses as my core courses and one of the things—a book I recently read was Jack Granatstein's *Who Killed Canadian History?* He dedicates an entire chapter to his time as the director at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

What I found interesting about it is that he talks about, in particular, Hitler's one limousine that is there. It's one of seven that was known to be used by Hitler during the Second World War. When they were in a funding crisis, they talked about potentially putting this up for auction, and there was significant outcry from Canada on this. It took that type of crisis to raise the profile of that museum.

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They have been in a position now, for about 20 years, where the philanthropic approach to that museum has really saved it, for a lack of a better term. They were able to change the whole display around that car so that it didn't glorify Nazism; it became much more of an education piece.

Are you finding that, with other museums, it is taking some kind of a crisis where there's a display or an exhibit that they have that they're looking to divest themselves of and that is actually creating the awareness so that people are appreciating those museums, or that particular museum, more often?

Ms. Alison Drummond: I think there are some places where that's happening. I think Halton, where the upper-tier municipality is shutting down heritage services and has been talking about deaccessioning some of the collection, has made people much more aware of those assets that Halton has.

Museums are also changing their exhibitions for many other reasons. The thing I've been struck by since I took this job is how very engaged community museums are with their communities.

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

Ms. Alison Drummond: So I think engagement with the community is really the important part. Sometimes it's a crisis that drives that, but sometimes it's the success. Summer camps ultimately—somebody told me—lead to people getting married at the same museum because they met at summer camp 20 years before.

Mr. Dave Smith: I've got the Canadian Canoe Museum in my riding and one of the things that we discovered while we were going through the process of redeveloping it and creating a new museum for it—the province put \$9.4 million towards that building; it was about a \$55-million build on it. What I saw going through that process was that it wasn't necessarily going through the Minister of Tourism, Culture and Sport, as it was at that point, it was going through the Ministry of Infrastructure and finding other avenues then that we could come up with funding to help accelerate and make those museums that much better.

Should we be looking at a multi-ministerial approach to it?

Ms. Alison Drummond: Absolutely, but I still think operational funding based on—

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

Before I go to the last question, I just want to say, I suppose it's just coincidental that the Chair's picture is in the presentation.

Laughter.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll go now to MPP Shaw.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Alison, I just want, maybe, to pick up a little bit on when you were talking about the importance of museums when it comes to culture and heritage. You talked about the interest in truth and reconciliation. In this building, we have a lot of artifacts as well.

Can you just talk a little bit about the Woodland Cultural Centre—I was at its reopening—and the importance of that, preserving the evidence that it was a residential school and the mix between what a museum is and changing—we can't change history, but we can be informed by it. Can you talk a little bit about the importance for Indigenous communities of the Woodland Cultural Centre?

Ms. Alison Drummond: I mean, obviously, Woodland is tremendously important. That opening on the day of National Day for Truth and Reconciliation was a huge event in the museum world. We're just beginning to develop this course; we've been trying to modernize the certificate for some years. So we're just starting that work with Woodland Cultural Centre.

But I want to really speak to the—Woodland actually does receive CMOG; it is the one Indigenous cultural centre that does. I think it's really important to go back to that point: There are 166 museums in the province that receive this operational funding. Many of those museums are tremendously engaged with reconciliation in their communities, with working with local communities—pioneer villages that are working with local communities to set up living pioneers working with the local First Nations as they did at the time.

I think the really important thing is that the world that we're in, where no new cultural centres can receive that operating funding, is a real problem, however much the existing museums are working on that, because it has to be led by Indigenous people and other communities. I think that, for me, that was really telling, when I read that.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you very much.

Okay, Bruce, I'm going to give you the last word here today. I share what is possibly your sense of, maybe, outrage. I don't know; I feel outraged by this program, the fact that you have to use the word "beg" here is incredibly upsetting.

I have family members, I have constituents who have talked about the cruelty that this program has resulted in. I have a constituent whose one child received treatment, and the treatment works. The second child was diagnosed during this transition and is not receiving treatment—so the cruelty of this family seeing, "We know this will help, but we can't get treatment for those kids." They don't have a house to sell and they don't have a credit card that isn't already maxed out. It's cruel, and it shouldn't be this way.

So I'm going to let you bring us home today and just share the emotion behind all of this.

Mr. Bruce McIntosh: Ms. Shaw, if I had a nickel for every time that I've heard about something like this I could probably fund the bloody program.

These therapies work, ABA of all of them. My son was diagnosed around his third birthday, shortly after. He wasn't speaking. He didn't speak for another two years. Right now, he's got a part-time job calling play-by-play

for some junior A hockey teams. Thanks to community living, he's living semi-independently. He's doing wonderfully well, and he and I have a date on Sunday to go ride the Finch West LRT, because one of his obsessions is transit.

I can't tell you how proud I am of my boy, but I do know that if my wife and I had not damn near driven us bankrupt in the three years that we were on the wait-list, he wouldn't be there. The wait-list is now over five.

There is so much wrong tied up in this, and there are so many kids that aren't going to get a shot because of it. Look, my son is 25; my daughter is 23. I don't have skin or DNA in the game, but I can't get the bit out of my teeth because of exactly this: I know it works. I know it works. If we could deliver it effectively and efficiently—human dignity before anything else. That's it.

I'm going to stop there.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you very much. I just want to thank you for being so open with us, sharing those emotions. We'll do everything we can. I'm a good friend of Monique Taylor, who is a huge advocate. She's still doing this, even—

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

I thank all three presenters for a great job done and taking the time to prepare and then taking the time to come here and enlighten us.

With that, we think that concludes not only this panel but the business for today. Thank you all for your participation.

The committee now stands adjourned until 10 a.m. on Friday, December 5, 2025, when we will resume public hearings in Peterborough, Ontario.

The committee adjourned at 1809.

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