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**Standing Committee on
Finance and Economic Affairs**

Pre-budget consultations

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

Consultations prébudgétaires

1st Session
44th Parliament
Tuesday 20 January 2026

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44^e législature
Mardi 20 janvier 2026

Chair: Hon. Ernie Hardeman
Clerk: Lesley Flores

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

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 20 January 2026

Pre-budget consultations	F-451
Axtion Independence Mobility Inc.; Co-Operative Housing Federation of Canada	F-451
Ms. Tracey McGillivray	
Ms. Simone Swail	
Ms. Elana Harte	
Ms. Suling Duong	
Beef Farmers of Ontario; Extend-A-Family Waterloo Region; Quantum Valley Ideas Lab	F-460
Mr. Richard Horne	
Mr. Don Badour	
Mr. Allan Mills	
Mr. Marc Gibson	
B'nai Brith Canada; Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce; Ontario School Library Association.....	F-470
Mr. Richard Robertson	
Mr. Ian McLean	
Ms. Anita Brooks Kirkland	
Cornerstone Association of Realtors; Ontario Public School Boards' Association; Community Living Toronto	F-479
Ms. Andrea Fedy	
Ms. Kathleen Woodcock	
Mr. Jonathan Bradshaw	
Junior Achievement South Western Ontario; Association of Ontario Midwives; Habitat for Humanity Waterloo Region.....	F-488
Ms. Karen Gallant	
Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis	
Mr. Philip Mills	
Progressive Contractors Association of Canada; Oxford county; Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, Bruce-Grey district.....	F-497
Mr. Stephen Hamilton	
Mr. Marcus Ryan	
Mr. David Geraghty	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Tuesday 20 January 2026

The committee met at 1000 in DoubleTree by Hilton, Kitchener.

PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS

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

Please wait until you are recognized by the Chair before speaking, and as always, all comments should go through the Chair.

The Clerk of the Committee has submitted committee documents, including written submissions, to committee members via SharePoint.

To ensure that everyone 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 in the time slot will be used for questions from the members of the committee. This time for 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 speaking time. The "one minute" does not mean you have to stop. The "one minute" says, "Put your punchline in, because at seven minutes, you're going to be cut off."

AXTION INDEPENDENCE MOBILITY INC.
CO-OPERATIVE HOUSING FEDERATION
OF CANADA

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): So with that, we'll start this morning's presentation. First of all, I need unanimous consent from committee—we have an extra presenter at the table—to allow two presenters for one slot. We have to have unanimous consent. Do I hear any dissension? If not, welcome.

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES FINANCES
ET DES AFFAIRES ÉCONOMIQUES

Mardi 20 janvier 2026

Now, for the first table, we will have Axtion Independence Mobility Inc. and Co-Operative Housing Federation of Canada. We have one cancellation that will not be here, so there are just two presenters at this table.

So with that, are there any questions from the committee? If not, the floor is yours. We'll hear from Axtion Independence Mobility Inc.

I should mention the microphones are automatic—and that's as much for the committee as it is for the presenters.

Mr. Dave Smith: It's on.

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: Okay.

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to participate in Ontario's 2026 pre-budget consultations. I'm Tracey McGillivray, and I'm the co-founder and the CEO of Axtion Independence Mobility.

I'm joined by my colleague Suling Duong, who is our chief occupational therapist.

Our team has designed and manufactured the Canadian-made Raymex Lift. It's the only device in the world to help both prevent and recover from falls and allows people to do so independently or with a single caregiver who provides minimal assistance.

The Raymex Lift can help reduce the strain on Ontario's health systems and helps people regain their independence. Ontario, like all developed jurisdictions, is facing a major structural demographic shift. We've got a rapidly aging population, we've got a year-on-year increase in the number of people falling and we've got an aging and shrinking caregiver workforce. There's growing pressure on hospitals, long-term care, with overcrowding, long wait-lists and long wait times—and those are getting longer every day.

One in four people over the age of 65 experiences at least one fall—most of them, multiple falls per year. That number doubles to one in two for those over 80, and the over-80 crowd is the fastest-growing subset of our older-adult age category. Half of those people need help getting back up, which results in, in a lot of cases, a call to EMS just for a lift assist—just to help somebody get off the floor. One in six of older adults that are admitted to hospital these days are there because of a fall. That's a huge number and, sadly, the death rates have tripled. The death rates resulting from falls have tripled over the last 20 years. This is a significant problem.

Today there are 3.2 million people over the age of 65 in Ontario. That number is going to grow to 4.2 million by 2040, so in 14 years the number is going to increase by a

third. This is an unsustainable structure. That means there are 800,000 people falling each year and, again, many of them multiple times. Some 10% to 15% of calls to EMS are just for lift assists and for 50% of people who call, there's a repeat call in two weeks. Again, 50,000 hospital admissions and 40% of admissions to long-term care are from falls or the fear of falling.

I want to talk just a moment about our health care workers, too. They're injured at four times the rate of any other industry. You would think it would be construction or heavy equipment or mining; it's not. It's health-care workers, and it's due to patient lifting—

Failure of sound system.

The committee recessed from 1007 to 1023.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll come back to order.

The present presenter has four minutes left to proceed.

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: Thank you very much. We were talking about older adults falling and the problem that it is for Ontario. And why should this committee care? Because it's costing Ontario over \$4.5 billion a year in direct costs. Hospital stays after a fall are almost twice as long as stays for all other causes, and I know, because I lived it personally with my father. The Raymex Lift that we're presenting to you here today is named after him. His name was Raymond.

Everybody thinks of and imagines falls to be the dramatic trips and the dramatic slips, and while those exist, that's not the majority of falls. The majority of falls happen during everyday activities—things like bending over to reach an object or kneeling down to do something and just simply being unable to get back up, and they end up on the floor and can't get up. Current tools that are out there don't address those types of motions and those types of activities.

Despite decades of efforts with best practices and grab bars and all of these things, we have not moved the needle one iota on the rates of older adults falling. And with the increasing population, the numbers of falls are exploding and just absolutely straining our health care system.

Once somebody falls, there is a cost and a consequence to it. But the fear of falling—they stop doing all the activities that put them at risk, so they lose their independence and, ultimately, they lose their dignity and end up having to go into a facility. Again, 40% of admissions to long-term care are because of falls or the fear of falling. The Raymex Lift is a breakthrough device that combines a powered lift, a transfer aid, a multipurpose mobility aid and a rehab tool all in one easy-to-use compact portable unit. It's already in use by Veterans Affairs Canada because the longer they can keep somebody at home, the more money they save. And the chief medical officer says, "If I can keep somebody home six weeks, I've paid for the device"—just six weeks, and this will likely keep them home for multiple years. It's been deployed by the US Veterans Affairs and their Veterans Health Administration in both home care and in their facilities and multiple other locations across the US, UK and Canada—and soon to be in Europe, starting in Q2 of this year.

Our ask, today, is simple: It's to support a funded pilot within the province of Ontario through Ontario Health atHome. You could actually include it in the newly announced high-intensity bundled health care at home program that you've announced to try and get people out of hospital, to reduce the overcrowding and the strain.

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

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: The potential savings are significant and immediate. We can measure those savings, and we can measure the patient outcomes. If I've got time, I'll show you a brief demonstration video, but I want to land this by saying the Raymex Lift is the only compact portable mobility aid that combines a lift, a transfer aid, a multi-purpose mobility aid and a rehab tool, and it does so at a lower cost than all the other single purpose tools that are out there—and again, it's made in Canada.

We sincerely appreciate the opportunity to present today, and we thank you for your time, for your attention and your engagement. We're happy to answer any questions when the time comes.

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

We now will hear from the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada.

Ms. Simone Swail: Good morning, Mr. Chair, members of committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I will just note my co-presenter can't hear anything online while I speak.

My name is Simone Swail. I'm the senior manager, government relations for the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada, and I'm joined online by Elana Harte, the executive director of the Central Ontario Co-operative Housing Federation.

Across Ontario, families are struggling to find housing that is affordable, secure and rooted in community. For many, the private market is out of reach and wait-lists for social housing are far too long. But there is a proven solution with a 50-year track record: non-profit co-operative housing. Ontario is home to 550 non-profit housing co-ops providing stable homes for approximately 125,000 people in communities across the province. These are places where seniors can age in place, families can put down roots and neighbours support one another.

Co-op housing is different from other forms of rental housing because there is no outside landlord. Co-ops are owned and governed by the people who live in them and because they operate as a non-profit, housing charges reflect the true cost of operating and maintaining buildings. These keep homes affordable and stable over the long term. After decades of limited development, co-op housing is building again in Ontario, largely due to the federal investment through the Co-operative Housing Development Program and strong municipal partnerships. This includes the largest co-op housing development in Canada in a generation in Toronto, Kennedy Green co-op, as well as new projects here in central Ontario, including the 30 Lauris development.

These projects are delivering new homes at a critical moment. They are supporting jobs in the residential con-

struction industry and local supply chains during a private sector slowdown, while creating permanent community assets that serve people shut out, again, from that private market.

But these projects are just the start. With the right choices in budget 2026, Ontario could unlock much more potential by protecting existing co-op homes and scaling up new development. Our first recommendation to this committee is to protect and preserve the existing co-op housing. More than 250 Ontario co-ops, representing over 21,000 homes, operate under the Housing Services Act—that's provincial legislation. These homes were originally developed by the province and later downloaded to municipal service managers.

1030

In 2022, the province introduced a new service agreement framework to govern what happens to the co-ops once the original mortgage ends. The intent was positive: to ensure rental assistance would continue for low-income households and integrate flexibility that would better support housing outcomes and growth.

Some service managers have worked in real partnership with housing providers within this framework, like Waterloo region here in Kitchener. Unfortunately, others have used gaps in the regulation to undermine the financial stability of co-ops and non-profits. In some cases, subsidy funding is dropping to zero once the mortgage is paid off. This is despite the fact that 75% of their homes house low-income households from municipal social housing waitlists and they also need to manage aging buildings with growing repair backlogs. Because interim funding is not guaranteed until a new agreement is signed, some co-ops have gone years without funding for rental assistance, placing the entire community at risk.

CHF Canada urges the province to strengthen oversight, guarantee interim rental assistance during the negotiation process and enable co-ops to refinance so they can maintain buildings and reinvest in affordable housing. With clear provincial direction, Ontario can protect the existing assets, rather than allowing them to erode.

Our second recommendation is to partner with the co-op sector to build the next generation of co-op homes. Ontario needs a decisive shift towards non-market housing. With substantial federal funding already committed, the province has an opportunity to leverage these dollars and significantly increase supply.

A recent Deloitte analysis found that if Ontario increased its share of co-op and non-profit housing to the OECD average, productivity would rise by nearly 10% and provincial GDP could grow by more than \$50 billion.

Affordable housing is also economic infrastructure. Building co-op housing now at scale would be counter-cyclical investment that would help the market and the people in need of affordable homes, protecting jobs, local supply chains and creating a lasting public asset.

To support this, CHF Canada recommends expanding the mandate of the Building Ontario Fund to create a \$150-million affordable-housing-construction-guarantee program. A modest provincial guarantee would unlock private fi-

nancing, allowing projects to proceed and be released once buildings are stabilized without adding to the provincial debt. Without provincial participation, Ontario risks losing federal affordable housing dollars to provinces with established co-investment tools.

I'd now like to invite Elana Harte—who, I hope, has heard what I've said—to speak briefly about a project here in central Ontario.

Ms. Elana Harte: Thank you so much, Simone.

The Central Ontario Co-operative Federation is looking to build 101 new co-op homes in Cambridge. This is only one of the new developments our regional federation is taking on. Our Cambridge co-op will create long-term, affordable and inclusive housing for people from all walks of life. It will support seniors, families, couples, singles and individuals requiring mental health support, and there will be 27 accessible units.

We are taking this risk because we recognize the need for our organization to step up and take on this role to do what we can to expand affordable housing. We are committed to supporting efforts and initiatives originating with co-op and non-profit organizations, as well as private businesses that share our goals.

To make this project possible, we are pursuing federal funding through the co-operative housing development fund. We have received municipal support in the form of \$100,000 from the city of Cambridge, but we don't have a pathway to access provincial support.

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

Ms. Elana Harte: During its construction, this project will inject over \$33 million to the local economy, but its long-term impact will be far greater. We are looking to the province to come to the table to amplify the federal investments so that they can do more, because we know Ontario needs more affordable housing, and, specifically, we know Ontario needs more co-operative housing.

In the CHF Canada budget recommendations, which we endorse, we know there are a number of potential options laid out. We need the province to seize one to match the federal investment and help build the housing we know the province needs and simultaneously support jobs and local supply chains.

Ms. Simone Swail: The housing challenges we face are serious, but they're solvable. Co-op housing is proven, scalable and built to last. With the right choices in budget 2026, Ontario can unlock co-op housing as a cornerstone of more affordable, resilient and inclusive—

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

We'll now start with the questions. MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you to both of our presenters.

I wanted to start with the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada. I'm concerned about your comment that without access to provincial funding, Ontario risks losing new housing projects to other provinces where provincial funding is available for new co-op housing.

Can you expand a little bit more about what's happening in other provinces compared to what we have here in Ontario?

Ms. Simone Swail: Thank you, MPP Sattler, for that question.

There are a number of different models across the country that provinces pursue. Ontario is quite unique in that it's the only province where housing has been largely downloaded to municipalities. Municipalities, by and large, just do not have the capacity to be a real partner on some of these projects.

BC Housing is a very large organization and has the capacity to support loans to provide other types of funding to new housing developments. And you see, particularly in Quebec, similar structures exist as well.

The Building Ontario Fund has a mandate to support the development of affordable housing, but in practice we haven't seen it successfully do so. It has been supportive of long-term care and supportive, I believe, in the new student housing project, but I've yet to see a demonstration of an affordable housing project come out of it. I think, really, it has to do with the structure of the fund and the timing. Also, what we highlight here is another way that fund could be used: as a guarantee to unlock private financing. Ontario is home to the largest banks in Canada. However, large banks are very, very nervous about dealing with non-profits and co-op housing. So the province coming in, as a role, to guarantee those loans, recognizing they are a provincial asset, something that we desperately need, would be a way that they could backstop these projects without adding to debt—which I know is a key priority for this government—but really unlock at scale some new development for the province.

The fear is that some of these federal programs—we have yet to see what exactly Build Canada Homes will be. But for the Co-op Housing Development Program, projects are submitted—the program is national in scope—and they're scored. If there is a provincial partner, they typically can score better.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I noticed in your submission that one of the recommendations you include is removing barriers that prevent the Building Ontario Fund from fulfilling its mandate. Are there other barriers than the ones you've just mentioned around timing and—

Ms. Simone Swail: The primary one we've seen so far is the timing of the loans. The way the fund seems to be structured—again, it's all very new. They seem to want their money back on a timeline that just doesn't work for affordable housing development. If they were willing to be more patient capital—to join in the project over a longer time period to make that investment back or to be paid back—then they would be able to provide a very, very strong partnership when it comes to affordable housing. The rates out of the Building Ontario Fund are significantly better than even what we can sometimes access through CMHC, so it would make a very significant impact on, particularly, large developments like we are seeing in a number of places. We've got a proposed development in St. Catharines, 400 units; 660 units in Toronto. There are

many other projects at quite significant scale—over \$150-million projects—across the province. But we do need the Building Ontario Fund to be there as more patient capital, and then that difference that they can offer in financing could be all of the difference about whether that project pencils out or not.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you very much.

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

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I just want to quickly ask the Raymex lift people—thank you very much for coming here today.

You mentioned that your product is already in use with Veterans Affairs Canada. How long has it been in use? Has it been evaluated? And why aren't we using it in Ontario?

1040

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: Those are good questions. The product is just launching now, so this is a brand new product. Veterans Affairs Canada acquired it because we went through the Innovative Solutions Canada testing stream program over the last year and a bit, which is what gave them immediate and early access to the product, so the very, very first units that rolled off the line have gone to Veterans Affairs Canada. It is being evaluated by them; that evaluation will be complete by the middle of March. We're already seeing benefits from it. We can't publish it until the study is completed, but we're already seeing—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time. Hopefully we can get the rest of the answer next time around.

MPP Fairclough.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you both for your presentations this morning. I'm going to start with the long-term-care example as well. I thought that your stats are pretty compelling, that 40% of people are going into long-term care because of a fear of falling. As somebody who worked in health care, this is a very significant issue. I think, as well, given where we are with hospitals at the moment and the overcrowding, this would help to keep people at home safely.

I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit more—it was good to hear that you've been through this evaluation phase. What does it look like for somebody in their home using the device? And then, secondly, are there any other competitors out there that we should know about? And then the third thing: I just want to understand the numbers a little bit more. You've laid out what the investment would be and what that share would be between the province and the individual. Can you just talk a little bit more about the details?

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: Sure, I'd be happy to—sorry; I'm going to try and do these in order. From a competitors' standpoint, there are a few and in the appendix of the presentation, I have actually listed them all out.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Oh, great. Okay.

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: There's two pages. It's page 8 and page 9. The first page is the functional capabilities of the other alternatives that exist out there. Most of those are single-purpose devices, and it shows you the cost

comparisons, as well as the weights of the devices and so on. If you're a former health care provider and worked in the system, the second page is actually derived from a white paper we've done in collaboration with the US Veterans Affairs, showing the operational comparisons. The Raymex Lift is smaller, it's faster, it's easier, it's cheaper and it does more than any of the other devices that are out there.

The other thing, just quickly: There are only two manufacturers of lifts in Canada, period. We are one, and it's done with intellectual property. The only other one is using old technology. It's all off-patent, so that means it's at least 20 years old. It's the typical Hoyer lift, the ceiling-lift kind of thing that's out there. They are made in Canada. You still need those in the health care system for people who are completely bedridden, but for about 70% of the patients that are in long-term care or acute care, they still have some trunk control, in which case this device works.

We brought it here; it's actually physically here.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: There it is. That's great.

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: This device works for those individuals.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: That's great. I'm going to ask another question. I think you answered my question, so I want to just as a quick question on the co-op as well. Thank you very much.

In terms of the co-op presentation, I certainly am in favour in supporting these kinds of projects, especially at this moment in Canada where we're looking to ensure there are more affordable options for people as well. I just wondered if you could talk about—when you look at the ways that the government could invest, just talk a little bit more about why it makes the most sense to be investing in co-op housing at this time.

Ms. Simone Swail: I think why co-op housing makes the most sense at this moment is it really fills a need for people that are just absolutely cut out of the market. Co-op housing provides a place for families where they build a real sense of community, where the people take care of each other. Yesterday on The Current, there was a fantastic interview about co-op housing and what it provides to folks, where you hear about how it creates a sense of community. It deals with the issues of isolation that so many people in our communities create—because there is a coming together, because it creates a sense of real ownership over your home in a model that you don't need to be a millionaire to access. I think that's a real sense of stability, security, ownership, place. You really struggle to find that anywhere else.

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

Ms. Lee Fairclough: And from a government perspective though, when you're thinking of investing in it, why would it make sense for governments to invest?

Ms. Simone Swail: Why does it make sense? Well, I think it goes back to that Deloitte study and that \$50 billion. We are losing out when every last dime a household has is going to their housing. That means that they are not investing in their education. That means they're not investing in the community. It is costing everyone.

One of the great things about co-op housing is that we get more affordable overtime, and that is because when we increase what we call housing charges—really, rent, if you will—we do that at the cost of what it takes to maintain that building in good condition over the long term, and that makes a massive difference. We've done studies where over a 10-to-15-year period, our rents get hundreds of dollars cheaper per month in every major city that was studied—

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

MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you to our presenters this morning.

I'll start with Aktion Independence Mobility. Maybe I missed it; is there a dollar figure attached to each unit?

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: Yes, there is. The cost—and I'll disclose this—that the federal government is reimbursing is \$5,000 a unit. I know that sounds like a big number initially—because people look at this and they see a rollator walker, because that's what it looks like, and those typically run about \$500. But this is a full-powered patient lift, and the cost comparisons for other patient lifts are substantially more than that, plus the cost of other tools that you will also need, because if you have a lift, you're also going to need a rollator walker. You're probably also going to need a transfer aid. So by the time you stack those up, it's significant. This one is lower-cost than the other patient lifts, and it's lower-cost than the transfer aids that are out there, and we've been able to combine it into one single unit, so it's a multi-functional unit.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Great—

Ms. Suling Duong: And it's easier to use, from a clinician's perspective. I'm here because I've been working as—

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: You're Suling.

Ms. Suling Duong: I'm Suling. I'm an occupational therapist. The reason why I wanted to accompany Tracey today was to share the clinical piece of it and how easy—this is designed by clinicians. It was designed to make it easier, it was designed to make it more affordable and also to have cost savings across the board.

I had to step away from acute care because the demands of lifting and the physical aspect—despite the fact that I really pride myself on being fit, I wasn't going to be able to keep up. It was way too much.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Great. I'm interested—you talk about the government investing in funding a pilot project. What would that look like? Are we looking at this being part of the Assistive Devices Program eventually, or are we looking at just implementing in institutions at this point? What are we looking at?

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: Thank you very much. That's a really, really great question.

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

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: The answer is both. I would ultimately love to see it as a systematic inclusion in the Assistive Devices Program as well as the Ontario Health atHome formulary for reimbursement.

Within the Assistive Devices Program, the current policy says they will not fund any lifts at all. There's a reason for that: because all other lifts require mostly two able-bodied caregivers to assist, so they're not an independence tool; this one is different. You can use it independently, so it affords and promotes independence and living at home, as well as being a transfer aid and vertical mobility and translational mobility as well. It's a true tool for independence, so I really do want to see this included in ADP. All the therapists and physicians we talked to want it included.

Then the other is Ontario Health atHome. We'd love to see it included in the high-intensity bundle—

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

MPP Dixon.

Ms. Jess Dixon: My first question is for Axtion Independence. Going off a little bit after MPP Brady's question—as you noted, as a government we have invested quite heavily in the idea of helping people age at home, and so we are always interested in ideas that work.

You've described a lot of potential benefits across home care, EMS, hospitals etc., but if this were to be a targeted pilot, can you help me understand, where is it that you would be focusing first? What would the target client of that group look like? And what type of outcome measures would you actually be looking for to demonstrate the required efficacy of that pilot?

1050

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: What I would look to do in a pilot would be what I call the “frequent fallers program,” as opposed to frequent flyers. The top 500 would be what I would recommend, because that is a material group that you could really sink your teeth into. We can identify those because of the great job that Ontario Health and long-term care and the EMS service does in tracking the patients. They've got coding for everything, and so we can pull—like, EMS knows who the frequent fallers are out there because they know the addresses they're going back to, often every two weeks, to go pick somebody up off the floor. We can identify those people—whether it's in a geography or across the province or a subset of geographies—and we can track that data to see the actual reduction in falls.

What I would love to see is a reduction in falls and a change in their fear of falling. There is an actual instrument out there to measure people's fear of falling. It's the falls efficacy scale-international. It's what we're using at Veterans Affairs and the USVA to measure that. We can deploy those already approved measurable instruments to measure the outcomes across patients, and you can start to measure the change in the number of falls, the number of calls to EMS, admissions to hospitals, admissions to long-term care and the change in the falls efficacy scale. Those are all measurable.

Ms. Jess Dixon: Suling, if you can just expand a little bit more, when you said “on the clinical side,” what was your experience?

Ms. Suling Duong: Oh, 100%, yes. Oftentimes, when we were in clinic and someone had a fall, you couldn't actually help them off the ground, depending on where the ceiling lift track was. We would have to, unfortunately, get them—if they're on the ground, we're rolling them. There's like four or five clinicians that—it would be in carry situations—roll them onto a sheet, pull them aligned—it's just very undignified. It was also traumatic for the patient as well as for the clinicians, because we're often trying to help and do our best, right? And it was not always easy.

Those situations would be negated if we had something that was portable, rollable—we could get them sitting up; we could just help them scoot their bottom. This goes all the way down to the floor. We helped design it. We had all this clinician feedback: “What are the features you want in this?” “Make sure that gets all the way down.” “Make sure that these arms move up so that you can”—

Interjection: And elbow room.

Ms. Suling Duong: —“have room to get moving”—yes, exactly—“positioned where you need it.” You could log roll them. You could also sit them up. But as long as you have trunk support, they can get their bottom onto the seat no problem.

I used to work in acute care for the elderly at Grand River. I'll tell you, the times I've heard people saying, “I don't want to go home because I'm just scared of going home.” And the conversation would stop there. We'd spend lots of time coaxing, convincing, trying to understand what it was. It was usually a fear that their caregiver would get hurt or they would get hurt at home. So again, it's the fear—the psychological fear of it all was so overwhelming for them to even consider. So having a tool like this that, either the clinician at home care could bring or have it at home there for them to use, would just alleviate a lot of those psychological barriers—as well as give a practical tool that you could use to get people up off the ground.

Because really, like Tracey was saying, a lot of the falls aren't devastating—

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

Ms. Suling Duong: It's just lowering to the ground after getting something, like a pot out of a drawer. Very daily living kind of stuff becomes dangerous and, in their heads, a potential fall.

It's not that they get hurt. They're not hurt. They don't have the lower extremity strength to stand back up again. They just need someone to help bring this over, get their butt on it and get up.

Ms. Jess Dixon: How long would a pilot have to be?

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: The pilot could be as short as six months to measure it.

Ms. Jess Dixon: Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you—25 seconds, MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Is there an off-road version of this, because I'm looking at rural Ontario saying that somebody's going want to be doing something in their garden, and that is not going to be effective in the yard.

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: There are no knockoffs. We are patent protected in 42 countries as well, and—

Mr. Dave Smith: An off-road version—something that you could use on your lawn.

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: Oh, I'm sorry—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I'm afraid the time is up.

MPP Sattler?

Interjection.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Whoa, whoa, whoa—time is up.

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: Oh, I'm sorry.

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: How about you just respond by briefly answering MPP Smith's question, and then I'll get to my questions?

Ms. Tracey McGillivray: The way that the frame is designed, it's not a rigid frame. It has a little bit of flexibility in it. It also has the larger tires so it can be used outdoors, and it can be used on things like grass; there are no other lifts that can be used on grass. It can be used on cobblestones because of the uneven terrain there; there is nothing else that can be used on cobblestones. Even a rollator walker—the traditional ones that are out there—because the frames are so stiff with the welding points out there, when you go over a cobble, two wheels lift off the ground, so it's not stable. This one, only one wheel will lift. You've always got three points of contact with the ground, even on rough terrain, providing that stability. And the geometry—we took a ton of time focused on the geometry, with the balance and where we position things like the battery and the motors to give it some ballast at the bottom. So, the stability on this one—there's nothing else that's like it.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you so much. I very much appreciate it.

My questions are focused on Simone Swail. Thank you so much for coming here today. In the last election and the election before that, we put forward a proposal to get government back into the business of building affordable housing—financing it, working with municipalities, co-ops, developers and non-profit developers—so it's really good to see you here.

I have some specific questions. I have a question about your first ask, around changing the Housing Services Act and changing the provincial service agreement. If it was going to be changed in the way that you wanted—something that we certainly support—how much would it cost municipal service providers, and what would it cover exactly? Who would benefit?

Ms. Simone Swail: It's a really interesting question, because what we have right now is a patchwork. We deal specifically, co-op housing, with 31 service managers across Ontario. There are 47 service managers in DSSABs. I would say about half of them—or about the ones that serve, certainly, co-op housing—are already providing interim rental assistance. They recognize that there is no long-term benefit to putting these providers into financial

risk while they are negotiating their service agreement. So, half of it is already there.

The other half is who we need some help with the province to bring to the table. It's very difficult to run negotiations with 15 service managers. Some of these locations are quite small. So, it really would a little bit depend. I know that's not a great answer, but we're talking about helping to provide the rental assistance for what we would say is maybe 7,500 households across the province based on the very affordable co-op rent, as it is.

We're not talking, actually, about a huge amount of money, but what we're talking about is creating an environment where there can be a fair negotiation. Because it's really hard for a small community organization to have a real negotiation with a service manager about the next 10 to 20 years when they are losing money every single day.

Ms. Jessica Bell: That makes sense. Thanks for putting a number on that, that it would affect about 7,500 households, essentially people who are low, moderate income and needing a subsidy so they can stay in their co-op housing.

The second question I had is around the \$150-million loan guarantee. It seems very practical to me to allow provincial Ontario co-ops to access federal funding and also private capital from banks. Have you done any kind of estimate on, if this loan guarantee were in the budget, what kind of co-op construction it could spur in terms of numbers?

Ms. Simone Swail: Yes, that is a really great question. We're actually just in the process of working this through, because we are trying to be an innovative partner here. We're recognizing the mandate of this particular government and what they're trying to achieve, and we are trying to figure out what is the opportunity here.

We are actually in the process of developing it. I don't have the number for you today, but I will provide it to everyone on the committee as soon as we have it. But what we know is there is a substantial amount of money that could be accessed, and there is real interest by developers with our co-op housing development program.

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

Ms. Simone Swail: Why we're speaking to you at this moment is that developers are coming to us now. They want to develop this housing, and nothing else is being built right now. This is a real opportunity.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Yes, I'm excited to see those numbers. This seems like a very cheap way to spur the construction of non-market and affordable housing.

1100

My final question is around offering incentives to municipalities if municipalities meet affordable housing targets. I would love it if the government required municipalities to track affordable housing targets; they don't yet. What kind of incentives do you think the provincial government could provide municipalities if they build more affordable housing?

Ms. Simone Swail: I mean, there are all sorts of opportunities. I think the Housing Accelerator Fund has shown

that municipalities can respond when the province provides incentives. So we would of course incentivize—that they should get additional financial support, whether that is through existing portals like COCHI, OPHI—those dollars are largely committed—or we would highly recommend new funding—

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

MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair: Thank you, Simone—very nice to see you again. I've been doing a lot of work in the housing sector, going back over 10 years, and I tend to see a bit of the same theme around challenges with service managers as it varies from municipality to municipality. Some service managers tend to do very well and are very responsive; other service managers don't. Part of this is that it's downloaded at the municipal level. What needs to change in order to ensure we can preserve and protect co-op housing with a lot less stress?

Ms. Simone Swail: I think, long-term, we could look at some of the structures that are in place. Maybe 47 service managers might be too many across the province. But certainly, I think there is a role, and part of the tension here is for the province to come to the table with for funding for social housing.

The reality is this is the only province in the country where housing has been downloaded to municipal service managers, and that creates real tension, because it's one of the largest items on municipal budgets. Every year, year in, year out, it's the cost of affordable housing, so I think that would be a key place to start.

We could look a full-scale review of legislation to see how we could make things better. But this is a critical moment, and service agreements were supposed to be—and we worked very closely with the government on it to solve some of this problem and to bring that long-term vision. But again, 47 service managers are really, I think, probably a big part of the problem.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. What can the province be doing to leverage some of the equity within existing co-ops in order to spur some new affordable homes?

Ms. Simone Swail: That is such a fantastic question, because we do have all of these assets across the province with billions in real estate assets.

Part of it with rental assistance at reasonable, real rates—then we can refinance with the private sector. We've done that just for, to date, the rehabilitation of our buildings. We've accessed over \$300 million from the private sector to ensure that these co-ops are in good condition going forward for future generations. That is a real opportunity. So that's one piece of it.

For going forward: Again, it's about also doing things differently. One thing we would love to see as we are developing co-ops is to structure things a little bit differently. We still want the decision-making around the community done in that place, but using organizations like land trusts, other co-ops—we call them co-ops of co-ops—will help us to better leverage the overall real estate assets

to create an engine for continued development and growth. That is something we are very actively pursuing.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: And that would help create more of an entrepreneurial not-for-profit housing sector as well, right?

Ms. Simone Swail: Absolutely. I mean, one of the problems—small is beautiful in that there's such spectacular feedback to your community, but what it doesn't allow for is that expertise to grow. We certainly are at the forefront of working with CMHC, service managers, others, looking at how we can aggregate. There are some examples. There's a land trust in Toronto; 32 co-ops are part of that land trust, and they are spurring the development now—and fantastic partnership with the city of Toronto, a co-op housing development that is happening there, and they are creating real assets that will continue growth for future generations.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Now, with the Building Ontario Fund, I think, in principle, it's a good idea, especially when we're looking at some of these bigger projects, but it requires scale. It requires larger investments in it. So I think this is an interesting suggestion around a \$150-million affordable housing construction guarantee program to leverage lending from the private sector. Are there potential opportunities—or do you think there should be—around bundling projects and then going to the Building Ontario Fund?

Ms. Simone Swail: Absolutely. One thing we've seen in another province—in Nova Scotia, it started off with a couple of co-op projects that were actually in difficulty. We bundled those together into one community.

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

Ms. Simone Swail: That community is now growing and building a number of co-ops all across the province. We can do that here. When we bundle projects, they can then also help reach the Building Ontario Fund as a \$150-million project minimum.

But the truth is, some of our projects are reaching that target on their own. The cost of building in Ontario is so high. The scale of development that we're trying to reach right now is kind of the future, but bundling is certainly a great way to get there when you're doing it smaller. If you're doing it smaller in towns across the province, that would be a spectacular way to meet that target, to help them access those better loans that will make a huge difference on their overall development.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I think the human impact will be that folks of my generation and younger—and folks who are a bit older as well—struggling with housing insecurity would be able to have a safe, affordable place to live.

Ms. Simone Swail: Absolutely.

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

We'll now go to MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I'd like to start off with our co-op friends. We're looking at 85,000 people who are homeless right now. Half of those people are underhoused or precariously housed, and that's going up to 175,000 to 300,000 people in the next decade. I know even Scotiabank has

recommended building hundreds of thousands of affordable homes as a way to support our economy.

Can you talk about some of the cost savings to hospitals, jails, front-line EMS when we alleviate pressure from the social and financial cost of homelessness on municipalities, when we can offer people a stable, safe place to live?

Ms. Simone Swail: Absolutely. We spend billions on shelters in Ontario. Those shelters absolutely need that funding, but that is not helping solve the housing crisis at all.

We really need to flip on our head the way we think about housing in Ontario. When you speak about shelters—and I don't have the most recent numbers in front of me, but on the average, it can be \$16,000 for a very basic room. If you're talking about hospital beds, you're talking about \$40,000 a month for that hospital bed, for folks to be in a place they don't really need to be.

The cost of an affordable home is on the order of a couple of thousand dollars a month to the province. It would make a massive difference to provincial budgets across the line if we actually started to get ahead of this problem and build the affordable housing that we know our communities need. This is something advocates have been saying to governments for a very, very long time.

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

Ms. Simone Swail: What I hope that we see right now is that we can add in the benefit to the jobs in the construction industry to really spur action in the development of affordable housing so we can realize those massive financial gains that we would have by investing in affordable housing.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: And if I may say, I think if we could combine these two, where we have accessible units like you're building in St. Catharines—I have to say, \$5,000 is not a lot. A power chair costs over \$50,000 and beyond, and people are generally only covered 75% of that cost. To me, \$5,000 of savings in an accessible unit would prevent our society, as we hit the silver tsunami, a great deal of humanitarian cost and financial cost on the system and burnout of front-line staff.

Thanks to both of you for coming today. Hopefully you could collaborate. I'd like to see the pilot happen in these accessible units to see how many folks we can alleviate and move out of hospitals, out of long-term care, and keep their integrity and help them age at home. Thanks to all of you for coming today.

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

MPP Babikian.

Mr. Aris Babikian: My question is to the co-op housing. Recently, our government passed the Fighting Delays, Building Faster Act, 2025, which eliminates red tape and expedites or speeds up the building process and eliminates government obstruction of building houses. What other measures can you think of that we should eliminate to help you or help the industry build more houses?

1110

Ms. Simone Swail: Certainly, building faster is a huge part of the problem. We go through, like any other development, very—it can be at times—onerous zoning processes. There are certainly other studies and other pieces that I know the government is very actively looking to streamline, and we've been very supportive of that.

One of the moves that this government took that has been most useful for us is that co-op housing does not pay development charges. That was done back in 2022 on the building more home faster act. I apologize if that's not the exact right acronym.

There are certainly pieces that can be done to help get building done faster. I sometimes joke that we did a development in New Brunswick and the entire approvals process took three weeks. Of course, that would never be the case in a major city, but, certainly, I think the government's actions—and we've certainly fed into that process—there are ways to make things faster. There are studies that don't need to be done. There are consultations that maybe should be streamlined, particularly when it comes to affordable housing.

I think it's important that we realize our communities are for everyone and that we shouldn't be excluding folks from our community, especially where we see supportive housing. There's a huge amount of space there.

The real difference between what we had before and what we see now as far as co-op housing development comes from the investment made by the federal government to commit to building co-op housing in this country. So we really would urge the province to, as well as working to make the system smoother and faster for everyone, commit to and work on building affordable housing at this time.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Do you have any red tape elimination lists of things that you can share with us?

Ms. Simone Swail: I can certainly go back and provide you some, but I would just say that, for us, the primary reason we're not being developed is less to do with the red tape than it is having real financial partners to help get the projects started. That is the key. Like what I've suggested for the Building Ontario Fund, we can pay back the loans over the long-term, but for a non-profit, for a co-op to get started to be at build, we need a partnership with government to make that possible.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Thank you.

I will pass my time to my colleague, MPP Smith.

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

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

I'm going to come to the co-op housing side as well. How long do you want to pay off on that loan? Because one of the challenges that we have is that as you extend it out over periods of time, the cost of interest increases. The dollar is worth more today than it is worth tomorrow, so the longer we extend that repayment, the less value that comes back that we can reinvest into housing.

Ms. Simone Swail: That's a really great question. Different models will require different pieces. I think what we're modelling here with \$150 million was looking at a

10-year term of investment. Certainly, the CMHC loans that we often work with—we're talking about much longer terms, which are 30, sometimes even 50 years. We've done that in the past with CMHC to build a number of the co-ops that we have right here in this province.

With this affordable construction loan guarantee, we were modelling out a 10-year and looking at the opportunity that would create, recognizing the Building Ontario Fund is really structured to get money out faster, as you say. It's not meant to be patient capital, but certainly, if the province was willing to be patient capital that would make a huge difference.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: And one of the things you've also brought up is the fact that municipalities are the housing service managers for it. What we're seeing across the province right now—this is my own anecdotal; it's not government policy—but the municipalities tend to want to put the money into the housing units that the municipality controls 100%. If we were to change that model on the housing service delivery, how would you suggest we change it?

Ms. Simone Swail: That is a spectacular question. I think it only makes sense that we see that in some service manager areas, they want to invest in something they have 100% control of. What we would suggest is that you get, over the long term, a better partner when you have an independent, community-operated organization like a housing co-op. But we need to build us at scale. So I think some ways that you could do it, some of the decision-making—

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

I want to thank all the panellists for all the time you took to prepare and to be here, and to enlighten us on some of the new innovations in the system. We very much appreciate that. Thank you again for the time you took to do it.

BEEF FARMERS OF ONTARIO

EXTEND-A-FAMILY WATERLOO REGION

QUANTUM VALLEY IDEAS LAB

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): With that, our next panel will be coming forward. I have a sheet here that says it's the Beef Farmers of Ontario, Extend-A-Family Waterloo Region and Quantum Valley Ideas Lab.

As we're coming forward, as with the previous panellists, you will have seven minutes to make your presentation. At six minutes, I will say, "one minute," and at seven minutes, I will cut you off if you're still speaking.

With that, the first presenter will be the Beef Farmers of Ontario. We ask everybody to start with introducing themselves to make sure we have the name proper in Hansard for the presentation. With that, Beef Farmers, have your say.

Mr. Richard Horne: Great. Good morning, Chair and members of the committee. My name is Richard Horne. I'm the executive director for BFO, a sector that contributes more than \$3 billion to Ontario's economy. Its share supports close to 60,000 jobs in primary production, processing and retail in almost every community across Ontario. Today, I'm joined online by one of our directors, Don Badour, who will share our time.

We appreciate the government's continued engagement with farmers and the agri-food sector. We also want to recognize the government's recent decisions to expand the Ontario feeder finance program as well as the Ontario Risk Management Program, both of which have proven to be timely and effective investments, so thank you.

But today, we're here to talk about our request for the province to establish a \$10-million breeder cattle loan guarantee program, which is modelled directly after the highly successful feeder-cattle loan guarantee program that I just mentioned. This modest provincial investment would help unlock approximately \$40 million in private-sector financing, targeted specifically at the breeder cattle sector, which is the foundation of our supply chain.

From a fiscal perspective, this proposal is low-risk and low cost, and it would represent a contingent liability on the province's books with no upfront expense. Importantly, this is not an untested idea. The feeder-cattle loan guarantee program, which is already in existence, has operated for more than 30 years with zero claims against the provincial guarantee. That track record shows that farmers are responsible borrowers and that this model manages risk effectively.

A breeder guarantee would be administered through the same co-operative structure with experienced boards, administrators and supervisors that are already in place. There is significant overlap between the feeder program—the existing program—and the breeder program we're here to talk to you about today, which means implementation would be efficient, familiar and low-risk.

In short, this is a proven policy tool that stabilizes and unlocks private investment without subsidies, and with minimal exposure to taxpayers. Finally, the proposal aligns directly with the government's stated priorities, or current ones, anyway. It supports the Protect Ontario objectives by strengthening domestic production and economic resilience. Importantly, it reduces our reliance on US imports. It also aligns with the grow Ontario agri-food strategy by improving food security, supply chain stability and competitiveness. It advances a number of rural development goals as well, particularly youth in agriculture.

That's the end of my time. I'll turn it over to my colleague, Don, to explain why this matters more at the farm level. So without further ado, Don, if you're able to join, please go ahead.

Mr. Don Badour: Thank you, Richard, and thank you, members of the committee. My name is Don Badour and I'm a beef farmer and director with Beef Farmers of Ontario. I want to focus on why this program matters so much to farmers, and why it's so important for the long-term strength of Ontario's beef industry.

Ontario beef farmers are facing a convergence of pressures, including record-high cattle prices, high debt-servicing costs, significant upfront capital requirements, and increased trade and supply chain uncertainty. The feeder cattle loan guarantee program has shown very clearly what happens when farmers have access to affordable, well-structured financing: They invest responsibly and at scale. Every time the feeder guarantee was increased, lending activity followed. That's not theoretical; we've seen it happen.

1120

But there's a gap earlier in the production cycle. The cow-calf or breeding sector is where herd growth actually begins, and it's also where access to affordable credit is most constrained. Breeder cattle require higher upfront investment and longer timelines before returns are realized. That makes many lenders more hesitant, without a guarantee, even though the long-term fundamentals are strong. Breeder cattle are fundamentally different from feeder cattle from a financing perspective. They require longer investment timelines, yet they underpin the entire industry by producing calves over many years. Without affordable access to credit at this stage, herd expansion stalls and so does Ontario beef production capacity. This challenge is especially acute for new and young farmers, who may have the skills and ambition but lack the upfront capital required to establish or expand a breeding herd.

We know from the feeder program that about 40% of participants are under the age of 40. That tells us something important: When financing works, young farmers step up. A breeder loan guarantee would extend that opportunity earlier in the value chain, allowing young farmers to start with breeding stock, build equity over time and establish stable, long-term operations. That directly supports succession planning, rural renewal and youth engagement in agriculture, all of which are priorities for this government. Without access to breeder financing, many young farmers are forced to delay entry, scale back their ambitions or leave the sector altogether.

From a public policy perspective, this approach is both efficient and disciplined. This isn't about grants or subsidies; it's about removing a financing barrier so farmers can invest their own capital, take responsibility for their loans and grow their businesses.

Breeder financing also has implications well beyond the farm gate. Ontario currently relies heavily on imported US breeding stock and on breeding stock from other jurisdictions, which expose our supply chain to trade uncertainty and external shocks. By strengthening domestic breeding capacity, we create a more stable supply of Ontario-born cattle. That stability benefits everyone downstream—feeders, processors, retailers and ultimately consumers who are asking for more local, Ontario-produced food.

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

Mr. Don Badour: Food security doesn't start at the store; it starts with the breeding herd. From farmers' perspective, this is a practical solution to a real constraint.

It is targeted, it is scalable, it is low-risk and it builds on the model that Ontario already knows works well.

We appreciate your consideration and respectfully ask for your support in moving the breeder-cattle loan program forward. Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you. That concludes that presentation.

The next one is Extend-A-Family Waterloo Region and it's virtual. We'll have to get it up on the screen. There we go. The floor is yours, Allan Mills.

Mr. Allan Mills: Thank you and good morning. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today.

I work with Extend-A-Family Waterloo Region. For 45 years, we've been serving the community of Waterloo. We support children and adults who have developmental or intellectual disabilities and their families. The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services is our primary funder.

I have a brief letter that I would like to share with you from a parent who was hoping to co-present with me today. Her name is Deborah. Deborah writes this:

"I'm the mother of a 32-year-old son who has high, complex needs that require 24/7 care. I am also an only child responsible for my mother, who is in a lockdown dementia facility. We also have two adult sons who moved home two years ago due to economic difficulties.

"My husband, at 67 years old, finally retired this past Christmas, and friends kept telling us he will have to reinvent himself, obviously not understanding the depth of care that our son requires. These are the years where we watch our friends travel, take up new hobbies and just enjoy a spontaneous lifestyle after raising their typical children. That, for us, has been unattainable.

"You see, it's not that I haven't tried to figure out a long-term solution for our son Hayden. I started this journey when he was nine years old. When he turned 21 and school ended, I was fortunate enough to make connections with like-minded parents who wanted more than the typical group home placement. In 2011, myself and two other parents who I'd become friends with over years of advocacy, joined together to purchase a home for our sons to live in. We had the support of a local agency and they provided funding for two weekends a month of respite while we sought additional support dollars for our sons' care, in order for them to transition into this home full-time.

"Long story short, after several years of attempts, one family went into crisis and needed to withdraw from the housing model. The decision was made sadly and reluctantly to sell the house. Later, I purchased a condo for my son in 2020, and again, sadly and reluctantly, in 2024 I sold it, as support dollars for him to live there on his own were nowhere to be found.

"My son deserves to continue the great, person-centred life we have provided for him, but that can not be done by parents alone as we age. Timely access to supports, services and funding are crucial. I'm asking this government to enact timely, viable solutions for parents like us who

struggle on a daily basis to get through each day, all while still wondering what happens if."

What Deborah is really looking for is residential support for her son.

This is a provincial snapshot collected by Community Living Ontario of the residential supports that are provided to adults across the province. In 2023-24, 17,856 adults were receiving residential support, but 28,000 were on the wait-list waiting for those services. In the Waterloo region alone, there are 900 people waiting for residential services, and our local capacity is only 741. Of those 900 people waiting, 70 of them are in crisis right now.

Another priority for people with developmental disabilities is ODSP. Our Ontario Disability Support Program payments are well below the poverty line. The maximum a single adult can receive from ODSP is \$1,408, which is intended to cover basic needs—food, clothing and personal items—as well as shelter, but the current average rent in Kitchener is \$1,750 for a one-bedroom apartment. That exceeds the entire amount that a person on ODSP can receive. They need an increase of about \$900 a month. My recommendation is that the province provide 50% of that, and then look to the federal government and their Canada Disability Benefit, recently introduced inadequately at \$200 a month. The federal government should also make an investment to get these folks out of poverty.

Community Living Ontario is a group that Extend-A-Family is a member of. They made a budget submission called Catch Them Before They Fall. I'm sure that this group has all seen it. They raised two priorities within their submission.

The first is to increase base funding for organizations like Extend-A-Family by 3%. The way I look at that is like when the flight attendant tells you to put on your own oxygen mask before helping someone else with theirs. We need to really firm up the crumbling foundation of our services sector in order to be able to reach more people who really need us.

The second priority they emphasize is to provide the full Passport funding allocations over the next five years. They're estimating \$57 million as the cost for that for the coming year.

Here's a snapshot of what Passport funding looks like. These funds are intended to help people throughout the day when they graduate or finish high school. Then, the funding is intended to help them with activities of daily living, goal-setting, skill development and basically provide their support needs between Monday and Friday, 9 to 4, you could say.

However, the basic amount that people get is \$5,500 a year—in other words, \$98 a week. You can't buy meaningful supports with \$98 a week, but based on an assessed need level, the funding can be increased up to \$45,000 a year.

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

Mr. Allan Mills: Some 40% of the people eligible for this program are waiting to get their full allotment.

I'd like to thank the group for the time today and the investment you're taking to hear from citizens. Please

invest in the developmental services sector so we can continue to make a positive difference in the lives of the people who are counting on us. Please deliver hope for these families. Thank you.

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

Our next presenter is Quantum Valley Ideas Lab.

Mr. Marc Gibson: Mr. Chair, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear today. My name is Marc Gibson. I am the chief operating officer of Quantum Valley Ideas Lab, or QVIL for short. We are an independent, Ontario-based non-profit that exists for the public benefit, working on quantum sensing and deployable advanced technology development.

1130

I appreciate this chance to explain to you what we do, why it matters to Ontario, where provincial support has been helping to develop these critical technologies and the real capabilities and lasting economic advantage that this translates into, and how this is helping to support Canadian sovereignty going forward.

In short, QVIL exists because Canada has a history of being exceedingly strong at research but too often we struggle to translate our breakthroughs into fielded technologies and manufacturing strength. That's something that we struggle with here at home.

We were founded by donations from Mike Lazaridis and Doug Fregin—the founders of BlackBerry—which was matched by federal and provincial funding to position Ontario as a global leader in the emerging quantum technology economy.

In 2018, Quantum Valley Ideas Lab was two people. I'm the longest-serving employee. We are now more than 40 employees. We are engineers, scientists, physicists and builders we've recruited from across Canada and from around the world to build this organization. We are taking technology from the stage of breakthrough physics to actual working technologies outside of the laboratory. We've protected this here in Canada and internationally with more than 40 patent families to date, and growing.

We've worked with world-leading organizations in Canada and internationally, including Defence Research and Development Canada, National Research Council Canada; internationally, organizations such as DARPA and, most recently, NATO. We've also worked with numerous world-leading private sector companies. These, I think, demonstrate the demand internationally and domestically for Ontario-built innovation. We've worked extensively with the Innovative Solutions Canada program, the IDEaS program. And we continue to grow our domestic and international relationships.

We benefit greatly from being based here in Waterloo region, as part of the Waterloo tech corridor, which is increasingly a hub for dual-use technologies. This is one of Ontario's strongest platforms for developing deep technology into jobs, exports and resilient Canadian capability.

I'd like to take a moment to pause and actually show you an example of a quantum technology which I brought

with me. The three small objects in here are actual working quantum sensors—not the glass case. The glass case is just to keep them safe. These are used in quantum sensing. Today, most people hear about quantum technology in the news, in the context of quantum computing, which is obviously a very, very topical subject. Quantum sensing is much more near-term, in that these devices are used to measure properties with extreme accuracy—things like magnetic fields, gravity, timing, motion. These can provide ways of measuring things that just classically are not possible, or to make technologies that are small and compact in a way that is not possible with any conventional technology. Inside of each of these cells, there's a wisp of cesium atoms—it's just a little hint of gas in there. We excite them with laser lights from a device that's probably not much bigger than that projector there. When I started working at Ideas Lab, this experiment took up half of a science lab, and we've shrunk it down to that point over the course of the years that we've been working on this. That's because size, weight, power and cost are oftentimes what determines whether something stays a science experiment or it becomes a working technology that can be used in commercial or defence applications. We're not only building these technologies in Ontario; we're building the tools to build these technologies here in Ontario so that that can be the basis of potentially being part of a global supply chain going forward.

In terms of why this matters to Canadian technology and to Canadian sovereignty, dual-use technologies—things that are applicable both for commercial applications and for defence applications—are of increasing national importance. Today's environment—tightening supply chains, export controls, and strategic competition—means that dual-use technology is no longer just about innovation and economy; it's also about sovereignty, being able to produce something that we can benefit from here at home to help us to safeguard our own country. These technologies will form the basis of next-generation radar. These will form the basis of communications technologies, of navigational components used in manned and unmanned vehicles when GPS is not available. Jurisdictions that can create technologies like this are ones that can build it, integrate it, deploy it, and then ultimately benefit from it.

Ideas Lab was created because there are three valleys of death that we encounter when we do deep technology innovation. Oftentimes, people in start-ups will talk about the valley of death; we think about it as three. The first one is the technology: showing that something can be taken from a science experiment into a fieldable prototype that actually works. The second is manufacturability: Can you make something repeatably, testably and scalably so that you can support a real supply chain? And then the third valley of death—usually where most people focus their attention—is the market adoption: Have you built something that actually solves a problem in the real world? Have you built something that actually works, that a market wants to buy from you?

At Quantum Valley Ideas Lab, after addressing the first two, we then spin out our intellectual property in the form of start-up companies or licensable intellectual property, so that we can then manufacture, field these technologies and truly enable its commercialization at scale.

Something that has been crucial to our success over the last several years has been Ontario's Critical Technology Initiatives, which is supported through the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade. This has been critical to making QVIL the success that it is today. This has supported capabilities such as hiring our staff, validating the technology and building our partnerships to deliver these results. So, in short, our message today is that programs like the CTI program do work, have worked and are something that, for the future strength of Ontario, we believe should continue to be supported.

In closing, a region that builds a technology, scales it, exports it and retains it has a real opportunity to benefit from it in the long-term. I welcome all of your questions. Thank you.

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

We start with MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you to all three of you for your presentations today.

Marc, I'll start with you—very interesting, groundbreaking and important work. In terms of the companies that are being spun off from Quantum Valley Ideas Lab, are we finding that those companies are staying in Ontario or do some end up moving abroad?

Mr. Marc Gibson: So far, we've launched our first start-up company, and it is Ontario-based right now. We have a great amount of international interest in these companies, but our first start-up is called WaveRyde Instruments, and it is still proudly an Ontario-based business.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I'm really happy to hear that. I think you might know where I'm going with other companies that get started in Ontario.

Mr. Marc Gibson: I absolutely do.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: There's a lot in the KW region as well, because we have some of the best talent in the world right here in Kitchener-Waterloo, coming out of the University of Waterloo. I know they're doing groundbreaking work in quantum as well. What do you think needs to change in order to have more of those companies that are started here by folks who are from Ontario stay in Ontario?

Mr. Marc Gibson: Things that we have been seeing recently that I think are really encouraging is that we have seen programs at the federal level where investment in Canadian companies, particularly in the quantum computing space—organizations like Xanadu, Photonic, Nord Quantique and others—have been receiving investment from government to encourage them to continue to develop here.

I think that kind of support at the early stage is critical, because there are other regions that are investing very

heavily, and some of them are very close by to Ontario. If you look just to the south, places like Illinois and Chicago are investing very heavily in developing very commercialized quantum-technology development parks and things like that.

So having that company-level support, but also organizations like ours and others, to be able to develop that network, that infrastructure level, to help retain companies here, I think, is one of the things that would be really critical going forward.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. I know some of it definitely does covers some federal investment funding rules and tax credits for the creation of new companies or staying here as well.

Are you finding, in your work, that we're seeing some folks from Ontario come back? What might be incentivizing that?

Mr. Marc Gibson: In our organization, I think we were early. If you've ever met the types of people who do this type of work, the physicists who do this, they are passionate people. They do this out of a real love for wanting to do something that's never been done before.

We've managed to recruit people from Canada, the United States, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Germany, India—I can go on; I've recruited a team. I've learned more about immigration law than I ever thought would be relevant. We also repatriated Ontarians who went to the United States to do their graduate work there. So yes, absolutely, we have been bringing people back home.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I'm happy to hear that. As I've travelled parts of Ontario, you end up talking to companies that have been able to recruit really smart folks from elsewhere in the world who are experts in their field—a lot in quantum, AI, computing. One of the barriers that I've actually heard from some of these individuals is that we have the Non-Resident Speculation Tax. That's impacting people who we need here in Ontario, wherever they are from in the world, to stay here, and then in order to buy a house or a property here, there's a 25% tax on top of that. Do you think that needs to change in some specific circumstances so that we can help get more international experts to come here?

1140

Mr. Marc Gibson: I'm not an expert in this particular area, but I would say that I think anything that can encourage—I mean, the conversations we've heard from other presenters today talking about affordable housing and things like that—I don't think that anything that is in place that would encourage people to want to move to Canada, reside and contribute to this economy would probably ever be a bad idea. So no, but not being an expert in that area.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Perfect. What do you think needs to—right now, I think the top supercomputer that we have in Canada is 76th; I think they're out in BC. How important are supercomputing data centres and stuff to the work that you're doing in quantum?

Mr. Marc Gibson: I'm glad you asked that. It's one of the things—so, when we talk about quantum, for anyone who doesn't live and breathe this every day, it's hard to

always understand where different things exist. The quantum sensing that we specialize in is very much about measuring the forces that are out there—like I said, things like magnesium, gravity and whatnot. It's a very different end of the spectrum.

Quantum computing, at the other end of the spectrum, is much more of a large-scale, solving problems that is more about the computational side of things. We're more about measuring things for the sake of communications and defence applications. At least for our organization, we looked at it and said when there are investments coming from large organizations, we strategically focused on sensing to do the most good we could there.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you.

Just very quickly, thank you, Richard and Don, from the beef farmers. In terms of the current trade situation with the United States and the new federal deal with China, is there an opportunity for beef farming to grow and expand in Ontario?

Mr. Richard Horne: Thank you for that question. I think absolutely. Trade is incredibly important to our sector. About 40% of the value of every animal produced in Canada, which includes Ontario, is derived from export markets, so the more we can diversify, the better. Those who will pay the most for different cuts and products—

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

I will now go to MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Fascinating work, Marc. Allan, we've heard several times on this committee the challenges that you have highlighted, and I appreciate and share your passion.

I am going to turn my attention, though, over to the beef farmers. It's always wonderful to see you, Richard and Don. I can understand why a breeder loan guarantee would be advantageous to an individual farmer, but can you explain or help us understand what benefit this would have to Ontario farmers on a whole and the beef sector more broadly?

Mr. Richard Horne: Thank you for that question. I think it's a great question, and yes, from an individual farmer's perspective, reducing borrowing costs is a major benefit of the ask. But more broadly, I think young farmers—and Don mentioned the percentage that are in these programs, a high percentage of which are under the age of 40. We need to start thinking about doing more from a policy program incentive perspective to support the next generation. If we're going to have food security and food being produced in this province, that would probably be—one barrier to entry is capital and this helps with that. So, young farmers, number one.

The second one would be reducing our dependence on US imports, on breeding stock, and from those from other jurisdictions.

The third would be to grow our herd and hopefully capitalize on the markets we just talked about and the opportunities in other jurisdictions—so, markets, young farmers and growing our herd.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you for that. Over the past year, we've continually heard about the need to tariff-proof Ontario. Perhaps I'm biased as a farm girl, but I do believe that the best way to tariff-proof and protect Ontario is to further invest in ag food processing.

I'm just wondering—I think, at the first week of January of this year, Ontario exported something like 300 head of cattle. Some 70% to 80% of those I believe are headed directly for slaughter and processing. From your perspective, Richard, what are the biggest barriers to expanding beef production here in Ontario and what would the government have to do differently to remove those barriers?

Mr. Richard Horne: I think in terms of expansion, it's opportunity cost with other things, so loan guarantee programs, like the one we're talking about here today, give confidence to producers to be able to expand their operations. Of course, there are incentive and grant programs on the processing side or the production side that would help, again, give confidence and limit risk to those operations to make those investments in labour and in their own operations to grow and expand their production base.

I'd also mention the Risk Management Program. It's been an excellent program that the province has put in. More money and accelerated government phasing would really help derisk the current climate, and again, give confidence to producers to expand.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: And we saw the increased investment to RMP prior to the 2025 provincial election, so are we currently outdated at this point with respect to RMP and should we be—

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

Next, we'll hear from MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you to all the presenters for coming today. I really appreciate it.

My question is for the Beef Farmers of Ontario. Richard, it's great to see you again. I just came straight to this committee from ROMA, the Rural Ontario Municipal Association conference. At ROMA, I was speaking with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. They shared with me they just recently came back from an international conference of farmer organizations in the States—you might have been there as well; I don't know. But they shared with me some of the comments that were being made by some of the American organizations, by some of the government officials that were at this conference.

They were talking about clear-cutting nationally owned American forests to reduce their reliance on Canadian lumber, turning that land into farmland so that they can be self-sufficient when it comes to food security. I share that because I think it's important for us to highlight, again, that the international rules, they're changing. The status quo is no longer the case and big things are happening. It's important for us to do big things here in Ontario. Like you mentioned, we have been doing some of those things with the Risk Management Program, and really, it's making sure that we have food security here in Ontario, here in Canada, and we need big action.

My question to you: You mentioned reliance on US imports and how the breeder financing program would alleviate that. Could you just share more on how the program would help reduce our reliance on US imports?

Mr. Richard Horne: Sure. Thank you for the question. Our production level in Ontario has remained fairly the same, if not grown somewhat over time. But the number of calves born in Ontario to support our feeders and our processors and ultimately our retail market has done down. We've supplemented that with imports from the US and western Canada, so our overall production remains the same but animals born and bred here have declined over time for a variety of reasons.

I think this program in particular, the breeder loan program, provides that necessary capital to operations that want to grow their operations, and the backstop by the province gives confidence to lenders to provide more attractive lending terms. It's really sort of a two-pronged benefit or advantage to producers, again, giving them the confidence and capital required to expand their herd numbers, which ultimately fill the Ontario supply chain.

I hope that answers your question. Thank you.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: It does, Richard. Thanks.

To Don: You talked about the barriers for young people getting into farming. I grew up in rural Halton Hills. My first summer job was working on a farm, and I know very well how difficult it is for young people to get into farming, especially if they don't come from a farming family. Could you just please elaborate on how this program would assist getting more young people into farming?

Mr. Don Badour: The biggest thing is reduced lending costs with a government-backed guarantee. Compared to the feeder program that has the government guarantee—interest rate on a loan is about a half to three quarters of a percent less. As far as the assurance of money that you have to put up yourself, it is 5% compared to 15%, which we currently have to do with the breeder loan. That guarantee would cut down those costs tremendously.

I'm a director on our own local breeder co-op and this past year we've had a lot of interest in young people, the majority under 40, with cattle prices so high and stable, who are looking to get into the beef and cow business.

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

Mr. Don Badour: It's good to see because—these are old statistics, but from my home county, Lanark county, between 2018 and 2021, we lost 26% of our beef cows in our county that went to cash crop or other things. For the local economy, it's nice to see some cows back in the area, and the type of ground we have, it's best for raising beef cattle, in our particular area.

1150

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Well, thank you. I really appreciate that. One of my childhood friends went into beef farming. He didn't come from a farming family. Unfortunately, he's doing it in Prince Edward Island, but hopefully we can get more people doing it here in Ontario.

Mr. Don Badour: Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you. We have 25 seconds.

If not, MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you to all three of our presenters this morning. I'm going to focus my questions on Extend-A-Family Waterloo Region and Allan Mills.

The concerns that you have raised, the letter that you shared from that parent, this has been the reality in Ontario for many, many years. We've seen it in consecutive reports from the Auditor General, scathing investigations by the Ombudsman about the number of adults with developmental disabilities waiting for residential services. We hear it as MPPs. We hear it in our constituency offices particularly around the Passport funding and the fact that that \$5,500 that people get is nowhere near—it comes nowhere close—to addressing the level of need that these families have.

Mr. Mills, can you tell us what you want to see from this government in the 2026 budget that will start to address some of these issues around the lack of residential housing options and also the inadequacy of the money that's currently allocated to the Passport funding program?

Mr. Allan Mills: Certainly. Thank you for the question. The people that we're supporting really do need access to whole of government. So the developmental services sector funded by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services really ought to be focusing on support hours to help people live successfully. Historically they've also been providing the bricks and mortar through group home development within our sector. But really, these folks should have access to affordable housing in the community, the same as everyone else, and these dollars could be focused on support.

My suggestion is a 5% increase to the spending on developmental services in the year ahead—\$186 million—which would move about 3% of the people who are currently waiting for residential services into care. We can also work better between ministries. It costs about \$280,000 a year to keep someone on an extended stay in the hospital. There are well over 100 people in hospital simply because they don't have anywhere to go. We can support them for less than half that cost and give them a better life if they were supported through developmental service agencies.

We just haven't seen any investment. The service capacity has gone down in the last decade. In 2017-18 we were supporting over 18,000 people residentially, and now we're supporting under 18,000—about 1,000 people less—because costs have gone up and there's been no investment in the services, so capacity has gone down.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you very much for that response. I want to go back to Community Living Ontario's submission for the pre-budget process and the recommendation for a 3% increase in base funding. Now, that 3% increase in base funding would help compensate staff who work in the developmental services sector.

Can you tell us about the reality for those staff who work in developmental services? Is there a lot of turnover? Are the wages appropriate given the important services that these staff provide?

Mr. Allan Mills: First, I'd like to recognize that our sector was included during the pandemic in the \$3-an-hour boost that people in direct support received. That was very well received, very much appreciated and, I would say, very needed. Apart from that, there's been very little invested. We had a 3% cost-of-living increase to our budgets in 2024-25, and the last adjustment, economically, to our budgets, was in 2009-10, when we got 1.4%. So you can imagine the inflationary pressures on our budget in the past 15 years.

While we've been trying to keep up with other sectors, we lose staff to education, we lose staff to health, we lose staff to long-term care, because those sectors pay better than we do. There are currently labour disruptions all across—well, labour strife across the province. There's a strike in the Oakville area, and people have been moved back into an institution by that organization to try to manage and care for them during this work stoppage.

There are about 70 more collective agreements coming up within the next few months. People are not happy, and the turnover rates are pretty high. Unfortunately, our sector is pretty low-valued in the broader scheme of things.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: And without that increase to base funding, what choice do Community Living agencies have? What kinds of services are we looking at being forced to cut?

Mr. Allan Mills: Sure. Whose service capacities are going down? I mentioned that residential services have gone down by—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll have to finish that answer in the next round; we're out of time.

We'll go to MPP Fairclough.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you to all the speakers for your presentations. I do have a question for each of you if we can make it through it in the five minutes that we've got allocated.

I will start with you, Richard, from the Beef Farmers of Ontario. When I look at the previous program that has been invested in, which has been the feeder program, it really is about getting the backing that's needed to get this off the ground and actually, in fact, was never drawn from in the end, in terms of that backing. So this seems like it makes a lot of sense for the government to invest in something like this.

Can you talk maybe just more specifically about how that financial investment will also really help protect us at this moment with the US? What difference would it make in the sector to insulate us from the situation in the US?

Mr. Richard Horne: Thank you for the question. I'll try to be brief with the three other questions, but I think we have a real opportunity to grow our cow production in Ontario to service local markets in Ontario. That is by far the biggest benefit with respect to market: development and marketing of our products to Ontario consumers. We love having imports from other jurisdictions to feed our sector here and our significant processing industry. We'd prefer to have Ontario-born-and-bred animals, though, to service those markets. So that's really that in a nutshell.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you very much.

My second question really is to Extend-A-Family Waterloo. Thank you, Allan, for your presentation. I have to admit, the letter that you read at the beginning really resonated for me as an MPP. I've had many people coming to my constituency office with the same concern, and particularly older adults with adult children that are also getting older, and really concerned about what will be there to support them should they actually pass away and their adults be on their own. So can you talk a little bit more about the numbers of people waiting and even perhaps comment on that older demographic and what we could be doing to give some of the certainty and reassurance to people that their adults with developmental disabilities will be supported?

Mr. Allan Mills: I wish we could give them that assurance. Right now, the only people that come into service are the people in the greatest crisis in the community. Right now, there are 70 people on that urgent-need list in Waterloo region alone, and there has been no funding made available by the province to address any one of their needs.

So, Deborah, who wrote that letter, is in a medical appointment today. If things went very poorly for her, her family would immediately fall into crisis. She's a 24/7 caregiver. They would be in that list of 70. Now, there's 71 people in an urgent situation, and we have zero capacity to support them without an investment of new funding into the sector. So there's currently 741 people receiving residential services of a wide variety of types, but in Waterloo region—and there's 900 people waiting; 70 of those people are in urgent crisis situations.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Yes, it really does need to be addressed urgently. I agree with you.

My last question is for you, Marc. It was great to have an update, actually, on the Quantum labs. When I worked here in this region, I learned a lot about your organization. You mentioned that really your ask here is to ensure that the CTI funding can continue and continue to support some of the kinds of successes that you're talking about.

1200

Can you talk a little bit more about the fund? Have you got any concerns about decreases that you might see in that fund? It was at the very end of your presentation, so I wanted to hear a little bit more about what you're hoping for on it.

Mr. Marc Gibson: I think the CTI program has been a fantastic initiative on the part of Ontario. For organizations like ours, when I have a long list of programs we've worked with things like defence development—you know, DRDC, national research—there are a lot more programs that exist today than when we started this company.

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

Mr. Marc Gibson: The thing with things like CTI is that they provide organization-level funding to support them. Whereas a lot of things are programmatic and targeted at specific projects that are being done, CTI and things like that I think are essential to help build organizations so that we can build larger capacity. I think that's one of the differentiators, whereas something like CTI was

a really instrumental program that Ontario put in place and, obviously, why we'd like to see that continue.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Okay. Do you have any concerns that it's going to go away?

Mr. Marc Gibson: I don't have any concerns right now, but at the end of the day, it was a program that was started with an initial time frame on it. So ultimately, that's one of the reasons why—

Ms. Lee Fairclough: So it needs to be extended.

Mr. Marc Gibson: —we're here today, to let you know how it went and, ultimately, to be able to show you the benefits that the program, in the time that was afforded to it, has already yielded.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: That's great. And congratulations again on the numbers of innovations and the successful companies that have been launching. It's very exciting for Canada.

Mr. Marc Gibson: Thank you so much.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. We'll now go to MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I think I need a longer conversation with you, Marc, so I'm going to hopefully reach out shortly to arrange a visit. I think in downtown Kitchener and in the Waterloo region we see too many start-ups—my partner included—leave the province, leave to go to the US, where they're ready to take more risks and help translate innovation into a marketable product. I'm hopeful that you'll see those successes. It's an awesome time to have this innovation there and, in this context, to be able to serve our country by providing a product that's made in Ontario and in Waterloo region, so I look forward to having a deeper chat.

I'm going to turn my attention to Allan. I recently met with Sunbeam, and he shared a story of a gentleman who was deaf and blind and had lived a year in a London hospital. It was just by chance that a nurse at this hospital sought out Sunbeam as one of many residential providers to provide complex care. Because this gentleman was 2 to 1, it cost the health care system a million dollars for that year of care that he received. He was believed to be bedridden and not ambulatory, but he'd been strapped to a bed for that year because of lack of appropriate levels of care or tailored care. Now, he's living comfortably in a residential setting with way less intensive staff supports—not even one-on-one. He's walking around.

What do you see the impact, not only financially but emotionally, when we aren't able to provide the proper care for folks with developmental disabilities and other disabilities?

Mr. Allan Mills: Yes, it's very difficult. I can think of two gentlemen that we were supporting in something called the Host Family Program, or Family Home, where they're living with a family who is volunteering their time to include these people in their lives. They receive an honorarium for that. Our budget for these two gentlemen, because they came to us so long ago, was \$13,000 each. They needed increased supports over time eventually, but they weren't the most urgent situations in the community, so they ended up in long-term care. Their supports went

from \$13,000 a year to—long-term care is estimated at at least \$10,000 a year.

The taxpayer bore that brunt. We could have easily served them well for half of that, but we couldn't get any more money in developmental services. Also, they were too young; they were in their forties and fifties, moving into long-term care simply because there was no capacity to keep them in the community through developmental services.

There are all kinds of horrible stories like that. It's great to hear the success story from Brian and Sunbeam. There are some of those as well, but unfortunately, they're rare. It sounds like Sunbeam would have been spending less money than the hospital was. So ultimately, again, with better coordination and a deeper investment in developmental services, the taxpayer saves money overall.

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

MPP Saunderson.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I want to thank each of our presenters today, not only for coming to share your input on the upcoming budget but also for the great work that you do in our communities.

I'd like to start off quickly with you, Allan, and Extend-A-Family Waterloo Region. I served on our community care and community living board in Collingwood for 12 years, so the story I hear from you today, sadly, is not new. I think you indicated in your comments that the last major funding increase you got was in 2009-10.

My recollection from the sector you serve is that program funding tends to be very siloed and restricted. I'm wondering if giving flexibility in a number of the funding envelopes your organization receives might help to ease some of the pressures you're speaking about.

Mr. Allan Mills: Sometimes that can help. We have seen funding flexibility. For example, I mentioned our Host Family Program. We've had people that aged out of the child welfare system, stayed with their former foster parents but were supported by us in host family. Then they've eventually transitioned into supported independent living, where they have their own place, and we provide support for them to live there successfully. That's a different funding bucket, technically, but the ministry has allowed us to move funding from one to another, so there is some funding flexibility internally like that. But if they were to have to leave us and go to another organization, that would be a lot more complicated.

What we don't see is interministerial co-operation the way we could between health and MCCSS or between housing and MCCSS. You can be on a wait-list for affordable housing with the municipality, but the supports to provide you that care to live there are, with us, provincially funded, and the gateway is through Developmental Services Ontario. There's not a lot of connection between the municipality and Developmental Services Ontario.

That has improved somewhat. But you could get off one of those lists but not have access to housing—say, if you're off our list—or if you get housing but you don't have supports, like Hayden's parents, who bought a house

for him but couldn't get funds to provide him support there. You have to be in a crisis, and then we end up with expensive supports rather than proactive, preplanned supports. That's the other part of the problem.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Thank you for that.

Marc, as one of the parliamentary assistants for Minister Fedeli, it's great to hear your story. I know that your organization benefited from a CTI grant. I wanted to talk with you because two years ago, I was over in Taiwan on a business trip, and I saw their organic system for innovation hubs and accelerators and how they connect not just the research and some funding there but also connect with angel investors and the investment network.

I wanted to get your sense from this program. Does that open doors for your ability, then, to tap into other forms of investment in the area to expand your business and your options?

Mr. Marc Gibson: Absolutely. Having that connection from working so closely with the CTI program and knowing the other initiatives that the province of Ontario has with things like the Invest Ontario programs going on, I think there's a natural, organic relationship there for organizations like ours that are spinning out companies to then be directed towards other programs that the province is supporting to help ensure that we are investing in our homegrown companies. I don't know that those linkages are necessarily quite there yet, but I can absolutely see a case for why that should be something that we should be moving towards.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Thank you for that. Just with everything that's going on geopolitically and with tariffs, we've heard some comments about some drain to the south. With what's going on in the world, are we seeing more of a focus on developing our own local Canadian and Ontario knowledge-based sector and investing in that, given the geopolitics of the day?

Mr. Marc Gibson: I would have to say yes. As I mentioned, I've been working with this organization since 2018, and I think we can all agree that the world has changed considerably in those years.

I've had the privilege of speaking with some of the highest-ranking officials in organizations like NORAD and places like that and talking to them about what they're looking for in the next several years in terms of making sure that we are able to monitor things like our Arctic and whatnot.

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

Mr. Marc Gibson: With the technologies that we're developing, when I speak to people in those roles, they're saying, "I would love to see things like that produced in Canada."

That's why organizations like Defence Research and Development Canada in Ottawa—we have a prototype device that we've produced through the ISC program that is in Ottawa, in the Shirleys Bay laboratory right now. We might be one of the few in this pilot program there that actually has a working quantum technology made in Ontario, in Canada's federal lab up in Ottawa, so that when members of the CAF, the Canadian Armed Forces,

come through, they can see what a homegrown product could yield. That creates that pull to then help these technologies get deployed, as I said in my comments, to support our sovereignty.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: As you know—you've been in this space—this government as well is attracting \$46 billion in manufacturing. In foreign investment, we've attracted tens of billions in tech, in that we're actually becoming, sort of, the Silicon Valley of the north.

1210

So do you see these investments dovetailing with the type of investments and loans that the grants program that the government is doing to make sure—

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

We'll now go to MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you to the presenters for coming in and sharing your expertise and your knowledge today.

I have some questions for Richard and Don from the Beef Farmers of Ontario. It's slightly different than what you mentioned, so if it's not your area of expertise, that's fine; just pass.

Given the economic turbulence we're seeing right now—the rise of tariffs across Canada—we are hearing a lot of calls from the agricultural sector to really do more to encourage consumers, businesses and institutions, from schools to municipalities, to buy local. Do you have specific recommendations on what Ontario could do to encourage consumers, businesses and institutions to buy more of your product?

Mr. Richard Horne: Thank you for the question. I think it's a broad response, but it's probably the most effective one, and it resonates most with what's going on currently, but shoring up our supply chain. So investment into things like breeder loans and the Risk Management Program for domestic production to weather market volatility and increase our domestic production across the board. MPP Brady mentioned processing capacity and supports for strengthening small- and medium- and larger-sized processors; things like that. And then on the farm side, we've talked about farm insurance and risk management, breeder loans etc.—all those things go hand in hand with the current trade situation that we find ourselves in.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for that. We've been advocating for stronger Buy Ontario/Build Ontario policies for some time. The government has introduced a new Buy Ontario bill. It's our opinion that that bill needs to include some kind of practical measures to support the agricultural sector, so this is really a good opportunity for that.

The second question I have is to Allan Mills from Extend-A-Family Waterloo Region. Thanks so much for coming here. I just had some clarifying questions. You mentioned that there are many individuals—adult children—who are waiting for that additional support. You mentioned that there are 70 adults who are in crisis out of 900 people who are on the wait-list. Can you describe what

“crisis” means for the adult children and their families? Can you paint a picture for us?

Mr. Allan Mills: Sure, I can try, and those numbers are specific to Waterloo region; obviously much higher if we think provincially.

Those families are at risk of breakdown. There's either been a death of a primary caregiver or a hospitalization of a primary caregiver. The family has broken down and parted ways, but the single parent that's left is not able to fully support the person on their own, or there's been mental health breakdowns within the home—either the person with a developmental or intellectual disability or perhaps one of their caregivers; that kind of thing. People have been at risk of homelessness. It's estimated that about 20% of people in the shelter system are people who have a developmental or intellectual disability, so there's people that are there. We're supporting some people that can't find housing, so they're couch surfing, they're living with friends or they're on the street sometimes, and our capacity to support them is limited to their Passport funding, which is really to help them with daytime activities. We don't have residential capacity for some of those folks at all.

Those are some of the situations that people are in that would be on that short list of 70. Some of them also will be in hospital; some of the folks that have been left in hospital for an extended stay because they simply can't go back home and there's nowhere else for them to go.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for providing that clarity. I think we've heard many times in committee that having someone live in a supportive home or is provided support is certainly a lot cheaper than having someone stay in an ALC bed, a hospital bed—

Mr. Allan Mills: Absolutely.

Ms. Jessica Bell: —a long-term-care-home bed, or being in prison or living in the shelter system, even. So thank you for that.

I had just some clarifying questions around Passport funding. We do get some requests from mainly families who want their adult children to access that Passport funding.

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: Can you just give me some details—how long do people typically have to wait to get access to their Passport funding when they turn 18? Does it come immediately, or is there a wait time there?

Mr. Allan Mills: Within a few months, they should be able to get the minimum amount, which is \$5,500 a year or \$98 a week by my math. But they would also have an assessment completed through the DSO that would indicate a much higher value. It takes them years before they actually get from that placeholder \$5,500 to what it could or should be. And even then, that is, I would suggest, inadequate.

The highest amount is \$45,000. That can't pay—for example, if somebody needed one-to-one support, which most people don't—but if somebody needed that, you can't get that throughout the week to compensate for what used to be their time in school. The family is still on their

own outside of that. The family that I shared a letter from, they have the maximum amount of Passport funding, but they're still struggling—

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

I want to thank all the people on the panel. Thank you very much for the time you took to prepare and to ably present your presentation here today. I'm sure it will be of great assistance to this committee as we move forward in our consultation process.

With that, the committee now is in recess until 1 o'clock.
The committee recessed from 1216 to 1300.

B'NAI BRITH CANADA
GREATER KITCHENER WATERLOO
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
ONTARIO SCHOOL
LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Good afternoon, everyone. We'll now resume our 2026 pre-budget consultation—

Interjections.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): And we will cease the general conversations for a few moments.

Mr. Dave Smith: Sorry.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): As a reminder, each presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation. After we've heard from all three presenters, the remaining 39 minutes of the time slot will be used for questions from the members of committee. This time for 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 members of the committee.

We have the first panel at the table. We will provide a verbal reminder to notify you when you have one minute left for your presentation or allotted speaking time. Please wait until you are recognized by the Chair before speaking. As always, all comments should go through the Chair.

And now we will welcome our first panel: B'nai Brith Canada, Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce and the Ontario School Library Association. I believe we're all at the table. We have the B'nai Brith Canada as the first speaker. With that, you can correct me on the pronunciation. The floor is yours.

Mr. Richard Robertson: Honourable committee members, my name is Richard Robertson. I am B'nai Brith Canada's director of research and advocacy. Our organization is the voice of Canada's grassroots Jewish community. We are dedicated to eradicating racism, anti-Semitism and hatred in all its forms, and to championing the rights of the marginalized.

The 2026 budget consultations are occurring during a national crisis of anti-Semitism. Ontario's Jewish community continues to be subjected to unacceptable and rising levels of anti-Semitism. In our 2024 audit of anti-Semitic incidents, B'nai Brith Canada recorded a 124% increase in anti-Semitism from 2022 to 2024. Jewish Ontarians presently face substantial threats to their security and well-being, and the continued vitality of Jewish life in this province remains in jeopardy as a result.

Confronting the anti-Semitism and hate plaguing our society requires immediate actions from all levels of government. As B'nai Brith Canada stated in our own submissions to the committee and Ontario Ministry of Finance in advance of the 2025 budget, government and opposition parties alike must work together with stakeholders across Ontario to actively confront hate and injustice wherever they arise. With this in mind, B'nai Brith Canada urges the committee to endorse the following recommendations for inclusion in the 2026 provincial budget.

Our first recommendation is that the government of Ontario dedicate funding for the creation and implementation of two new five-year programs to enhance familiarization of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of "anti-Semitism" among secondary and post-secondary students in the province. B'nai Brith Canada is a proponent of the government of Ontario's anti-racism strategy. The strategy is a proactive plan that empowers all of Ontario's marginalized and minority communities and includes the Jewish community's chosen definition of "anti-Semitism," the IHRA definition of "anti-Semitism," a definition that was adopted by the government of Ontario in October 2020. B'nai Brith Canada recommends that the funding be allocated to enable the Minister of Citizenship and Multiculturalism, who is responsible for the anti-racism strategy, to work with the Minister of Education and Minister of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security to create two new programs aimed at increasing secondary and post-secondary students' literacy in relation to the IHRA definition.

The rationale behind the creation of these programs is simple: We cannot expect the next generation of Ontario's leaders to contribute to the fight against anti-Semitism if they do not understand the nuances of what constitutes contemporary anti-Semitism. B'nai Brith Canada has heard from Ontarians, specifically youth and adolescents, that they are unfamiliar with the province's definition of "anti-Semitism." The programs proposed by B'nai Brith Canada would serve as proactive measures to rectify this knowledge gap among secondary and post-secondary students across the province. In doing so they would be empowered with the information needed to become stakeholders in the fight against anti-Semitism.

Our next recommendation is founded on the same principle. It is that government of Ontario invests in a mandatory training program on the IHRA definition of "anti-Semitism" for all provincial public servants. The government of Ontario can demonstrate leadership in the fight against anti-Semitism by equipping provincial public

servants with a comprehensive understanding of the IHRA definition. Implementing such an initiative across the entirety of Ontario's public service would ensure that public servants are able to identify and respond to incidents of anti-Semitism that they encounter in the course of their public service. The government of Ontario's adoption of the IHRA definition marked an important step in the commitment to combatting anti-Semitism. To turn this commitment into tangible action, the government must implement mandatory anti-Semitism training for the provincial public service grounded in the IHRA definition.

Our third recommendation is that the government of Ontario review provincial grant programs to ensure that all provincially funded programming is in alignment with Ontario's anti-racism strategy. Currently there is no guarantee that ensures the recipients of funding for Ontario's grant programs will operate in alignment with the anti-racism strategy. As a result, B'nai Brith Canada recommends that the Minister of Citizenship and Multiculturalism and the Anti-Racism Directorate work to ensure that all projects and organizations that are recipients of provincial grants are aligned with the anti-racism strategy. Such a guarantee could take the form of an attestation to be signed by all funding recipients. Such an attestation has been implemented by the federal Department of Canadian Heritage and could be replicated by provincial granters of funding. Such a guarantee would assure Ontarians that no provincial funding will be allocated to recipients of projects that have the propensity to contribute to the further division or injury of Ontario's social fabric.

Our final recommendation is that the government of Ontario allocates funding to develop a digital literacy program addressing online harms within the K-12 curriculum and to support B'nai Brith Canada's call the creation of a national youth digital literacy program. Simply put, the kids are not all right. Our youth are exposed daily to dangerous content and situations online. Exploitation, sexploitation, indoctrination, explicit content, misinformation, disinformation and extremist content are just some of what children are routinely exposed to on social media and in the digital realm. B'nai Brith Canada has witnessed the increased frequency of anti-Semitic and hate-based incidents and youth radicalization online. A 2024 report published by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police indicated that violent extremists have adopted the Internet as an avenue through which they indoctrinate minors and adolescents to recruit them to participate in their activities.

Ontario's curriculum includes general digital literacy in anti-hate education. While this is commendable, there's no mandatory program designed to protect Ontario's K-12 students from online harms. We must accept that our youth, as digital natives, will be exposed to online harms. It is our societal responsibility to prepare them for such. Presently we have left them to fend for themselves, flying blind through a storm. Thank you.

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

Our next presentation is Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce.

Mr. Ian McLean: Good afternoon and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present to you today, Chair Hardeman and the committee. I see friends—Aislinn and Jess and Lee Fairclough, so it's nice to be here to present today.

I'm Ian McLean, president and CEO of the Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce, but I also bring greetings on behalf of my colleague Greg Durocher who is the president and CEO of the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce. We work closely together on everything from advocacy issues, events and programming and also host the number one business show on 570 NewsRadio at noon on Sundays—you have to say all of that together for it to be factually correct. It's called Business to Business—yes, it has to be all together.

I want to just maybe start here this afternoon: Last week, the Business and Economics Support Team of Waterloo Region—which is the two chambers, Communitech, Waterloo Economic Development Corp. and Explore Waterloo, the five major business organizations released the second in our regular update for the community called Vision 1 Million: Are We Ready? that's recognizing that our community is growing fast. We'll be somewhere between 900,000 and a million people within 20 to 25 years and there is lots of work for us to be doing so that we're ready with the infrastructure, services, programs that we need to be successful as a community of a million people. I encourage you to—I can provide this for you—the score card is available at bestwr.org. It's a full report on all the things that are required for us to be a successful community of a million.

1310

I'd take some liberty and say the number-one budget priority for business, our chamber members, but also, I think, the community more broadly as a whole, is the firm commitment and inclusion of funding for the new Waterloo Regional Health Network facility in the spring budget. It has been 60 years since a new hospital was built here in Waterloo region. Our community is 700,000 or 720,000 now and headed towards a million. We can't create jobs, we can't get investment, we can't secure a thriving community without health care that our citizens should expect and need.

We also need the infrastructure, and so this is the second part of this. As we grow, we'll need somewhere in the order of not only a new hospital, but we need our LRT phase 2 to be funded between the federal government and the provincial government—because we won't be able to build the 50,000, 60,000 new homes for the citizens we'll be moving in here. So for housing and to create the jobs—we're looking at somewhere in the order of 70,000 to 100,000 new jobs that don't exist right now—it rests on the infrastructure here in the community. The government deserves credit, to be fair, for investments like all-day, two-way GO and the improvements that are happening there, and the transit hub announcement that recently came, but we'll need the federal and provincial governments to fund phase 2 of the LRT project, which is foun-

dational to our success as a community and is an engine for the province's economic growth.

I'm going to pivot a little bit.

Chamber members, as you all know, in your communities represent businesses of all sizes and types, but the backbone of chambers and businesses across Ontario are small businesses. When I say "small," this is what it means: I have almost 1,500 members; 90% of them have less than 50 employees. That will be the same in all of your communities. It's small businesses that drive our local economies and the province's economy.

The government's continued focus in making government procurement easier to navigate and accessible for small business is really important. You should not need to know what the secret handshake is or pay a consultant to be able to deliver products and services in the province of Ontario.

The last comment I would make—and it has been in the news; I'm sure you're aware of it—is that there's a water crisis here in Waterloo region. My colleague Greg and I sent a letter to the regional council, and the reason it's important for this committee is, not only do we need to fix it and fix it fast—because investment is frozen now. We're not accepting development applications. So we need to fix it and fix it fast, and it's going to require provincial leadership—provincial leadership to get the facts straight. Everyone can agree on what the facts are and what the solutions are, and the province will need to be part of that. We need to look forward and not back. We're not going to accept finger pointing from anybody, partisan or not. We need to fix this and move forward, and we need to lift the pause. When I talked to my colleague Tony La Mantia from Waterloo Region Economic Development Corp.—there is going to be no investment in new jobs for direct investment or growth in this community until this is solved. So it's not directly here, but I wanted to put it on the table—that the province stepping in and helping this community through this immediately, if not sooner, is going to be essential to the economic growth not only of this region, but the oversized role that this region plays in the provincial economy.

Thank you.

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

We'll now hear from the Ontario School Library Association.

Ms. Anita Brooks Kirkland: Thank you, Mr. Chair and the standing committee, for the opportunity to participate in this consultation. My name is Anita Brooks Kirkland. I am the past chair of the national non-profit organization Canadian School Libraries. Prior to my retirement from the Waterloo Region District School Board, I was its program consultant for K-to-12 libraries. I am a former president of the Ontario Library Association and of its division, the Ontario School Library Association. I am here representing the Ontario School Library Association, or OSLA.

OSLA provides a common voice for school library professionals' needs and interests through advocacy, leadership and continuing education, representing over 1,300

elementary and secondary school teacher-librarians, library technicians and school board consultants. I'm proud to work alongside passionate school librarians and school library staff who make an impact for the millions of students who rely on school libraries every day.

Ontario has made it clear that improving foundational skills in reading, writing and math are central goals. School libraries and teacher librarians are essential partners in achieving these goals. The evidence is consistent and long-standing: When students have access to a well-resourced school library and trained library staff, literacy improves, research skills strengthen and outcomes on assessments like EQAO rise.

Teacher librarians serve as literacy leaders and provide support and expertise to the entire school. They work directly with classroom teachers to achieve literacy and curriculum objectives, helping to build vocabulary, strengthen comprehension and develop the research and critical thinking skills students need to succeed. These skills are not nice to have, they are foundational to STEM learning, data literacy and mathematical reasoning. STEM subjects rely on understanding graphs, tables, data sources and evidence. Teacher librarians explicitly teach how to interpret information, question claims and evaluate sources—skills that support data literacy and mathematical reasoning.

School libraries also play a unique role in fostering reading for pleasure, which, research shows, is one of the strongest predictors of overall academic success, including in math. School libraries are also the one place in the school where students can find what truly interests them, sparking a love of reading. Developing literacy through enjoyable reading prepares students with skills that they will use in school and beyond.

School libraries serve as an inclusive and equitable space for all learners, especially for those who may lack materials and books at home. For those students, the school library is essential. Despite this, Ontario school boards have dramatically reduced school library staffing and resources; some have eliminated school libraries altogether.

The introduction of the core education funding model in 2024 has exacerbated these challenges by removing enveloped funding dedicated for school libraries and library staff, as well as eliminating reporting measures on how school boards are spending funds intended for school libraries, if at all.

This is reflected in ongoing trends, indicating that fewer and fewer Ontario students are meeting the provincial standard in reading and writing. Last year's grade-3 and grade-6 EQAO scores indicated slow progress in improving reading, writing and math scores. This is happening at the very moment when Ontario is trying to strengthen literacy and math outcomes.

The Ontario School Library Association's recommendation today is straightforward and aligned with the government's stated priorities: Restore and enhance protection of provincial funding for school libraries and library staff under the core education funding model, as well as

accountability for school boards about how these funds are used, in recognition of their importance for meeting Ontario's student literacy goals and supporting student achievement.

Three actions the government of Ontario could take to achieve this would include:

- creating a defined suballocation within the funding model for school libraries and staffing consistent with the provincial per student formula;

- fully protect this allocation so it cannot be diverted to unrelated expenses; and

- restoring annual reporting requirements for school boards.

These changes directly support the government's focus on strengthening reading, writing and math skills.

School libraries are not an add-on. They are a core component of student success. When students have access to books, resources and trained literacy staff, achievement improves. When those supports disappear, outcomes decline.

Ontario has an opportunity in budget 2026 to reinforce the foundations of learning, support educators and give students the tools that they need to succeed. Restoring and protecting school library funding is one of the most effective and evidence-based ways to do this.

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

Ms. Anita Brooks Kirkland: Good timing.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to improving student achievement across the province. I would be pleased to answer any questions.

1320

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

We'll start with MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I do appreciate all the comments that were shared today. As a former education worker, I know that those school libraries are such sacred places, if I may say. They're the most beautiful parts of the building, and we need to see them animated, and you can only do that with well-trained staff. So I'll be keeping an eye on that and advocating for that, as well.

I'd like to direct some attention to Ian. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the vision forward when it comes to our water issue. We are seeing so many layers that have led us to this moment in time. We're freezing building permits, which is a tragedy for a region that's growing, and we need to build more housing as soon as possible to meet our targets, to meet the demands of our population and serve our community.

I hear about permits to draw water from the Ministry of the Environment, challenges with how we count new development, having missed pieces here, and I think it speaks to a need for greater coordination. I know you've been part of that, trying to bring together regional elected officials in the chamber. Can you speak to how we can right this in terms of working together across sectors, including the environment and levels of government and the chamber and the home builders, to ensure that the path forward is sustainable and well-informed?

Mr. Ian McLean: Thank you for a simple question. Okay. I'm sure I can answer it in two minutes.

I would say that there has been a lot that has led to this point. Again, trying to do the TikTok on how we got here is not where we want to focus our efforts. I would say that—if I go back, and maybe I'll position this: There is a pipe that comes out of Lake Erie that's in Simcoe or somewhere down there. That was the plan to make sure that we had enough water in Waterloo region, recognizing that we were using groundwater and supplementing from the Grand River—

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

Mr. Ian McLean: Sorry?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Carry on.

Mr. Ian McLean: Oh, sorry.

The history is that we always knew we would need to supplement water supply. Now, we've gotten this far—40 years, we've never had to do it—because of technology: low-flush toilets, faucets, conservation. But now we're where we are, which is that there was some miscalculation of infill—and we're doing a lot of infill.

Again, nothing is going to get built. The hospital isn't getting built. The mega-site so that we can have the next anchor employer, that's not getting built. Homes aren't getting built until we solve this.

My guess is—and I'm not the expert—that the remedial in the short term will be, do we have to drill some new wells? How do we divert water where there's more in Cambridge than in the Mannheim site? The fact of the matter is that we have to get the short term dealt with and then have an honest discussion—

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

We will now go to MPP Smith.

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

I'm going to start with Richard, from B'nai Brith. Do you mind if I call you Richard?

Mr. Richard Robertson: Absolutely.

Mr. Dave Smith: The suggestions that you put in, some of them are much easier to deal with than others. I'm going to jump on one in particular. The request about providing IHRA training to public servants—CUPE represents a large portion of it. Fred Hahn has been very active in his protests that have been described as being anti-Semitic.

How do we navigate that, to provide that level of training to Ontario public servants when you have the head of CUPE who is very vocal in opposition to that type of acceptable training?

Mr. Richard Robertson: It's a great question, and my response to that is that it's still within the realm of the province to determine what training public servants receive. The 2020 adoption of the IHRA definition of "anti-Semitism" positioned the province of Ontario as a leader in the fight against anti-Semitism. What's been sorely missing since then is implementation.

A tone is set when public servants receive training on the IHRA definition. It will hopefully create a domino and trickle-down effect throughout our society. The provincial

government does not control the training of all Ontarians; however, they do have a say in the training of our public servants. The Jewish community has been clear: The IHRA definition of “anti-Semitism” is the Jewish community’s definition of “anti-Semitism.” It is the most comprehensive vehicle. It’s a working definition through which to appreciate contemporary anti-Semitism.

It puts the Jewish community in a difficult position when our public servants aren’t aware of the nuances, as front-line workers interacting with the Jewish community on a regular basis, of contemporary anti-Semitism. So to set a tone to show its commitment to the implementation, it is imperative that from the top down, we see the implementation of the IHRA definition—an easy solution, so it’s well within the government’s purview, is the training of our public servants utilizing the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism.

There might be some in the various unions that don’t like that, but quite frankly, this is the submission of my organization. It’s the submission of the Jewish community. It’s in the best interests of our community. It’s in the best interests of our province. It’s aligned with our anti-racism strategy. I believe that if it’s framed in that manner, there’s enough of a backbone to go ahead with this. To speak negatively of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism is to speak negatively of our anti-racism strategy as a whole. If you don’t support our anti-racism strategy and the commendable efforts of the province of Ontario to fight racism and hatred, I think that speaks volume.

Mr. Dave Smith: I’m in 100% agreement with you on it. I think this is something that should very much be done. I do recognize that any time we try to implement something, especially when we’re talking about a unionized staff, we do have to have negotiations with it.

Let’s face facts: CUPE protested out front of Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto. There is absolutely no defensible position that CUPE could ever take for doing that, and yet they did. So I recognize that we are going to have some significant challenges dealing specifically with Fred Hahn and CUPE on something like this. I welcome the opportunity for B’nai Brith, and the Jewish community in general, to come forward and support us if we’re able to move forward with something like that.

I will turn it over to one of my colleagues.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Babikian. You have 1.43.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Okay. A quick question to B’nai Brith: In 2022, our government allocated \$300,000 to schools to educate parents and students on anti-Semitism—how to combat it online and in the school. From your experience, how effective was that program or that year in fighting anti-Semitism?

Mr. Richard Robinson: Anti-Semitism as part of the curriculum, specifically focusing on the Holocaust, has had a tremendous impact. We saw—

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

Mr. Richard Robinson: We saw numbers that were absolutely horrifying in terms of misinformation, dis-

information about the Holocaust, within our youth. That is necessary education, but sadly, it’s not enough.

We need the education to go beyond the historic realm of anti-Semitism—teaching about the Holocaust, learning from the past—to focus on contemporary anti-Semitism as well, because as I said in my submission, we hear from Canadians across the province: They do not understand what constitutes contemporary anti-Semitism. We’re setting ourselves up for failure if we don’t invest in literacy amongst our youth, our next generation of Canadians, on contemporary anti-Semitism, as defined by the province.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Thank you.

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you to all the presenters for coming in today and sharing your expertise and your knowledge.

My first questions are to Ian McLean, the Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce president. Thank you so much for being here. One question I had was around your mention about making government procurement easier to access for small business, so that they can get those government contracts. My colleague MPP Fife introduced a bill to make it easier for small and medium-sized businesses to get those contracts, and we also have this really good opportunity where the government has introduced a “Buy Ontario” bill, and they’re writing regulations now.

What I do not see in the regulations just yet is specific measures on how to get those small- and medium-sized businesses those contracts they need to thrive in this climate. Do you have regulations or recommendations that you think should be included in the government’s new “Buy Ontario” bill which would help your members, especially the smaller ones?

Mr. Ian McLean: I didn’t come prepared with a specific one, but I would say I’ve been president of the chamber of commerce for 16 years—I know, I look far too young, but it has been 16 years. Minister Milloy started with how we could do red tape reduction in those early days. Everyone struggled with this, and part of it is when you go to procurement, it always naturally defaults to lowest cost. I would say, I was a city councillor; obviously that’s one of the things that needs to be there.

The other, however: If you’re going to have “Buy Local” and “Buy Ontario,” there needs to be—and this is what needs to be worked on. How do you let that small business who can provide the service well enough, can partner with others, can do the work, but they won’t be able to compete with huge, global or large multinationals that can get their costs down because they’ve got economies of scale—so you’ve got to pick what you’re going to do. If you’re going to support the small business community and say it’s important for small businesses in every part of the province to be able to be part of the procurement process, I think one of the places to start is to say, “Lowest cost isn’t always the best option.” I’m not advocating to be way out of whack, but lowest cost always is the default.

1330

We saw this, frankly, during COVID. We saw this during COVID, where we got what we needed, and as soon as things got back to—and I'm talking about masks and gowns and all those sorts of things, and I was in the middle of that here, providing 2.5 million screening kits to chamber members across the province. As soon as the markets came back, the procurement went back to large companies. That's a problem, because it doesn't support the action of helping small businesses.

We see this in the tech community too—my friends at Communitech. The best thing you can do to get a business, a start-up that has new technology is that first contract with the government is the best calling card they have. They will say, "I sold to the Ontario government," and that's where they can get more investment for their company and start to scale.

So I'm not sure exactly what it looks like but I think there has to be something in there that says—if you want to get at small businesses, that's one part that needs to be reviewed in detail, that allows both bureaucrats and ministers or others that are making those procurement decisions—give them more flexibility to say, "We want to support our local businesses in every community across the province of Ontario."

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thanks for that.

Anita Brooks Kirkland, from the Ontario School Library Association: I have kids in the public school system in the TDSB. I follow pretty closely what's happening to the libraries in local schools. Often the librarian is taken out to teach. Libraries aren't open for most of the day. There's a whole lot more going on there.

Can you help me understand here: If we wanted to get to a situation where libraries play that critical role that they're supposed to play in schools, what would that cost? Is there an estimate on how much that would cost?

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

Ms. Anita Brooks Kirkland: Well, the position of the Ontario Library Association and the Ontario School Library Association has been, consistently over the past few years, that if schools and school boards spent what was allocated to school libraries—if they spent the full amount in the provincial funding formula—we would be much further ahead. Arguably, we would require more, but the reality is that, though the amount of funding is defined—and I have the actual figures here—leeway is given to school districts to reallocate funding as they see needed.

A couple of years ago, the provincial government did institute a reporting structure, after working with OLA, for school boards that were significantly underspending on library on their allocation. And the results came in for the one year that that reporting happened—this is self-reporting by school districts—

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

MPP Fairclough.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you to all of our speakers today. It's been great to hear from all of you.

I will say, as somebody who used to work in this community at the hospital, it was great to hear that the WRHN, the new name for the hospital project here, is still a high priority for the community. I think one of the things that always impressed me in this community is that there was this recognition that health and access to health care are linked specifically to economic prosperity. So it's amazing to hear you say that again.

I would also say that the data supports the movement on that hospital overwhelmingly. Of all the communities across Ontario, it's the one to move on.

So I wondered if you could just make a couple of comments on where that is at and the progress that we're seeing. It's been good to see the government support it, but we can't see it stall. And I am quite worried about your comment that if the water problem is not solved, it won't progress. That's a very significant issue for this community.

Mr. Ian McLean: I don't want to overstate that, but I mean, when you've got a development pause—everything has to go through the development process, from housing to new development. So let me say, and I want to put a fine point on this, the new hospital and the funding for this new hospital is the highest priority for this community, for everybody.

Much in the way—some of you will remember when we started the push for all-day, two-way GO, we made it so that you couldn't come to this community without saying, "Everyone's on board." The post-secondary, public sector, private sector: Everyone was on board with saying, "We have to have connection to Toronto," and all-day, two-way GO is the thing that we talked about. The hospital is now that priority. We congratulate—and things will evolve with all-day, two-way GO.

The new hospital is foundational for a number of reasons. Ron and the team at Waterloo Regional Health Network have been plowing ahead. They're ready to execute if the funding is in the budget. That is what we're going to be—our chambers are looking to hear those words in the budget in the spring. That's what we now need. I would say it's foundational. If we can't get investment—we'll get through the water issue, but we're not going to get large foreign direct investment here if we don't have the health care that people need and we don't have the housing that they need.

Health care is one of those things—you can't get to the next bucket of saying, "Do we want to invest here in Waterloo region?" They're going to say, "Do you have housing? What's your education like? Do you have the health care that our employees would need?" You don't get to, "Is this the right place? Do you have the right site? How close is it to"—you don't get to those parts until you get the foundational part. The hospital is the highest priority for this community, and I can say that with some surety. For the business community, that is our highest priority. There are lots of priorities, but that is the highest priority.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: That's great. As I say, I've always been so impressed by this community, how you come together that way.

I was glad my colleague asked the question about the small businesses and the procurement. A quick comment to just share that before we broke for the holiday break from the Legislature, we had a lot of debate on this bill and how important it was going to be to make sure that we—it may mean that we pay a little bit more for certain goods as we procure them as governments, but it's the right time to do that. Those examples you gave before of businesses starting up and then shutting down quickly because it was always a race to the lowest cost, I think were really critical.

In terms of our colleagues that are here from the libraries as well, first of all, thank you for taking me back to the days of wandering around the library at my own school as a kid. It is a place where your curiosity is allowed to let loose and discover new things. I'm concerned more generally about where we're heading with the schools, the budget restrictions for schools and the impacts for kids. Here you've got an example of the impacts to libraries. Can you talk a little bit more about what you're seeing in our schools at the moment, given the funding pressures and cuts that we're seeing?

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

Ms. Anita Brooks Kirkland: I'll refer back to MPP Bell's comments about reductions in the Toronto District School Board, for example—which is one of the school districts that has most strongly supported the role of the school library, I might add. For a long time, the Toronto District School Board recommended that every elementary school have at least a 0.5 teacher-librarian assigned to the library and that that allocation increase based on the ratios and the funding formula. For a very large school, that might mean that there were two full-time teacher-librarians.

A couple of years ago, the TDSB, after getting through the pandemic and assuring us the staffing would not be affected, then cut that staffing to 0.5 for every elementary school. Whether that school had 400 students or 2,000 students—

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

MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you to Richard and Anita for your passionate presentations.

Anita, I grew up in my community library and then I moved on to my public school library and then my high school library. That love of reading and the curiosity that it fosters is part of who I am today, and I'm saddened that we are not utilizing our libraries to their fullest.

1340

I am going to turn though to Ian, and I'm going to give you a lot to chew on here because I'm curious. I represent a rural area where accelerated growth is not popular, but here we are—we're in a region that is growing rapidly. You are eager to meet housing targets, but you have a water infrastructure issue, which is significant. But it's not unique because as we travel the province and we talk to other municipalities, those infrastructure issues are rampant everywhere. So I'm not convinced that growth is the path to prosperity. As property owners, we don't put in

a pool if we can't afford to make investments into home heating and things that support the functioning of the home.

In the end, you said we have to get the short-term problems fixed, but you have to look at the long-term discussion. I'm wondering what that looks like, and I'm also wondering at what point does growth become a liability rather than an asset for a region like Waterloo?

Mr. Ian McLean: I'll start with that. The Places to Grow Act dates back 20 years. We made a decision as a province. I don't even who started that—maybe McGuinty—but it's been through several versions of government. Places to Grow was put in place. This region bought into it and the province put it in place.

If we're going to unwind and say we're not going to grow because we have what I would characterize as—there are solutions to the water shortage that we have, and we need to address those, but we've planned this community.

We're 720,000 people. Whether we get to a million people—because it's not our vision. I want to be perfectly clear: This is not businesses' vision, to be a million people. This is what the community and the province decided.

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

Mr. Ian McLean: We're saying, if we're going to get there, we have to make investments, whether it's in water, whether it's in health, whether it's in roads, whether it's in other infrastructure like transit.

I'm not prepared to entertain that discussion. I know some around here want to have that and say, "Well, let's just stop growing." Okay—let's go and do the economic impact of what that means. I take your point that we have to come with a solution of what it looks like to fix the water crisis that we have. But stopping growth has got its own implications for this community in a whole range of ways.

I think we have to deal with the short-term solution and say, "We can grow responsibly. We can be a successful community of a million people and be the economic engine that this province needs to pay for the social programs we want to have."

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: But the investments have to come—

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

MPP Dixon.

Ms. Jess Dixon: I'll start with you, Ian. On the hospital issue, one of the things that I had spoken about with Ron when we were first talking about applying for the planning grants and so on was—I had said, to be blunt, "Many people in Ontario want a new hospital." In their initial pitch for the hospital, they were focusing mostly on need, and I was like, "But need can be demonstrated in many places." There are very few communities that would turn down a new hospital.

What I had suggested was to take some of that focus and instead look at where the hospital fit as far as Ontario was concerned, with this idea of leveraging the fact that we have so many universities—we have Waterloo; we

have such a tech centre—but we also have a huge med-tech centre here in Waterloo region.

I wonder if you can talk a little bit more, from the perspective of the chamber, about this idea of the hospital not just being a service provider of health but being an economic driver in this region—again, not even just of jobs, but how it benefits Ontario as whole?

Mr. Ian McLean: That's a great, great point. I've been impressed with how the hospital, and, of course, the Waterloo Regional Health Network, is working in co-operation with the Cambridge Memorial Hospital and saying, "How do we have a more effective health system?" Effectively, the two hospitals are one health system.

I think one of the things, as they're going through the planning, is to recognize that we do have an innovation cluster here. You referenced med-tech; we've got a cluster that's specifically on that. They're working with our post-secondaries—whether it's U of W, whether it's Conestoga—to make sure that innovation is being driven into this whole idea of what the new hospital looks like.

I agree with you that it's not just the service. I think we can do this differently. We have some tools here as we do this build—which, frankly, is overdue. I think it can be something that can be put into the planning process so that other communities can benefit from as well, because I agree; innovation is the cornerstone of what they're talking about in terms of the specifics of what the build looks like. They've been going through all that. And we do have, again, the tech cluster here, the med tech space and our post-secondaries that are already working with the hospital on how to do those things more efficiently, more effectively and deliver better patient care.

Ms. Jess Dixon: Thank you.

May I continue?

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

Ms. Jess Dixon: Thank you—on to you, Anita: You've talked about how the funding formula does include money for school libraries but that one of the challenges is—and then you've said of course no one would ever turn down additional funding but that if some of that allocated funding was being spent you would be in less difficulties, but boards ultimately have the discretion.

Given the fact that reading comprehension is central to literacy and also to math outcomes—the reading comprehension, understanding, problem solving, that type of thing—from your perspective, does it make sense for the boards to continue to have that type of discretion over how that funding is allocated given that those core responsibilities of literacy and mathematical competency are provincial responsibilities?

Ms. Anita Brooks Kirkland: Recognizing that boards are under strain on budget—and we all know that, but in our recommendation is to protect the allocation to the school library because no matter how you perceive it, when it comes to thinking about literacy, thinking tends to go towards classroom instruction. Libraries are often perceived as an add-on and so on. But the research really demonstrates that engagement in reading is one of the key

ways to increase student literacy and across the curriculum.

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

Ms. Anita Brooks Kirkland: So really what our ask is: that the money that is allocated to school boards for school libraries be used for school libraries, and boards should be required to use it as it is allocated. It's a simple ask and shows that libraries are part of the core of instruction.

Ms. Jess Dixon: Thank you, and I appreciate all of the work that you do. Like many of us, I also have fond memories of my school library and of being a book nerd for many years—and still counting.

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

Twenty-seven—MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I'm going to continue with Anita from the Ontario School Library Association. I was a school board trustee for 13 years before I was elected and also a strong supporter of teacher librarians and school librarians in the public education system. In my board, Thames Valley, there had been a big discussion about moving from teacher librarians to library techs, because it would reduce payroll costs, because they're cheaper than teacher librarians, but we wanted to maintain that critical role. I appreciated your comments about the importance of teacher librarians in school libraries.

I'm sure that you are very well aware that our education system is stretched to the bone. There has been—I think it's between \$1,200 per student or \$1,500 per student—funding less now than when this government came into office. I understand why school boards are making these difficult decisions about maintaining the contingent of teacher librarians or keeping their school librarians open, because they have so many other pressing priorities, students with special needs who need those resources.

So I understand your recommendation that the funding that's allocated for school libraries be spent on school libraries and teacher librarians, but would you also support an overall increase in the education spending so that school boards aren't put into this very difficult rock-and-a-hard-place about where to cut in order to meet the funding shortfalls that they are facing because of the under-funding by the government?

1350

Ms. Anita Brooks Kirkland: Well, I can't argue with you there. Of course, I would like to see education funding increase. We will hear from some representatives that there has not really been a decrease, but when it's factored into inflation, we know that there has been substantial reduction in funding to school boards. And school boards are making very difficult decisions. There's no doubt about that. I see that in my own backyard, with the Waterloo Region District School Board. I have been tracking the reductions to school libraries over many years, and to me, it's in close to a crisis situation right now. However, I worked in that board; I know the goodwill of the people there, and I know that the director of education is very supportive of the mission of school libraries and under-

stands their importance. So, yes, school boards are caught in the middle.

We would like the government, the Ministry of Education and school boards to understand, though, that school libraries are the core of education; they're not an add-on. All of the competencies that students need today for critical thinking, discerning information, anti-racism—all of those things are incorporated into the way that the school libraries support students and teachers.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you very much for that response.

I want to turn to Ian from the Kitchener-Waterloo chamber of commerce and say thank you for coming and bringing a business perspective to this process and not talking about red tape. I think we heard you mention red tape in terms of access to government procurement for small businesses. But you didn't talk about red tape as the biggest barrier to economic development. You talked about health care. You talked about transit. I heard you, in your response, talk about housing.

I wonder if you could elaborate a bit more about why health care infrastructure, community infrastructure are so critical for small businesses to thrive, not just in Waterloo region, but across the province.

Mr. Ian McLean: I'm going to disappoint you and say that red tape is a big problem for small business, so we could always do more—and whether it's on procurement. So I will say that you're not going to get me to say that that's not something that every level of government should be pursuing.

When we started what was called the business economics part 2 of Waterloo region, during COVID, we met the five organizations—two chambers, Communitech, Waterloo EDC, and Explore Waterloo—and a lot of our conversations were about where the gaps were in the system, whether it was on talent, whether it was on infrastructure. And we saw where those gaps were. That was five, six years ago now. There was not a plan that we could see, to say, "How are we going to grow responsibly?"

So I would say health care is essential. We know, when we have site selectors come here from around the world, they're asking about the major pieces. They're talking about infrastructure. They're talking about education. They're talking about housing, health care. They won't come and invest until they know those things are done. Then, they'll come and say, "What's your low-cost jurisdiction; talent?" So it is part of it. It's foundational. It's like we have to have the 401 to get goods to markets. Well, that's infrastructure. We have to have health care that drives people wanting to live in the community, so we have the talent that we need. These things are not linear, and they're not separate. They're integrated. The small business community needs less red tape. They need talent that can deliver, so they can grow their businesses as well. But the foundation needs to be there. That's why we've said our major things are hospital, LRT, housing, and jobs. Those are the four pieces. And there's lots that needs to be done for—

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

MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you, Chair. Through you: Thank you for your presentations today.

Richard, I appreciate you coming forward and raising the issue of anti-Semitism. It is a very serious and real problem and scourge, I would say, in our province.

From your perspective, how would you envision those programs looking like in schools?

Mr. Richard Robertson: We've heard it today—a lot about what is required to build healthy, strong communities across Ontario. I would submit to this committee that having communities that are free from racism and hatred is a baseline that we need to achieve in society to have communities that continue to thrive. The way that we can do that is by implementing some of these programs.

We have an anti-racism strategy; it contains the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism. Yet, as a stakeholder on behalf of the Jewish community, we routinely hear that individuals, specifically youth and adolescents, are not aware of this definition. They're not aware of the nuances of what constitutes anti-Semitism. That is what the IHRA definition is designed to do. It's designed to inform about contemporary anti-Semitism and its manifestations within society. So, we need to get that knowledge; we need to fill that knowledge gap. We need to get that to our kids, whether it's through curriculum, whether it's through a province-wide programming that makes that information more accessible, whether it's through starting with our public service.

There are tangible ways that we can begin a whole-of-province implementation and rollout to fill that knowledge gap, starting with our youth, starting with our adolescents—working with universities through the MCU. There are lots of ways we can do this, but the point is that since 2020, not enough has been done. We filled the gap on Holocaust education; that's been fantastic. We're seeing the results of that. Now, we're left with a national crisis of contemporary anti-Semitism. If we simply don't address that, if we simply don't try to develop this programming—getting it to those who need it most—then we will not achieve our goal of fighting racism and hatred in this province.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you very much for that. I know part of your presentation—it doesn't touch on other aspects today, and frankly, I think it would be best if we could just eliminate anti-Semitism from the start, without having to think of security, the policing and other elements to it. Is there anything else that you'd like to add on this today?

Mr. Richard Robertson: Yes, absolutely. We've seen increases in the security grants. We've seen increases in funding and in programming to tackle the repercussions of anti-Semitism, but those are necessarily, by their own design, band-aid solutions. They're responding to the issue.

We need to get at the heart of racism; we need to get at the heart of hatred, and one of the forms of racism and

hatred that is exacerbating itself right now in our society is anti-Semitism. We've got to get at the roots, and that starts by getting the information about what that even is to those who need it.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you very much.

Anita, I really appreciated your presentation today. Some of my best memories in school were in the school library. And I was formerly on the senior team of a public school board, so I definitely recognize the important work that school librarians play.

What role do think school librarians can play as we are now dealing with things like AI, with new technology? Can you maybe explain a little bit more about how important that role of a school librarian is in those areas?

Ms. Anita Brooks Kirkland: Oh wow, that's a big one. It is a core part of school library instruction from teacher librarians, which is integrated with what the classroom instruction needs are across the curriculum. It's information literacy. Information literacy has evolved. You know, it used to be making sure you knew who wrote the information by using the aspects of the book. Over the years, it has become media literacy and very, very sophisticated. And of course, AI is the next frontier.

Already, this has been a professional focus, a professional learning, with teacher librarians at the major conference that I attended last year. I attended several presentations by teacher librarians on teaching about all of this, and helping kids to recognize the information and make critical assessments. And of course, it's getting more and more difficult.

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

Ms. Anita Brooks Kirkland: Of course, it's the reality, and so the approach is not "Stop doing that." It's to become literate about it, know how to recognize it, know when to use it appropriately, know how to help teachers assess student work based on the use of AI, and so on.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you.

Just very quickly, Ian, I appreciate the—

Interjection.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I know, right? I've only got five minutes.

Mr. Ian McLean: He's going to cut me off.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I know, he will.

I appreciate the presentation, and I think well noted on all of the points: phase 2 of the LRT—important—down to Cambridge; housing, in order to fuel, frankly, the growth that's taking place in tech and innovation and AI in this region.

Something I didn't hear today, but I think I had heard it when we met with the mayor of Waterloo, is that they are reserving energy capacity as well for the hospital, so just the need for much more resources around water, around energy, in order to fuel what I really do think is the amazing potential of the Kitchener-Waterloo region.

I guess this is maybe not as much of a question, but I think it's something that the provincial government needs to be really well taken care of—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Well, there's not going to be time for an answer to it, because your time is—

Mr. Ian McLean: Go to BestWR.org. It's all in there.

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

1400

I want to thank all the panellists for their time to prepare and the time to come here and talk to us. I'm sure it'll be of great assistance as we move forward in our public consultations, so thank you very much for being here.

CORNERSTONE ASSOCIATION

OF REALTORS

ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL

BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

COMMUNITY LIVING TORONTO

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Now, we move onto the next panel. The next panel consists of the Cornerstone Association of Realtors, the OPSBA and Community Living Toronto.

As they're coming forward, we will point out again that you have seven minutes to make your presentation. At six minutes, I will say, "One minute." Don't stop; you have one more minute, but at seven minutes, you will not have another minute. With that, we do ask each person to start the presentation by giving us your name so we can attribute it to the right presentation in Hansard.

With that, we will start with the Cornerstone Association of Realtors.

Ms. Andrea Fedy: Andrea Fedy, with the Cornerstone Association of Realtors.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): The floor is yours—seven minutes.

Ms. Andrea Fedy: Thank you.

Good afternoon. Thank you to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs for the opportunity to participate in today's 2026 pre-budget consultation. My name is Andrea Fedy. I'm a local realtor and I'm here on behalf of the Cornerstone Association of Realtors as a member of the association's board of directors and provincial and federal advocacy committee.

Cornerstone has nearly 8,000 members and is Ontario's second-largest realtor association. We support real estate professionals in Waterloo region, Mississauga, Burlington, Hamilton, Niagara north, Haldimand county, Norfolk county and surrounding areas.

Realtors are champions of the Canadian dream of home ownership. Helping people find stability, build a future and open the door to place they can truly call home is a core of what we do. Our members are on the front lines of Ontario's housing market. Everyday, they guide families through the biggest financial decision of their lives, work closely with builders and contractors, and see first-hand the pressures facing buyers, sellers and renters. This experience gives realtors first-hand knowledge of the barriers

people face in today's housing market and how provincial policies can make a real difference.

We are presenting three key requests for the 2026 budget, each aimed at strengthening Ontario's housing market and supporting the communities we serve. Our first request is to protect our members' livelihoods following the iPro Realty scandal, which left many realtors unpaid for work they had already completed in good faith, helping connect Canadians with a great place to call home.

Realtors do not receive salaries or paycheques. They are independent professionals who are only paid when a transaction closes. When iPro collapsed, commissions that had been fully earned through completed sales were frozen or lost, not because of any failure by any realtors, but because of a failure of regulatory oversight.

We are encouraged by the recent steps taken by Premier Ford, Minister Crawford and the administrator of the regulator, RECO, to accelerate insurance coverage that may provide recovery of up to 50%. We urge the government to move quickly on the Premier's commitment to ensure full recovery of the missing funds. This issue affects real people. Some realtors are out tens of thousands of dollars and are now taking on significant debt just to pay for essentials like their utility bills, their children's tuition and property taxes.

This is the bottom line: The regulator failed to do its job, and homebuyers, sellers and realtors paid the price. We are pleased to see that consumers are being made whole. In the same spirit, realtors must be made whole as well, and quickly.

Our second request is to bring the dream of home ownership back within reach for hard-working Canadians. We are advocating for the removal of the 8% provincial portion of the HST for all homebuyers and for provincial support to help offset municipal development charges.

These affordability measures would help families move to their next home and create the next generation of homeowners by making more starter homes available and increasing the overall housing supply. By helping young people put down roots and build equity, you are making a direct investment in Ontario's economic future. The extra costs, including HST and DCs, are making homes less affordable by adding 25% or more to the cost of a home. This makes it nearly impossible for young families to buy new homes, prevents new construction, eliminates job opportunities and pushes prices higher for existing homes.

Finally, Waterloo region is a strong, growing community. It is a great place to live and thrive. Continued provincial investment in the new hospital, the Cambridge LRT and water capacity infrastructure is needed to sustain this success and open the door to new families. These projects support planned density, economic growth and long-term competitiveness. To achieve this, the province must continue investing in key infrastructure programs. For example, programs such as the Housing-Enabling Water Systems Fund and the Building Faster Fund should be strengthened and sustained in budget 2026 so municipalities can meet housing targets and sustain the region's growth.

Cornerstone is committed to working collaboratively with the government of Ontario, municipalities across southern Ontario and industry stakeholders to support the real estate and housing sectors while upholding the highest standards of professional services to consumers. Thank you for your time today. We appreciate the government's focus on fixing RECO, affordable home ownership and strong communities. We look forward to continuing to work with the province on attainable housing and keeping the dream of home ownership alive in Ontario.

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

We will now hear from OPSBA.

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: Good afternoon. I'm Kathleen Woodcock, the president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, also known as OPSBA. I am also a trustee with the Waterloo Region District School Board for the last 20 years, so it's particularly nice to join you here today in Kitchener, which is part of our jurisdiction.

It's an honour to speak to you today on behalf of OPSBA, whose member school boards represent nearly 1.4 million students, almost 70% of Ontario's kindergarten to grade 12 student population. Our membership includes all 31 English public school boards and 10 school authorities. Our priorities are student success, equity and well-being; local school board governance; truth and reconciliation; effective relationships; and sustainable resourcing. I wanted to share our priorities because, even in these somewhat strange and uncertain times in the education sector, school boards and trustees remain focused on serving the students and the families in our communities.

Now, we're typically consulted separately for our input and recommendations for education, but that didn't occur this year. This is unfortunate, because this annual consultation has occurred as far back as I can remember. It has always been an opportunity for education experts and those connected to the sector to provide evidence-based data and lived experiences to how education funding can be improved. It's a good thing that these public consultations are still being conducted so that people across the province have the opportunity to give their input and perspectives. OPSBA will be submitting a formal written submission with more details but, for today, I'd like to highlight some of the most acute funding challenges affecting the public education sector.

We also shared many of these items at our November Queen's Park advocacy day, at which we met with MPPs from all parties to talk about the pressures all boards are feeling. There are many folks here today around the table who we met with at that time. These discussions are important, as education continues to be the second-largest funding line in Ontario's budget. While the overall funding for education has increased, funding for K-to-12 education on a per-pupil basis has not kept pace with inflation. School boards rely almost solely on the provincial government for funding. When that funding does not keep pace with inflation, the impact is felt directly in the classroom.

One specific issue felt everywhere is the unfunded federal increases to the Canada Pension Plan and employment insurance statutory contributions. Boards are paying out of pocket for these increases, without the needed additional supports from the province, and that just isn't right. We will continue to advocate for a solution to this at both the provincial and federal levels until it's resolved.

1410

Other province-wide funding challenges are:

Special education: There continues to be a lack of funding and adequate resources to effectively support special education needs, given the increased demands.

Student transportation: Many boards overspend their transportation budgets to meet their own unique, local needs.

School facilities and capital: Boards need the flexibility to manage their buildings and properties so that they remain safe, accessible and continue to meet required municipal and environmental standards, all this while facing increasing costs of materials and dealing with various approvals.

Cyber security: Many boards across the province have had to deal with incidents and these risks continue to grow as artificial intelligence capabilities evolve. Boards need specific funding to deal with this and to mitigate the risk.

Finally, as president of OPSBA, I need to emphasize the importance of supporting local school board trustees as partners in Ontario's education system. As someone elected to be the bridge between my community and our public education system, I believe these local voices matter. Trustees across Ontario know our communities, our schools, our families and our students. We are committed to improving our education system.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

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

We now will go to Community Living Toronto.

Mr. Jonathan Bradshaw: Thank you, Mr. Chair. My name is Jonathan Bradshaw and I'm the director of advocacy and strategic partnerships at Community Living Toronto. Thank you to members of this committee for having us here with you today.

I know many members have at least one developmental services agency in your communities, and Community Living Toronto is one of Ontario's largest. We support children, youth and adults with developmental disabilities across the city of Toronto through housing, community-based supports and other programs. We operate more than 50 sites, manage over 200 leases and support approximately 4,000 people and their families. Our work is delivered by 1,200 dedicated staff who support some of Ontario's most marginalized residents.

As Canadians, one thing that truly speaks to who we are as a nation is our willingness to care for one another, regardless of race, religion, ability or circumstance. Organizations like ours are the front lines of delivering those essential services. We're entrusted with public dollars and

we use them very carefully and responsibly to improve the lives of numerous people. We recognize that governments today are navigating many competing priorities in a complex and even more uncertain global environment. At the same time, we want to urge decision-makers to be cautious not to erode the foundational values that define us as a society and a shared commitment to supporting everyday people facing real, ongoing and lifelong challenges.

In the developmental services sector, we're often told that now is not our time for additional investment. We've adapted, we've stretched resources and we've found ways to do more with less, and we take great pride in that resilience. But it becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile those messages with the pace at which significant funding can be mobilized elsewhere when it's deemed urgent. This raises important questions about priorities and about ensuring that people with developmental disabilities are not left behind when choices are made.

I want to be very clear: We're grateful for the government of Ontario's recent investments in the developmental services sector, especially in the 2024 budget. Those investments were meaningful and they were necessary. However, decades of underfunding have led to serious financial pressures and structural challenges that continue to threaten the stability of community-based supports. If these pressures are not properly addressed, people with developmental disabilities face increased risks of inappropriate placements in hospitals, shelters and long-term care—outcomes that are worse for individuals and significantly more costly for government.

Today, I'm going to focus on our three main priority recommendations: predictable and sustained agency funding, ending the services wait-lists and addressing the developmental services housing crisis.

First, predictable and sustained agency funding: More and more people are entering the system with increasingly complex needs, whilst agencies are facing rising staffing costs driven by collective bargaining, inflation and an ongoing labour shortage. Agencies across the province are struggling to recruit and retain staff because wages cannot compete with other public sector and private sector roles. At Community Living Toronto, we have taken difficult steps to manage these pressures, including pausing non-essential hiring, holding vacancies and deferring salary increases for non-unionized staff. These measures have helped some in the short term, but they are not sustainable. Without predictable multi-year funding, agencies risk staff burnout, service disruptions and a reduced quality of care. These impacts are felt, and most deeply, by the people with developmental disabilities and their families.

Our recommendation is straightforward: We're requesting a minimum of a six-year commitment of annual increases of 2% to 3% to operational funding for the sector. This would allow agencies to manage staffing pressures, plan responsibly and ensure people continue to receive safe, high-quality supports in their communities.

Second, ending the service wait-lists: In 2014, a government-appointed all-party committee, the Select Com-

mittee on Developmental Services, recommended that eliminating service wait-lists should be a top priority. Since then, the situation has only worsened. Today, more than 53,000 Ontarians remain on wait-lists for developmental services and supportive housing. As a result, people with developmental disabilities are diverted into other systems that cannot meet their needs.

Across Ontario, approximately 2,500 people with developmental disabilities, most under the age of 65, are living in long-term-care homes. In the greater Toronto area alone, it is estimated that one in five emergency shelter users has a developmental disability.

People with developmental disabilities are also far more likely to remain in hospital and it's often for prolonged periods. These stays are not only harmful to individuals, leading to regression, loss of life and deteriorating health; they are also significantly more expensive than community-based supports. The 2025 Ombudsman's report *Lost in Transition* made clear that long hospital stays for people with developmental disabilities are causing real harm and worsening long-term-care outcomes.

We're urging the government of Ontario to develop a comprehensive wait-list reduction strategy, preferably led by a developmental services agency, with meaningful involvement from people with lived experience, families and service providers. This is not only a policy issue but a matter of human rights, equity and system accountability.

Third, addressing the developmental services housing crisis: Ontario is facing an acute shortage of housing for people with developmental disabilities. Wait times are now significantly longer than those for general affordable housing, leaving families with few realistic options.

Community Living Toronto has projects that are ready to move forward. The Lawson redevelopment, for example, is a major mixed-use redevelopment being advanced in partnership with Tridel. It would deliver modern inclusive housing alongside community spaces and services. The project is shovel-ready but requires additional provincial support to proceed.

At the same time, agencies are struggling to maintain their existing housing. Property, facilities and repairs—or PFR—funding has declined sharply in recent years. Last year, Community Living Toronto requested approximately \$900,000 for essential repairs and received no allocation. As a result, we were forced to reduce our repair and maintenance budget, limiting work for critical issues only.

We recommend two actions: establishing a dedicated ministry-led housing stream specifically for people with developmental disabilities to move projects from planning to construction, and stabilizing predictable funding for essential repairs and maintenance so agencies can maintain existing homes as safe and accessible and plan responsibly over the long term.

In closing, the developmental services sector stands at a critical crossroads. At a time when global attention is rightly drawn to major geopolitical, economic and other major crises, it is all too easy for the daily realities of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families to be overlooked, yet these needs are no less urgent.

Investment in developmental services should not be seen as a secondary to broader societal challenges. Even amid competing global priorities, we must not allow those who are waiting for essential supports to be pushed further to the margins. Without timely, predictable investment, people with developmental disabilities will continue to face long wait-lists, housing instability and inappropriate placements—outcomes that erode dignity, inclusion and long-term system sustainability.

I would like to thank all members of the committee for your time and consideration. Community Living Toronto stands ready to work in partnership with the government to translate these recommendations—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I thank you very much for the presentation. It was so riveting; I apologize for not giving you a one-minute notice. That does conclude the presentations.

We will now start with the first round of questioning with MPP Babikian.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Thank you to all our three presenters.

My question is to OPSBA. To support student success, the government is investing \$30 billion over the next 10 years, including close to \$23 billion in capital grants to build new schools, add child care spaces and modernize school infrastructure. This includes \$2 billion for the current school year to support the repair and renewal needs of schools. Are you supportive of these investments from the government and where do you envision the largest impact?

1420

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: Of course, we appreciate any funding that we receive regarding capital, our facilities etc. We have found that with the moratorium on the pupil accommodation review process, boards have not been able to, I'll say, right-size their fleet of schools because we can't close—or if a school is not completely full but there's a school near it that is overflowing, we can't go through the pupil accommodation review process to maybe amalgamate those schools or build a new school that would accommodate all of those students. It's expensive for boards to keep lights on, heat on in half-filled schools.

We appreciate, again, the funding that does come for capital projects, and we have lots on the go right now and it's appreciated. But if the pupil accommodation review process could be revisited and some new guidelines be inserted, then we would be able to move forward in a more productive way.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Thank you.

I will pass my time to my colleague.

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

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

I'm going to jump over to Cornerstone realtors for just a moment. My first question is around the iPro Realty challenge. Are you hearing from potential homebuyers that they have lost faith in realtors or in the whole industry as a result of that? Or has it just been a blip that's more on

the agent side and the government side that is more concerned about it?

Ms. Andrea Fedy: I would say it's more on the agent side and government regulatory side more than the homeowners on—

Mr. Dave Smith: The consumer side?

Ms. Andrea Fedy: Yes.

Mr. Dave Smith: With that in mind, then, it's safe to say that consumers have not lost faith in realtors and have not lost faith in the industry itself? This is just something that affects realtors far more than it does any of the consumers?

Ms. Andrea Fedy: Well, I would also say that, you know, if you're putting your trust into a realtor and then the consumer's money is being put into a trust account, and that trust account has now done something that is not kosher—I don't know what the word is—

Mr. Dave Smith: Ethical?

Ms. Andrea Fedy: Ethical, that's a better word—that will definitely trickle down to the consumer side. I mean, why would I give money to a trust account not knowing where that money is going to?

Mr. Dave Smith: A lot of times when government does things on the regulatory side, it is a reaction to something that has occurred. Most of the time when you create legislation or you create regulations, you're not in a position where you can anticipate everything that could go wrong and when it goes wrong. A lot of times what happens is something goes wrong and then you have to be reactive to it.

This is one of those cases where I want to make sure that whatever the government does, we regulate to the point of integrity but not to the point of interference. We have seen through the years that when you do that reactive thing, sometimes you get to a point of interference. Should we be looking at an insurance-type scenario that would protect the realtors on the commission side if something like this were to happen again in the future? Or is this something that we should be looking at as it was a one-off and we're probably not going to be in this type of position again, so think about it in terms of how we would mitigate it, but we don't have to go so far as to create a whole new insurance regime just to protect you? And I know that's a long question.

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

Ms. Andrea Fedy: That's a good question. I probably would get my team to follow up with that because there are a lot of insurance—we have insurance, but I guess it doesn't cover as much as the iPro Realty scandal happened. I would probably get my team to look further into that.

Mr. Dave Smith: Okay, thank you very much. I appreciate that.

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

We'll go to MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you to all three of our presenters today. I want to begin with the Ontario Public School Boards' Association. Kathleen, it's nice to see you.

It is unfortunate that the government didn't schedule those separate budget consultation meetings with OPSBA this year, but I very much appreciate you taking the time to come and present to this committee about those funding challenges that are pretty common to every single public school board in the province.

You talked about the population growth and inflationary pressures on school board budgets when per-pupil funding has not changed to take that into account and the impact of the unfunded statutory benefit increases, which I know has been huge in boards like Thames Valley District School Board and others.

Special education: We have heard for decades that school boards have been having to shift money from other areas of the budget to deal with underfunding in special education. Student transportation, deferred maintenance—we know about the lead in the pipes in schools across the province.

Do you have some overall numbers? Can you give us a sense of the scale of what we're looking at with money that's being spent on special education outside of the special-education budget, money that school boards are having to spend on the unfunded increases to CPP and EI, the money school boards are having to spend on transportation that's not being funded by the province? Do you have those numbers with you?

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: I don't have the numbers with me, and before I answer, thank you for your service on the Thames Valley school board when you were a trustee. I don't have the exact numbers. The only response I can give is that we need more supports.

I'll take special education as an example. We need more adults in our schools so that our students—all of our students—can get the support that they need. If you've got a full class—you've got a teacher and you've got your students—and a special-ed student comes in who doesn't have an EA, then the teacher has to spend more time with that student, sometimes at the loss of the other students. But if the proper supports were in there, with the special-needs kid having an EA, then that teacher could support all of the students at the same time.

Any money, any resources that we can get to address these pertinent issues like the statutory costs for being an employer, for the transportation, the special needs, the cyber security—any funding that we can get to address those needs is going to be a relief for us being able to spend the money in the classroom, where we need to spend it. It's the release. We need more funding in those areas and that will help us to—we're spread very thin.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you very much and thank you for being the voice for parents, families and communities—and students, of course—in our public education system.

I wanted to go to Community Living Toronto and focus on your second recommendation around ending service wait-lists. Your brief points out that there are 53,000 Ontarians who are on wait-lists for developmental services and supportive housing. Can you give us a sense of what they are waiting for? What kinds of supports do they need

that they do not have access to because they are stuck on a wait-list?

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

Mr. Jonathan Bradshaw: I do want to be very clear here that that is actually—I think when we say “wait-list,” the idea comes that it’s one single list where everyone is in a queue and everyone is waiting for supports. This is, in fact, multiple wait-lists. These are wait-lists for residential supports, different supportive programming. It’s actual, multiple different lists and multiple different types of supports.

1430

These are situations in which people can be waiting for decades for some of these supports. You have aging families, you have aging parents who are oftentimes in their eighties and nineties who don’t know where their child, who is now also an adult in their fifties, where are they going to go when they die? I think a lot of the people around the table have heard a lot of those stories in their communities—

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

MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you and through you, Chair: Jonathan, I may as well pick up on that piece. One of, I think, the toughest parts for me being an MPP is when I’m talking to parents of folks with an adult with a disability and they say exactly that: “I don’t know what’s going to happen when I die.”

How important is it that we fix that piece now and what would that impact be in the longer term?

Mr. Jonathan Bradshaw: I think the reality is that the people here can either strategically think about how we will deal with this issue or it will be transferred to other services in government. It will continue to fall to hospitals to take care of it or it will continue to fall to long-term-care placements. People will continue to fall through the cracks and end up homeless or in shelters. I think it is a tremendous priority. We’ve been talking about this now for quite some time.

As I mentioned in my remarks, a select committee of the Legislature recommended that as a priority, more than a decade ago, ending those wait-lists, and they’ve only grown. Again, I want to be clear, there have been significant investments into the sector, but these are structural issues that have been there for decades and it’s time that we have a real strategy of how we’re actually going to tackle these things so that the people can receive the supports that they actually need.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: It’s really a matter of dignity at the end of the day and respect for our fellow Ontarian.

Around the need for housing and supportive housing, what exactly are you looking for in that area for the provincial government?

Mr. Jonathan Bradshaw: The provincial government has supported—we saw in the fall economic statement of 2024 support for arena residential development. In budget 2025, we saw funding for Safehaven and Luso. The gov-

ernment recognizes that this is something that needs to be supported.

What we are calling for is predictable funding for new innovative types of housing because as with everyone else in society, there isn’t a one-size-fits-all solution to housing. Everyone needs different types of support and not everything fits for everyone.

We have a type of support that we provide that works well in Toronto, which we’re calling inclusive vertical communities in which we partner with the city of Toronto, we gain access to units in new condo developments or other developments, and these are actually inclusive communities where people are living in buildings with everyone else and oftentimes the needs of those people can range from a little bit of support a day or effectively living on their own.

There’s a broad range of need out there, and I think what we’re saying is just having the ability to make sure that these plans that exist, these types of housing that exist, make sure they become a reality.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Perfect, thank you.

Through you, Chair, to Andrea: Thank you for your presentation today. Picking up on the topic of housing and, more broader, affordability: We’re able to help in some aspects of the housing spectrum that will have other trickle-down effects when it comes to housing availability, housing supply/demand etc.

I completely agree with you saying that we should remove the provincial portion of the HST, I would say, on all buyers of a new home if it’s your principal residence. I think that’s an important step forward—not just for first-time homebuyers—in order to get more supply into the marketplace. What would you think about going a bit further than that, and even taking the land transfer tax off the purchase of a new home?

Ms. Andrea Fedy: The land transfer tax completely—

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

Ms. Andrea Fedy: Sorry. The land transfer tax to not charge—

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Off a new home—

Ms. Andrea Fedy: Off a new home.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: —to get more supply.

Ms. Andrea Fedy: Yes, of course—anything to help the new buyers, or buyers in general. Yes, I think that’s a good idea.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Around the RECO and the iPro Realty scandal, to me it really feels as though it’s a failure of the regulator. It’s a failure, in some ways, of government oversight as well. And I think it does impact some confidence in the real estate sector.

Should there end up being more criminal types of penalties for things like embezzlement, fraud, which is essentially what we saw happen here with the owners of that brokerage?

Ms. Andrea Fedy: I don’t know if I’m at liberty to say that.

Sometimes buyers give too much money. So they give a \$50,000—

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

MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I thank all of you for coming and sharing your wisdom and expertise today.

Thank you to my local realtor for coming and advocating for all the people who just want a roof that they can afford and for all the things that we could do as a community to help make that dream a reality.

Of course, for Community Living—we hear so many stories all the time about how strained and stressed caregivers are and that we need to keep that investment going, because it leads to other costs and it affects people's lives so majorly.

I'm going to focus on Kathleen. I appreciate all your leadership in the education sector, as a member of our community and as a representative of trustees. Not all trustees are perfect, but I've had great experiences with our local team, advocating for education. You are experts.

I'd like you to talk a little bit more about special education. Even as a school social worker, I've seen the demands that children have and the needs they have change dramatically over the last five years, since COVID-19. That's not anything to do with the government; it has a lot to do with how kids live their lives. It creates a great amount of demand on the staff and the budgets. Because you can't even pay for sick days, principals end up drawing staff from special education classrooms to fill a—fail to fill. Do you know what I mean? That's just one area, too, where boards don't get the full range—they get paid for four sick days; they can take 11. Can you speak a little bit about how we are patching together staffing and that does short-change kids in special education?

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: You summarized it very well—by "patching together."

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

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: It's a constant day-to-day issue; for example, for the fail-to-fills for principals who have to manage having adults in the school and the right adults in the right schools.

Special education—the needs have changed, and they have become more, and kids in our schools really struggle if we don't have the right number of adults there to care for them. If a kid doesn't have an EA or if they have some behavioural issues on a certain day and they get sent home, what's that for the parent, who perhaps is a single parent who is working, can't get home with their child, loses time at their job, and then maybe eventually loses their job, because we don't have enough adults in the schools to look after the spec-ed kids who need extra support on days when it's not going well? And that happens to all of us.

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

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

My question is for Kathleen, following up on MPP Babikian's question.

I represent a rural community and a lot of small, rural schools. The school closure moratorium is very important to communities like mine.

I wasn't sure exactly where you were going with your answer before. Are you advocating that we end the school closure moratorium? I just wanted to clarify that.

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: I'll clarify by saying that we would like to have a conversation with the government and the minister regarding how we can improve the pupil accommodation review process. We're very well aware that in some areas, predominantly rural areas and in the north, the whole concept of closing schools, that's just—no, we don't support that. We have to have the conversation so that the guidelines are developed to accommodate both the needs of rural boards that have perhaps not—they don't have the number of schools that in an urban area may be closer together and can be amalgamated.

1440

So, rural: I'm saying that if we lift the moratorium, I want to have a conversation with the minister on how we can help support the minister to create some appropriate guidelines for both rural boards and for urban boards.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Well, thank you for clarifying that. I think it's very important. Our government is very focused, as MPP Babikian said, on building new schools and making sure our schools are in good shape, not closing schools.

In my riding, my home community of Rockwood, I was able to announce a 72-student expansion, a capital project there, a couple of weeks ago.

Talking about rural schools, Limehouse Public School, the elementary school where my father attended in the 1970s, a small, rural school, they had a furnace fire. Smoke destroyed the entire interior of the school, but they were able to refresh that school—and that has less than 70 students, so a very small rural school. So we're—through a \$23-billion investment to make sure we're building schools.

But I want to just turn to Andrea now for the rest of my time. I think this is the fifth pre-budget consultation I have attended so far, and we've heard from a few realtor groups. Something that has come up a few times but you didn't touch on was the Landlord and Tenant Board and making sure that that's working efficiently. Our government recently passed the Fighting Delays, Building Faster Act, which provided some more balance to the Landlord and Tenant Board with the Residential Tenancies Act and making sure that we attract more people to become landlords. We need more rental housing. So I just wonder if you can speak about the importance of that and how we can get more rental housing available for people in Ontario.

Ms. Andrea Fedy: Yes, that's very important. The Ontario Real Estate Association has definitely touched on the Landlord and Tenant Board act, but today, we brought these asks. So we agree with the reform, but it's just not what we're focusing on today. The Ontario Real Estate Association is doing that.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Okay. Thank you.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to go to Kathleen for just a second. Kathleen, bear with me on this; It's a bit of levity. It's something I've been trying to incorporate in every budget consultation: Would you be supportive of the Ontario television production show being incorporated into the Ontario curriculum for The Littlest Hobo?

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: Well, I do remember The Littlest Hobo, and it was a great program. Now, the curriculum, as you all know, is the purview of the Minister of Education. So I can't really answer that question. I'm going to—

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm on a mission—

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: Pardon?

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm on a mission to get The Littlest Hobo into every one of these meetings so that we bring it up and bring it back, because I think the stories behind it are fantastic for kids.

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: Okay. I—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Any further questions?

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you, Chair. No, we're good.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Any further questions? If not, MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you to the presenters for coming in here today.

Most of my questions are going to be to Kathleen Woodcock, the president of the OPSBA. Thank you so much for coming.

There was this issue of school closures. It's certainly an issue in the Toronto District School Board, which is an area I represent. In December, the Minister of Education announced that he was proposing to lift the moratorium on school closures in urban areas, which made a lot of people really concerned.

One thing that we are looking at asking for is to have some conditions if a school property is sold: Maybe it goes to another school board that's growing more quickly. Maybe it's offered to the municipality at an affordable price. Why I think that is important is that Toronto is a rapidly growing city, and in 10 years' time, we might need that school again. And if we sell it, then what happens?

Does your association have any recommendations if a school is sold off, any restrictions or criteria that you think might want to be put onto who gets to buy that property?

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: Thanks for the question. I don't have any suggestions at this moment.

I do want to clarify that the minister has announced that he's lifting the moratorium for supervised boards only, not for boards across the province. That's really important, and I realize that your question is Toronto-centred.

I'm sure that we could come up with a lot of ideas on how we could help the government to create a situation where, if indeed the moratorium were lifted everywhere, we have a way of making sure that any money from the sale of a school or the sale of the land can be returned to the education sector. I don't know in what form or what it would look like, but we would love to have that conversation with the Minister of Education so that we can help with some information from on the ground.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you. One of the challenges I have with school board funding is that sometimes schools are put in that situation where they need to sell off a school because they've had funding cut year in and year out from their operating and capital budgets. They're caught between a rock and a hard spot.

Toronto is in this situation where we are now under supervision. What we are seeing with the supervisor is teachers being removed from special education schools. We have just seen that the class cap for elementary and middle school students is about to be lifted. There is a conversation around closing schools. When I'm talking to parents, they often feel that they've just got no voice. They don't know who to call. They don't know how to deal with issues that they might be facing with their kid if the principal is not responding in the way that they want them to. They're really worried.

What do you think is at stake when school board trustees are replaced by an unelected supervisor? The reason why I think this is important is because you and I both know the government has given themselves the authority to take over any school board in Ontario that they want, so what's happening in Toronto could be the future for Waterloo or Kitchener or Peterborough. I'd like to know what your position is on that.

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: Right. We are very, very supportive and vocal about the fact that locally elected trustees are indeed the voice of democracy. Local trustees know their communities. They know where—for example, in a board, say, the size of my board or a board like mine—there are different pockets in the region of, perhaps, lower socio-economic areas. We know that because we are here. If there are supports that we can provide to those schools in those areas to give the kids a better education and help them on their journey, then we can do that.

People see trustees in the grocery store, at the mall, at community events—everywhere we go. We know our communities. A bureaucrat in Toronto does not know the local issues that parents are trying to deal with. When a parent calls a principal or a teacher and doesn't have anyone to turn to from their community, they are lost. I would suggest that a bureaucrat in Toronto is not going to know what I know about certain areas in my community for the school needs.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for raising that. We hear a lot of talk about how getting rid of school board trustees is going to save a school board money. In the case of Toronto, we have had school board trustees—who earn very little; they're part-time—replaced by someone who earns—

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

We'll go to MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair, thank you, Kathleen, for your presentation today—lots of things to talk about in public education and what we can do to make public education more effective. I think that does start with trustees, though, and the important role that trustees do play.

Do you think this talk around trustees is a bit of a distraction from the real issues in public education—in particular, the underfunding?

1450

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: I don't like to speak to other people's motivations, because that's not fair.

I do know that locally elected trustees are the baseline for democracy. Once they're gone, they're gone. I don't subscribe to the current thinking of the government or the Minister of Education saying that this process is outdated, that trustees cost too much money.

Of course, trustees are human, just like yourselves, and we make mistakes and we can make mistakes. But we are all human and it's important that we work together to keep that local piece so that we don't lose that connection.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: It's interesting that you talk about local connections. School board trustees are the longest-standing form of elected representation in Ontario.

Those student and family support offices that the ministry is saying need to be set up—do you think those offices are going to be able to get in the issues and help provide a resolution in sometimes a tricky situation, as opposed to trustees?

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: No.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. I would agree with that assessment, because the offices are set up in a way that is part of the administrative structure. It's not an independent structure. They're still reporting up through superintendents and the director of education. And sometimes the role that trustees play—they do challenge. Because there are unique situations, I think, that do require that support.

You mentioned cyber security needs. I think that's a really interesting piece. In a former career, I used to work for a school board and dealt with a very large cyber incident that literally wiped out a network—had to rebuild from scratch—and around that, the disruption to family, students, data, all of that. What more should the provincial government be doing around cyber security?

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: Thank you. As I mentioned in my presentation, we need to have dedicated funding so that we can mitigate the risks that come with the cyber security attacks. It's really important that we be able to do this mitigation so that we can help to improve confidence of the public in public education.

AI is coming up. With all these technological issues, it's very scary for people who are in a board that is attacked in this way, and it really speaks to your own feelings about privacy and about the sharing of your information. If we don't have the ability to protect ourselves and our students and our families from these kinds of attacks, then we are doing a disservice. The dedicated funding for that purpose would be very helpful as far as how we can mitigate the risk of these attacks.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you.

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

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: With the grants for student needs that would be rolled out, typically, a little bit soon—at least, I would say. We don't know when we're expecting that to come out. What impact does the lack of certainty

around budget planning have for trustees and school boards and the system as a whole?

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: When there's a delay in that funding, boards have already started planning for the next academic year: staffing and school calendars and transportation needs—everything. So we're starting that planning now. When that announcement is delayed, it makes it more and more challenging for us to actually do proper planning.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: And does that speak to how important it actually is for associations like OPSBA and the government to be in contact and working together?

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: Yes. We can be working together—

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

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: Thank you.

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

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you to all our presenters this afternoon. I have so much to say and ask but I've got very limited time. Jonathan, I just want to tell you that I have a very close relationship with my Community Living partners in Haldimand–Norfolk, and I thank you all for the incredible work that you do in our communities for our families who love and support our most vulnerable in this province. I support all your asks and I will continue to advocate for Community Living.

I'm going to bounce over to Kathleen quickly. Following up on the trustee issue, I believe that, actually, we're going the wrong way. I think government's going the wrong way on this. You said that the government says trustees cost too much money. Well, what if we worked it the reverse? What if we bolstered the role of school board trustees to actually look after some of the roles of high-salaried administrators, got rid of those fat cats at the top and bolstered the role of trustees? Would that work?

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: I can't—school boards are composed of governance, which are trustees, and operations, which are school boards. I can't refer to our directors of education, our senior administration as fat cats. They are paid good money and they're well worth the money.

Getting rid of trustees is not going to save the government as much money as they need to fix some of the problems that we have in our schools, like lack of supports for spec-ed, transportation costs and building costs. So I—it's an interesting proposal that you've suggested. I don't know how that would work, but I would be really, really happy to talk to you and the government about that.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Great. Thank you. I just recall the days when parents were basically volunteers and operated schools, and they seemed to do a good job.

I'll quickly ask you the question I've asked many people as we've travelled on this committee. The chaos in the classroom: You even said that we are thinning our resources. We need to invest in EAs and OTs and speech pathologists, but that's a long-term solution. I'm wondering if we should be actually taking the resources that we have and putting them under regional roofs and busing

those children who need those extra supports into those regional centres—something like the Gregory School in Brantford.

Ms. Kathleen Woodcock: That's an interesting model. If we can do something to—the kids—I don't know. That's an interesting model. I don't know that the government would be willing to fund that model, but we need at least two more adults in every school in this province in the building so that we can support all the kids.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time for that question and concludes the time for this panel. So thank you all for the time you took to prepare and the way you handled some of the questions. Thank you very much. I'm sure your presentations will help us in our deliberations, so thank you very much for being here.

Our next—

Interjections.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Again, if we're going to talk, please do it outside this area.

Interjections.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): They don't even hear that. I've lost all semblance of order.

If I could ask the members that are not coming to the table to move away from the table.

JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT
SOUTH WESTERN ONTARIO
ASSOCIATION OF ONTARIO MIDWIVES
HABITAT FOR HUMANITY
WATERLOO REGION

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Our next panel is Junior Achievement South Western Ontario, Association of Ontario Midwives and Habitat for Humanity Waterloo Region. As with the other panels, you will have seven minutes to make your presentation. At six minutes, I will say, "One minute," hopefully, and at seven minutes I will stop the presentation. I also ask that each presenter starts with giving their name for Hansard to make sure it's properly recorded.

The first one will be Junior Achievement South Western Ontario, and the floor is now yours.

Ms. Karen Gallant: Good afternoon, Chair and committee. Thank you for taking the time to consider my presentation and request today. My name is Karen Gallant. I'm the President and CEO of Junior Achievement South Western Ontario. We deliver programs to youth across Windsor-Essex to Bruce, Huron and Grey counties, and through southwestern Ontario to Niagara. We also deliver programs here in Waterloo region, and have been doing so for more than 50 years. My presentation today is also on behalf of the other two Junior Achievement charters in Ontario: JA Northern and Eastern Ontario and JA Central Ontario.

1500

Together we provide high-quality, hands-on programming to children and youth from grades 3 to 12 on the

skills necessary to prepare youth for employment and their futures, including important skills in financial health and well-being. Last year, the three JA charters delivered more than 100,000 high-impact learning experiences for children and youth. We engaged 3,179 classrooms across 845 schools in Ontario. Our programs are offered in both official languages.

We recognize how important it is for our youth to be prepared to succeed in today's global economy. Through our programming, and with the help of our volunteers and partners, we shape the next generation of workers and business owners right here in Ontario.

In Waterloo region itself, the culture of entrepreneurship runs deep. JA South Western Ontario has an important role to play to continue to foster that culture of innovation and to encourage youth to consider small business and entrepreneurship as a viable career option. We do that primarily through our Company Program, our high school program where teams of youth work under the guidance of volunteer mentors. They start, operate and liquidate a small business over the course of 18 weeks. This year, there's 40 students here in Waterloo region who are participating in this program, igniting their entrepreneurial spirit and building the foundation for small business creation.

We are pleased to see the priority that the Ontario government has placed on financial literacy, and we know that the work being done in classrooms today by both teachers and JA volunteers to teach children how to manage money, budget and make sound financial decisions will pay dividends in the future. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Ontario government further in this area.

But the work that we do extends beyond financial literacy. We help bridge the gap between students and the business world, and it's that gap that we would like to discuss today. Today's grade 12 students were in grade 6 or 7 when the COVID shutdowns began. Some days it's hard to remember it was that long ago. These students, though, who are now on the cusp of beginning their adult lives, missed out on in-person learning and interaction at such a pivotal stage in their social development, and we're seeing the impacts of that today.

Mental health concerns are on the rise and students have reduced social skills. This is evident in the workforce, and it does not just impact what we traditionally think of as careers, but also how these young people are showing up to their part-time jobs. They are less confident and less resilient. They experience increased anxiety and higher levels of stress. We know they need additional supports to be successful in their future.

We are asking this committee to prioritize funding for work readiness for young people. In our view this should allow for greater investments in the soft skills of young people of Ontario. Training and mentorship that helps young people live up to their full potential. This would be an investment in the future of Ontario's workforce, helping young people gain the necessary skills they need to succeed in any work environment, including those who

wish to start their own business. This would be beneficial to all sectors of Ontario's economy, including the skilled trades.

We view this as separate from the current Skills Development Fund, though it could also be implemented through that framework as an additional funding envelope. While the Skills Development Fund provides much-needed support to companies and non-profit organizations looking at more direct training and up-skilling opportunities, this proposed funding would be further upstream.

We see the gap for young people in a more holistic way, as they transition from school to their adult lives, and we're eager to expand the work that we already do to help them. We know that the government is focused on protecting Ontario's economy and workers, on creating more jobs and on getting critical infrastructure projects built. We hope that this committee, and the government more broadly, will join us in our work to prepare the next generation of Ontario's workers, business leaders and entrepreneurs.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with the committee through the question-and-answer period or through follow-up discussions and meetings. Thank you for your time today and for your attention to this matter.

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

Our next presentation is a virtual presentation, the Association of Ontario Midwives—

The Clerk pro tem (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): There's also an individual in person.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): It's also going to be—I'm just sitting here looking at the screen.

We now turn the floor over to you. Thank you very much.

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the importance of prioritizing midwifery in the 2026 provincial budget. My name is Elizabeth Brandeis. I'm the director of government, labour and public relations at the Association of Ontario Midwives, representing Ontario's registered and Indigenous midwives. I'm also a midwife and I'm joined here by my colleague, Devi Krieger, who's online and is a policy analyst in my department and is also a midwife.

Midwives are an essential part of Ontario's health care system, delivering comprehensive, continuous primary care for pregnancy, birth, the postpartum and newborn periods and beyond. Midwifery is evidence-based, cost-effective and deeply valued by Ontario families. Our care lowers hospital admissions and lengths of stay, reduces unnecessary costly medical interventions and eases pressure on emergency departments. In a system facing tremendous strain, midwifery offers strong value to Ontario families and the health system and increases primary care access.

But despite this value, Ontario's midwifery workforce is in crisis, and you have an opportunity to reverse this trend in the upcoming budget. Midwives are experiencing unprecedented burnout and attrition. This is driven by

chronic underfunding, poor integration in the health system and persistent misunderstandings about our scope of practice and the proven benefits of our model, even after 32 years in the publicly funded health system.

In 2021, one in three midwives told us they were considering leaving the profession within five years and, unfortunately, we're seeing that prediction unfold. Today, more than 13% of the small midwifery workforce is not practising, and resignations from practice are increasing, most concerningly for midwives in their first five years of practice. But demand for midwifery continues to rise. Childbirth cannot be delayed or wait-listed, yet families increasingly cannot access midwifery care when they need it. While midwives provide care for 30,000 families each year, including in three practices right here in K-W, in 2024, more than 6,500 families who wanted midwifery care were turned away due to a midwife shortage.

At the same time, Ontario is losing its return on investment in education with new graduates moving to other provinces before they ever serve Ontario families. In 2023, 24% of McMaster midwifery graduates and 22% from Toronto Metropolitan University did not register to practise in Ontario. Ontario cannot afford to lose more midwives—not when the system is struggling and not when the need for primary care continues to outpace supply. Midwifery represents less than one quarter of 1% of the health care budget. Implementing these recommendations is affordable and fiscally responsible.

The Association of Ontario Midwives is calling for four key actions in the 2026 budget:

(1) Increase investment in midwifery services to address the primary care crisis. Expanding midwifery services reduces pressure on family doctors and nurse practitioners, allowing them to care for more patients. Midwives providing more perinatal, sexual, reproductive and infant care is good for communities, for primary care access and for the health system. We're asking for increased funding for growth in midwifery practice groups, Indigenous midwifery programs, expanded midwifery care models and interprofessional primary care teams. These investments will increase access to care—the care Ontario families want, need and deserve. This is a smart, high-impact, fiscally responsible investment.

1510

(2) Invest in university-based midwifery education programs. Funding for the Ontario Midwifery Education Program has been frozen since 2010. Meanwhile, other primary care professions received over \$300 million in new education funding in 2025, yet midwifery programs remain stagnant. The Midwifery Education Program has outlined clear, evidence-based proposals to increase per-student funding and create a more sustainable program. These changes are essential to sustaining the program and preserving Ontario's future workforce.

The unfortunate closure of the Laurentian program in 2021 has also had major impacts, especially on access for Indigenous and northern learners, and has eliminated French-language training for midwives in Ontario. This has worsened recruitment and retention challenges in

northern, rural, francophone and Indigenous communities. Ontario must act now to protect and secure Ontario's future midwives.

(3) Support community-based, Indigenous-led midwifery education pathways. Indigenous midwives are both registered midwives and also practise under the exemption for Indigenous midwives in the Midwifery Act. Their work returns birth to Indigenous communities where Indigenous practices of midwifery have been lost through forced evacuations for birth and provides holistic, community-governed care throughout the reproductive life cycle.

Indigenous-led education pathways are essential to addressing long-standing health inequities, but they cannot survive without stable, sustained funding. Supporting these pathways is a meaningful step forward towards reconciliation. It brings birth and Indigenous midwifery back to Indigenous communities.

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

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: And finally: (4) Ensure midwife compensation is cleansed of gender-based discrimination. Midwifery is the most female-dominated profession in the health system, and compensation for midwives has been subject to systemic gender-based pay discrimination. In 2020, the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario ordered the government to take concrete actions to close the gender pay gap, including completing a joint compensation study and evidence-based analysis of fair compensation for midwifery work. This study is expected to conclude this year and will recommend pay adjustments retroactive to 2014. We're calling on government to implement these adjustments and close the gender pay gap once and for all. Fair compensation is not optional; it's essential to retaining midwives, preventing burnout, stabilizing the workforce and honouring human rights obligations.

Midwives are ready to continue to deliver this high-quality primary care that Ontario families—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time. Maybe you'll get the rest in in the question period.

We now have Habitat for Humanity Waterloo Region. He's on the screen as we speak. As with the others, you will have seven minutes to make your presentation. At six minutes, I will warn you, and at seven minutes, I will stop you. With that, the floor is yours.

Mr. Philip Mills: Thank you so much, everybody. I appreciate the opportunity to come and speak to you today. My name is Philip Mills. I have the privilege of serving as the CEO for Habitat for Humanity Waterloo Region. I am also the chair for Habitat's Ontario caucus, representing 23 local organizations across the province.

It can't be a surprise I'm here today to talk to you about affordable housing and a very particular part of the affordable housing continuum; I'm here to talk about affordable ownership, which is close to the heart of Habitat but I think close to the heart of many Ontarians and something that needs to be at the centre of what we look at as we figure out how we're going to attack this housing crisis.

We've spent a lot of time in our community here. I've spent a lot of time talking with Habitats across the province, and this is an issue it's an issue that is everywhere. Parents are worried about where their kids will live. Seniors on fixed incomes are stretching every dollar. Young adults have quietly given up on the idea that one day they might own a home. There are real social risks to an entire generation that doesn't have hope, a group that isn't tethered to their communities, a group that doesn't see a future for them, and we need to address that as a community. There is a growing sense of hopelessness, and I think that's something that we can tackle and fix if we would all work together on this.

Here in the Waterloo region, Habitat is doing a lot of really interesting things to try and combat this. I think it helps for you to get a sense of what Habitat's doing locally here in this region to understand what we can do across the entire province here. We've helped many families—over 143 families here in this region—to get into home ownership. We have our Build Now project here in Waterloo region, partnering with both the city of Waterloo and the city of Kitchener to try and bring hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of homes to people in an affordable ownership opportunity.

Our goal, together with our municipal partners, is to try and get 10,000 units built here in this region over the coming years. These projects, we think, offer people and families hope and our community and builders across the region the possibility that there is a way to actually solve this crisis.

Now, Habitat is unique in that we focus on affordable ownership, and specifically unique that we are one of the few—the only one that does this across the country. So when we look at our opportunity, the partner opportunity to work with the province and to speak to what we want to see from the province, we think we have a really interesting lens here.

Habitat's model—and I think this is important—is a little different than everybody else's. Folks that work with us buy their home. This isn't something that they're given; this is something they work for, this is something they buy, this is something they pay for. So the Habitat model is different than a lot of other affordable housing in that it is this long-term partnership where folks are paying for it. And that payment that they're making back to Habitat, we reinvest right back into more housing. So when you're working with Habitat and when Habitat does its work, that stuff is reinvested over and over and over, making for a compounding sort of benefit.

When we look at the work that the province has done to support affordable housing, there has been a lot of really good work, and we're real champions of the work that has been done. We are really excited to see the work that the province has put forward. But as with any sort of opportunity, there are some places we can see some more growth and some more development, and we think that the province has opportunities here within their provincial budget to make some changes and do some things that could really impact housing.

We are excited and love the signalling on HST relief. We'd love to see that finalized. We'd love to see that work actually pushed through.

We would love to have an opportunity as Habitats to collaborate more with the province.

The other thing we're looking for is the opportunity to unlock surplus lands. The province has been talking about surplus lands, and we realize that comes with costs, that does come with issues, that does make things tricky—but realizing that the province is looking for solutions, and we have them.

When we talk about HST relief, there is a real opportunity to help families and people afford housing in a way they couldn't before. Civil development charges for non-profit housing providers—this relief provides both direct savings to our Habitat family partners and enables local builders to construct more affordable housing units. With increased cost of land, construction and labour, the HST burden can impact the financial feasibility for housing projects. Our families just don't have the dollars and can't afford the extra costs here.

We understand the federal government holds a lot of the levers on this change. We are asking the province to continue to urge the federal government to quickly pass GST measures so HST relief can be mirrored in Ontario. We think this is an opportunity for the Ontario government to be bold—an opportunity for them to lead on making impactful change in the housing space.

We talked about partnering with Habitats and the benefit of partnering with Habitats. We have the opportunity here to take a coordinated approach to housing. We do something that nobody else does: We are across the province. There is an opportunity for us to work together to really scale impact. We have the skills, we have the network, we have everything in place to be working together. So as the province decides and looks at funding—what's being invested in—we implore them to not forget affordable ownership—that whatever regulations, whatever sort of investments, whatever is coming out includes affordable ownership. And we would ask that you look to Habitat as a trusted partner who is positioned across the province to make meaningful impacts on those ownership items.

Last was around surplus land. There are lands in the province that we can help come to life. We can bring housing to communities across the province if the province is ready to unlock and allow it at that surplus land. We understand there are costs. We understand this isn't something that happens for free, but the opportunity to partner here is really impactful. We understand the careful fiscal balance when it applies to these public lands but, left unused, it doesn't benefit the public. Left unused, we have a crisis continuing to grow. So we're asking the province to loosen that provincial land, to loosen what's theirs, to let us go and create sustainable and healthy communities for people.

Together, we can do a lot to really impact housing if we're really careful and mindful of how we implement the coming budget.

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

Mr. Philip Mills: Thanks so much for your time. We appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today.

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

We now will start the official questions with MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you to the presenters for coming in here today. My first questions are to Elizabeth Brandeis from the Association of Ontario Midwives—very good to see you here.

I hear a lot from midwives in my riding about the difficulty of staying in the profession. They have a lot of difficulty keeping up with the night shifts, being on call, shortages; often, vacation is cancelled. This is what I hear about. It's a problem because a lot of people, as you mentioned, want a midwife and they're not able to get one.

1520

We've heard doctors come in and talk about the family health team model, where you have a doctor supported by a team, so they can easily refer.

I'm curious to know, in addition to the funding parity, what else can be done to keep midwives in the profession?

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: I really appreciate the question.

Absolutely, there are many things in addition to what was outlined in our presentation today, including having a variety of options for midwives to work in different settings and in different models, including the ability to move in and out of models that require the rigorous, 24/7 on-call requirements that the typical midwifery model requires. We need midwives to be practising in that model. That's the model that has delivered the kind of excellent health care outcomes that we've seen over the last 32 years in Ontario. But we also need midwives to be able to work in ways that are sustainable for them at different life stages—especially with parenting young children or caring for aging parents—that don't require the same kind of 24/7 on-call requirements. That's why there are midwives working in what are called expanded midwifery care models now, which are programs in community health centres and shift work within hospitals.

We're just scratching the surface, I think, of different ways for midwives to be filling roles within the health system, that really untap the potential for how midwifery can contribute, as I was saying, to the primary care crisis—and also to be more sustainable for those midwives to stay in practice when, otherwise, they would just burn out and quit. It's sort of a domino effect that we're seeing. Midwives who become burnt out leave practice and leave the caseload that need to be cared for to a smaller number of midwives, who then subsequently get burnt out themselves.

So we need investment in that model to ensure that midwives can be sustained within the 24/7 on-call model and that we don't lose them to a whole different profession when they need to step away and not do that on-call work.

The other thing that we've called for is for midwives to be included in the interprofessional primary care team model as part of the primary care action plan expansion.

In theory, that would be a great way to invest in midwives being part of family health teams and other interprofessional primary care models, but unfortunately, we haven't seen the uptake, because of real competition within the system and a very physician-dominated system. Often, it's physicians who are making choices about how that expansion funding is applied. We have midwives who are ready to work in those interprofessional primary care teams, but the priority isn't there. So we need dedicated funding to ensure that midwives are able to participate in those interprofessional teams.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I've been following the issues around the pay equity lawsuits very closely over the last few years, and the need to ensure midwives are paid for what they deliver.

Can you speak a little bit more about what funding model the Association of Ontario Midwives is asking for? What would need to change for it to work for midwives?

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: The order from the tribunal was very clear: that what needs to be implemented is an evidence-based evaluation of midwives' skills, effort, responsibility and working conditions.

When midwifery was first established in 1994, there was a very clear understanding that this new, female-dominated profession needed protections against being too closely associated with nursing, which isn't a primary care profession. Registered nurses don't provide the same kind of care.

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

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: So they were benchmarked with a male comparator at the time: family physicians within the community health centres. At that time, midwives were assessed to be paid 90% of the CHC physician—now we're down to 44% of that pay, without any kind of attendance to that benchmarking.

What the study that's under way right now is doing is actually evaluating, in a very rigorous and evidence-based way, what is the worth of the work if you actually look at it in comparison to our physician colleagues? We don't expect to be paid the same, but we expect to see an evidence-based evaluation system every time we sit down at the negotiating table, to be able to pay midwives for the scope of practice that they practice and the value that they provide in the Ontario health system.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you very much for coming in here today. I appreciate it.

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

We'll now go to MPP Fairclough.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you to all three presenters for being here today and sharing your requests with us. I do have questions for all three of you, between my two question sections.

I'll maybe start with Habitat for Humanity. Thanks for your comments. I am the homelessness critic for the Liberal caucus, and I listened to you today about how important it is to make sure that we're addressing the affordability of housing. That ultimately has to be the solution. I'm really worried; three out of five Canadians

are actually worried about losing their housing if their financial situation were to change. This means more and more people are on the brink of losing their homes.

You've talked about some of the things that you'd like to see. The HST relief being finalized: That was something we supported too, so I'm glad the government will see that through.

But I did want to ask you about targets for affordable units. Last week, we saw a change in regulation too, around exclusionary zoning that now would remove some of the expectations for affordable units as part of developments for the next couple of years. Do you have any comments on what other incentives we could be putting in place provincially that would help ensure that we had more affordable units available to people?

Mr. Philip Mills: I think one of the biggest barriers that everybody who's trying to put affordable housing together has right now is financing. The opportunity for low-cost financing, using governments and municipalities to say, "Hey, if I can get construction financing at a price point that brings down my overall costs"—I think a lot of folks are in that position where the cost to build right now, because we don't know what delays we're going to see—every delay costs, especially when you're on a loan and you're using some sort of financing mechanism. So I think one of the things the government could be looking at, which would be of huge benefit to Habitats across the province, would be looking at financing that is stable and low-cost.

It doesn't have to be free. We would love free—I will never say no to free money; if everybody wants to send grants to Habitat, I think we're all in there. But even the opportunity to say, "Can we get financing and construction costs down?"—how do we bring those costs down? Because when it's not-for-profit housing, the lower the cost, it just means we build more housing. When you're talking about Habitat, that means the family buys it for less. If I pay less, I will build more homes. I think we can drive down those costs.

The DC relief was fantastic work. That helped a ton for not-for-profits. Once again, looking into the other stuff, there's transfer taxes. I pay in land transfer tax. Let's say a lovely municipality—perhaps Waterloo—decided to transfer 24 acres to us to build all kinds of affordable housing. We'd pay land transfer tax on that. Are there ways to look at reducing? Because if I didn't have to pay land transfer tax, that wouldn't get passed on. That's costs that families and other folks don't have to pay. I think land transfer taxes and low-cost financing are some things that could really help spur more affordable housing, specifically when you target those things for not-for-profits and charities.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Great. Thank you.

My second question is to Elizabeth and Devi from the Association of Ontario Midwives. Boy, I was really struck by your stat: 24% of grads from Mac and 22% of grads from TMU did not even register to practice, and 13% are leaving. I worked in health care for years before coming here, and I've seen this across other aspects of the health

care system. Can you talk a little bit more about why close to a quarter of people that are training are just deciding not to practice?

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: Yes. They are practising; many of them are moving to other jurisdictions in Canada, so we are seeing that brain drain from the Ontario-educated midwives actually being recruited to British Columbia. British Columbia is actively recruiting in Ontario. Other than the mountains and the ocean, they're also being drawn there because it's a different model of care there: There's less micromanagement of how they practice, there are more opportunities for them to practice more flexibly and they just received a 52% pay increase two years ago, so that's also appealing. They're leaving to other provinces.

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

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: But they're also leaving because the work itself is so challenging. Even after having gone through a rigorous four-year program, they're coming out the other side, some of them, questioning whether this is the right profession for them. They see what's happening within the profession as well. Their preceptors are having difficulty sustaining themselves within the profession. So we're seeing it trickle down to the new grads who haven't even practised yet and, as I mentioned, midwives in their first five years leaving without even the prospects to stay and thrive for a whole lifetime of a career, which is what we would love to see when we invest in their education.

1530

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Great. Thank you.

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

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Sorry. Was that one minute?

The Clerk pro tem (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): No, it's time.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Oh, it's time?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Oh, I was looking at—carry on.

MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: It's getting late, isn't it, Chair?

I'll start with you, Philip. I don't have any questions for you, but just a comment: I'm a fiscal conservative, so I really appreciate the Habitat for Humanity model, because it stretches public dollars further and provides that long-term affordability, not short-term fixes, because we see a lot of that being presented to us. I think most importantly, it builds community capacity rather than dependency. So I really appreciate your remarks and your asks of the government.

I will move to you, Elizabeth. Maybe you said this, but what is the cost difference between midwife-led delivery versus OB/GYN?

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: It's a great question. It's not an apples-to-apples comparison. Some major differences: OBs perform surgeries; midwives don't. Midwives take care of newborn babies; obstetricians don't. So it's really not an apples-to-apples comparison.

The other important part of the midwifery model of care is that, internationally, midwives care for a smaller case-

load. That's part of the model of care. So when you're looking at a cost comparison, we don't have the same ability to do the volumes. The other part of volume issues is that midwives are capped at a certain number of births in Ontario, so could be doing more volume if there wasn't so much management of the program.

If you look more longitudinally and look at midwifery outcomes—things like reduction of C-sections, increased breastfeeding rates, reduction of unnecessary medical interventions and reduction in emergency department visits—there's actually a lot of cost savings that might not be captured if you're just doing an apples-to-apples comparison in that way.

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

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Great. Thank you for that.

I'll jump over to Junior Achievement. I'm heartened by everything you said. I have a son who has always said he's going to be a businessman, but every time he's gone to student services, he leaves kind of disappointed. I know this government has talked about and invested in financial literacy, and I'm thankful for that, but I'm thinking we can do better. As a government, we can do better with respect to financial literacy, so I'm wondering if you can tell us how we might expand financial literacy in this province so that all students have access to that type of training and skill development.

Ms. Karen Gallant: Thank you for the question. The government has recently implemented some changes to the curriculum in high school, and we're looking forward to seeing how that might roll out. It has been paused, but we would really like to have the opportunity to talk to the government about how we might be able to do that.

One of the things that we would love to talk to the government about is actually having JA listed—

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

We will now go to MPP Saunderson.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I want to thank all of our presenters this afternoon for taking the time out of your busy schedules to come and give us your important thoughts and also for the incredible work you do in our communities.

Karen, I am going to start with you because part of my riding is Collingwood, which has been ranked by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business as one of the top entrepreneurial communities in Canada, actually of any size. That's in part because when our shipyards closed in the mid-1980s, that's what we were. We had to recreate ourselves, and if you wanted a job there, you had to make your own, essentially.

So with that strong entrepreneurial spirit, I'm happy to hear all the programs you have. I know through our small business economic centre in Collingwood, they have summer programs where they work with students. They give them some seed money and then they work with them to create their programs. We also have a regional innovation hub in Barrie, and the town also has its own incubation fund, mostly directed to young business people.

I'm wondering if you work with the local org—because I think you have one in Kitchener—and small business centres to help integrate those programs. Because you talked about mentorship, which is a huge part of those programs.

Ms. Karen Gallant: It's a great question, and Collingwood is a great example of a community that has reinvented itself. A lot of young people now are taking the approach of, "I can't find a job; I'm going to create one." So it's a great example.

If you think about small business creation as a funnel and as you get down, down, down in the funnel and you actually get a small business that succeeds, JA is at the top of the funnel. We really try to ignite that entrepreneurial spark, that engagement in local business and engagement in local community with the high school students. The goal is then to get them to go on to a summer company program. Often, we do see overlap that way and we promote summer company to our company program youth.

What we hope is that those students will go on to post-secondary education in a business area. Then they're going to go and connect with the RICs, the chambers of commerce and all of those local economic development agencies. Certainly, we work with all of them as best we can across southwestern Ontario. They are great partners for us, and they can be great sources of mentors to our students and create the community connections that our youth are looking for along with the mentorship that they very badly need.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Listen, I think it's a great program you're doing and please keep up the great work.

Philip, I have a couple of questions for you on Habitat for Humanity. You had some incredible statistics about the numbers that you're doing. In seven of my municipalities, there's Habitat for Humanity, but the numbers aren't nearly like you've got. You said last year, you helped 143 families with hundreds of homes and you're hoping to do 10,000 units across the region. I'm wondering, on the scalability, how do you scale up to those numbers?

Mr. Philip Mills: We have fantastic partnerships from our local development community and from our municipalities. Our build-now approach on these allows us to scale up what we're doing using land from the municipalities and the expertise from our development community. We can drive down the cost of our homes dramatically, allowing folks to access an affordable purchase price again.

We're hoping that most of these homes will be down below \$400,000 for a three-to-four-bedroom unit—opportunities that don't exist right now, but that's by taking out those costs. When those development charges get taken out, that's less that people have to pay. HST is another cost driver. If we can take out HST, we take out land, we take out development charges, we can get to prices that people can afford again.

That's an entirely scalable opportunity. We have Habitats across the province who could do this if we had access to the land.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: It's interesting to hear. I know in some larger municipalities DCs are getting waived, but not all across the province. What would the DC be for the types of units you're building?

Mr. Philip Mills: The way it works is going to depend, like you say, where it is. Because we're a not-for-profit, they are all exempt, the projects that are built now. Habitat projects are exempt from DCs, so we're getting a lot of benefit from that. They can range anywhere from \$30,000 to \$100,000 depending on where we're operating and where my partners in other Habitats are. In our region, it's \$50,000 to \$70,000, so those are not insignificant numbers to have taken off our costs.

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

Mr. Brian Saunderson: It was interesting because we had the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada in this morning talking to us. They were saying, now with the type of work shortages we're having, that it's a good time to be incenting this type of housing, to get people working to get the housing stock in the ground. Because housing stock will also help to make housing more affordable generally, not just specifically the type of model that you're proposing.

Are you seeing with this kind of economic environment that partnerships—there's more opportunity there?

Mr. Philip Mills: Yes. One of our biggest supporters is the local construction association. They see the benefit in saying, "Let's get a lot of housing built," because the market is turned in, because for-profits aren't in a position to be developing right now because the costs don't make sense. There are lots of folks who need work and lots of labour that wants to be out working. We're excited to put them all to work. The knock-on effects of affordable housing are massive when we do it at scale.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Just because I've been on a couple of not-for-profit boards, social enterprise is such an important area that's growing in our not-for-profit sector—

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

MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you to all three of our presenters today. I wanted to start with the Association of Ontario Midwives and Elizabeth.

You mentioned several times during your presentation about the important role of midwives in helping to address the crisis in access to primary care. Can you elaborate for us on how midwives can be part of the solution to the primary care crisis?

1540

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: Yes, absolutely. Thanks for the question. Midwives providing care in these models that I was describing before, where they really could be scaled to providing more comprehensive care for newborns, more sexual and reproductive health care—and we're seeing examples of that in some of the expanded midwifery care models and Indigenous midwifery programs that have less constraints around the care delivery model that midwives are providing.

If there is a midwife in an interprofessional primary care team, for example, who's taking care of all of the babies in that model—there are examples around the province that we can point to of where this is happening—it frees up the other primary care providers to increase their volumes as well. So it's about, kind of, attaching through new innovation.

Things like sexual health screenings and treatment and those kinds of visits, if those were shifted to a midwife in one of these interprofessional teams, again, it would free up the other staff to provide care to maybe more complex patients who have comorbidities, who need to be cared for by the family physician, and alleviate some of that pressure.

Prenatal care itself is often dealt with by primary care providers within their practice and then they refer to an obstetrician later on in the pregnancy. If midwives are doing all of that care seamlessly throughout the entire pregnancy, again, more of those visits would be available for other care needs.

We've estimated, depending on the size of the family health team or interprofessional team, midwives could increase attachment by hundreds of patients if those well newborn care patients and others throughout the reproductive life cycle—those visits were done by midwives. It could really innovatively care for the needs of the community.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you very much.

I wanted to turn to Junior Achievement South Western Ontario. I appreciated your comments on the impact of COVID on this new generation of young people who are graduating from our schools and looking to move into employment or a post-secondary education or wherever they're going and the increased mental health challenges.

Your ask is for some funding to assist with supporting work readiness for youth as they go through this transition. Can you provide more details about your ask? What kind of work readiness program are you thinking of? How much funding are you interested in getting from the government?

Ms. Karen Gallant: Thank you for the question. There's not a fixed figure in mind at this point. What we are looking to do is to help young people develop the skills that employers are looking for—the skills and mindsets, really. Things like communication skills—they're so important.

What we're finding is that many of our young people are graduating from high school, moving on to post-secondary and they are so accustomed to being behind a screen, perhaps with the camera off, or communicating via devices, they don't actually have those kinds of skills to relate interpersonally.

So we're looking at providing some training around those kinds of activities—networking, communications, the things that employers are looking for. And many of our programs already deliver these: teamwork, presentation skills and so on. We would like to amplify those programs and make sure that we're reaching more students across the province to help them, then, be able to transition from

high school into post-secondary and into the workforce more effectively.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: You said there are three organizations that cover the province. Does JA have the capacity to sort of scale up and provide that kind of programming support to students across Ontario?

Ms. Karen Gallant: We would have, yes. If we were able to rally both some public and private funding, we would have the ability to scale quite nicely.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: And you think that there would be private funding accessible to support something like this? You're hearing from employers that there's a need?

Ms. Karen Gallant: We're hearing from employers there's a need, and JA is funded, at the moment, primarily by corporations and individuals. So yes, we feel that we would be able to rally some private funding for it as well.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll now go to MPP Fairclough.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I too will come back to junior achievement, and I missed the very beginning of your presentation but fortunately somebody sent me some notes as well.

I did want to just ask about the relationship with some of the employers and maybe to talk a little bit more about what they are saying about some of the biggest gaps. I've seen a bit of a theme where a lot of employers are feeling the same way—actually they're not getting the skills they need through some of the community colleges, given the pressures there right now. Can you just talk a bit more about what it is that we really need to be supporting students with so that they'll meet the employers' needs?

Ms. Karen Gallant: Yes, that's a great question and you're right, with some of the challenges that our post-secondary partners are facing in the moment, it's definitely difficult to make that bridge.

As I mentioned, certainly the ability for young people to interact in a more personal and in-person environment is one of the biggest challenges that we hear from employers. That is one of the things that we really look at in our existing programming, and that we would be looking to close the gap on is those in-person, face-to-face kinds of interactions. How do you communicate your thoughts effectively in a professional environment—more than 140 characters—is what most employers are looking for. So how do you do that? How do you relate to other individuals in a professional manner? Those are some of the things we're already very good at and we're looking to build, and that's what we are hearing employers are looking for.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: That's great. As a mom of teenage boys, 16 and 19, I can relate to all of that. There're wonderful kids, but it's true, it's a set of skills that they really need to develop.

Ms. Karen Gallant: It's a challenge.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I wanted to just come back on a request from the Ontario midwives. I was wondering if you can speak a little bit more about the Indigenous program asks that you had as part of your four things?

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: Sure, yes, I'm happy to. My Indigenous midwifery colleagues are best equipped to answer this question, but I will do my very best to do them proud.

We have 17 Indigenous midwives practising under the exception clause of the Midwifery Act which means, they're governed by their communities not through College of Midwives, and they're providing care that really is bringing birth back to communities that have lost it, because of effects of colonization of all kinds, including forced evacuation for birth. It's really an area where I think we can all gain a lot of inspiration for how communities are reclaiming birth in that way, reclaiming joy in their communities.

Currently the education pathway is through apprenticeship. It will remain through apprenticeship largely. It's done on the side of delivering these programs. So dedicated funding for education pathways that we're asking for is formalizing and supporting more of a—not a university based-curriculum, but a clear curriculum with a laddered approach where Indigenous midwifery students can learn at a pace that's appropriate for them, that works within their community, that serves the needs of the community and can kind of jump off that ladder and provide maybe a certain kind of support for the community, do a bit more education and grow into the role of being an Indigenous midwife in the community. We have lots of models for it—growing numbers of models for it—but the ask really is about dedicated funding for the education pathways themselves.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: What amount of money is that? I'm curious.

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: We're talking about small numbers, and so part of it is the wraparound services that are required especially if there's housing needs, for example, in a community. If somebody doesn't have an Indigenous midwifery program in their community in the Far North, they might need to go to North Bay for a period of time. So it would include the wraparound needs for those learners as well.

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

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: It's also linked to the ask for a replacement for the Laurentian University program which unfortunately closed in 2021, and there's a real gap for northern and Indigenous university-based learners as well. So it's both of those asks.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Great. Thank you.

1550

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): You've got 36 seconds.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thirty-six seconds—I just wanted to say, too, I'll be watching with interest the settlement that may come after this report. That started in 2021, you said, and it's coming to completion now?

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: Yes, well, the order from the human rights tribunal came in February of 2020; the study has been under way since late 2020, so we're entering our sixth year of the study. It's a massive amount of work, but we're hoping to complete this this year.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: This year, okay.

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

MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I think I need more time with you, so I'm going to come for a visit, because I have a business degree and an entrepreneurial family, so I agree with you. As a school social worker, I saw how many kids couldn't look at someone in the face. We know now that kids would prefer to text than talk on the phone, so I'm with you—and how we can partner you with community centres and youth programming and wellness hubs to make this possible.

I'm trying to get two questions in. I'm going to ask the midwives: I see you as being a bigger part of the postnatal and prenatal experience. I think we see less women—I've had that experience. OB: I didn't end up having success breastfeeding, and then with a midwife I did.

What do you see the impact of helping the mental health of parents—and how that would translate into affordability, even?

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: This is one of those ideal research projects that we're hoping to get off the ground to really look at those more longitudinal cost benefits. Whenever we're talking about health outcome improvement, there are cost savings in the system. We know that breastfeeding, for example, is a great example of the lifetime health benefits for that child. Reduction in unnecessary medical intervention is another example that's cost savings, and mental health is a large one as well. Midwifery care is a relationship-based model of care. It's based on time spent with clients and families to establish a trusting and deep relationship during a really pivotal period of time, and midwives are poised to be able to address mental health issues, pre and postpartum depression and anxiety and, of course, in collaboration with mental health professionals, provide that preventative care.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I'd like to see you work on menopause, and also, I think this would benefit attachment, which we're not talking about, and child mental health, as we talk about screen health in those very early days.

I'd like to ask Phil a question, if I may. Phil, you've seen the housing challenges in our community with waitlists being quite long and a lot of encampments and people living unsheltered. Can you explain how investments in Habitat could alleviate pressure on our municipalities, especially in this time of increasing amounts of people facing life homeless?

Mr. Philip Mills: Investments across the continuum need to happen. We can't do it in one space or the other, and what we end up running into is that if you fix one problem and folks aren't able to move their way through the housing continuum, it just stalls somewhere else. One of the reasons we can't help folks off of the streets is because there isn't an affordable place for them to go, because that person doesn't have somewhere to go, and that person doesn't, and there's this chain of movement that we're hoping for—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time for the questions and for that question and for this panel. So I want to thank all the panellists—

The Clerk pro tem (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): There's still the government.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Oh, do you still want a turn? I'm sorry. MPP Dixon.

Ms. Jess Dixon: I do. Thank you, Chair. Thank you so much.

To turn to the Ontario midwives—listening through your presentation, and to follow a little bit on MPP Fairclough's comments: Out of your four asks—ultimately this is a hearing on budget, on finance asks. The one that seems the most clear and actionable is about education. Lee was asking you about this, but I am trying to dig down a little bit more, and now, I will say, I do know the answer is always like, "Well, as much as possible." So you don't want that idea that you're asking for a lower number. But I am trying to get a sense of, given that we've been frozen since 2010, how many midwives are we currently producing in relation to demand. Are there particular areas other than just the north where we are lacking, and what quantum are we looking at to bring us closer to an appropriate supply?

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: Yes, excellent question—thanks for the opportunity to say a bit more about it.

Currently, the two sites for midwifery education are only able to graduate 45 students. That's their cap, so 90 for the province. We've seen over the last few years only about 60 or 70 are entering the system, so we're talking about small numbers. It's a very hands-on and practical program, meaning that those learners are in the community with practising midwife preceptors. So growth cannot be exponential.

Currently, we have 900 midwives practising in Ontario. As much as we would love to say, "We would love to make that 2,000," it can't happen overnight because we just don't have the capacity for the clinical learning in the community.

What the Midwifery Education Program has proposed is a very staged and gradual growth over years. So even if it's 10% growth in the first year, that allows a gradual increase that then will eventually lead to more clinical preceptor capacity and that kind of slow and gradual growth can happen.

We're not talking about doubling the workforce, although, yes, we would love to see more roles and more involvement in the health system eventually. But we actually don't know what that target number is because we haven't created the opportunities for growth to happen as rapidly as we might like it to grow.

The two programs are small. We would love to see a third site, and we would like to see gradual increases.

There's also the issue of the per-student allocations that need to increase. Compared to other health professions, the per-student amount is insufficient. It's a small ask.

Ms. Jess Dixon: What does that look like?

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: I don't have those numbers right at my fingertips, but I believe that there is a weighted allocation, and we're asking for a slight increase to bring those programs more in line with, say, a nurse practitioner program, rather than lower than the registered nurses' programs.

Ms. Jess Dixon: Because of the preceptors and hands-on aspect of this, I appreciate what you're saying about how you can't just snap your fingers and put money into something and create it. Is it something where government would simply be funnelling finances into the post-secondary institutions to say, "Please create more spaces"? I know you were talking about the idea of wraparound supports, but if we can't do that, can we at least simply provide funding to the universities to increase the capacity in that incremental way?

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: Absolutely. There's a detailed proposal from the education program that actually was submitted in 2024. I think all of those proposals still stand in terms of the need and the impact that they could have. It is about increasing the amount of funding for the education programs. Also, increasing the ability to slightly increase tuition in those programs is something that would assist as well.

Ms. Jess Dixon: Okay. Thank you. Just to continue on that, when you talk about this idea that we have people who are going through the program who are never practising, what is happening there?

Ms. Elizabeth Brandeis: I can't speak for the majority of them. I think moving to other provinces is definitely a reality. I know that there is a phenomenon in the education program where—a large part of learning is clinical, and it really is just that phenomenon of them seeing the burnout and they see the future not looking very bright for themselves and they just say, "I invested this time in my education. I'm going to take a pivot and do something else."

Ms. Jess Dixon: Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you. That does conclude the time for this panel. We want to thank all the panellists for a great job of preparing and presenting it too. I'm sure it will be helpful as we proceed with our endeavours.

PROGRESSIVE CONTRACTORS
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA
OXFORD COUNTY
ONTARIO ENGLISH CATHOLIC
TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION,
BRUCE-GREY DISTRICT

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): The next panel is Progressive Contractors Association; Oxford county; and Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, Bruce-Grey district. And I just want to point out for the committee members, just because it's Oxford county, they will get no special treatment from the Chair. As they say, "Full disclosure."

I also have to, of course, tell the chair that I'm not going to pick on him any more than anyone else.

1600

The panellists would likely have heard the instructions. You have seven minutes to make your presentation; at six minutes, most of the time, I will say, "One minute," and then at one minute, I will say, "Stop. Thank you." We ask each person to start with your name as you make your presentation.

We will start with the Progressive Contractors Association.

Mr. Stephen Hamilton: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of the Progressive Contractors Association. My name is Stephen Hamilton, and I'm the director of public affairs for Ontario. PCA is a national association of leading construction companies that employ 40,000 unionized, skilled workers across the country—workers who are primarily members of the CLAC labour union.

Over the coming years, the provincial government will be spending historic amounts of money on infrastructure. This, of course, is a good thing. The province estimates that Ontario will be spending \$200 billion over the next 10 years, with the bulk of the money going towards transit, highways, education and health care. It is absolutely critical that the money is spent on projects where all firms are able to bid on the work, regardless of what union card their workers have.

PCA has been the leading advocate for fair and open construction competition across Ontario. We were proud supporters of Bill 66, Restoring Ontario's Competitive-ness Act, back in 2018. We applaud the government for passing the legislation that gives all qualified companies and workers an equal opportunity to build public projects in almost all municipalities and public entities. The legislation is already making a difference. The municipalities where bidding was previously restricted—places like Hamilton, Sault Ste. Marie and, notably, where we are today, the region of Waterloo—are enjoying the benefits of open competition. These municipalities now have lower capital costs, providing more value for taxpayers.

According to a report from Cardus, Waterloo region alone is saving an average of over 14% on their capital budget, or over \$24 million a year. The savings are the result of more competition in the bidding process, which doubled the number of companies bidding on construction work, after Bill 66. These are tangible savings that mean taxpayer dollars can go further, with more projects delivered. The savings are the result of additional competition in the bidding process. To be clear, this has occurred without lowering prequalification standards or any other requirements to be part of the bid selection; only the company's union affiliation is no longer required as a precondition to bid.

Beyond cost savings, there are real fairness issues under the old system of closed tendering, which excluded workers just based on union affiliation. Today, local workers in Waterloo region, regardless of what union they belong to,

can participate in building the infrastructure in their hometown.

While the region of Waterloo has benefited from more competition in construction, there are others that have not. One glaring municipal holdout, the city of Toronto, which chose to opt out of the legislation and continues its closed system, we estimate could save about \$350 million a year if they followed suit, like all other municipalities in Ontario. The city is bound to nine province-wide collective agreements in the ICI sector. This means that all work tendered by the city of Toronto, from fire stations to libraries, can only be bid on and awarded to contractors that are affiliated with those unions. No municipality in Ontario has a closed system like Toronto. The result is a capital budget in the city of Toronto that is increasing exponentially, and the state of infrastructure across the city has never been worse. We need to inject competition into procurement so Toronto can get the best value for money while building world-class infrastructure.

The province itself should also look to changes to how it tenders work in the energy sector. Due to legacy collective agreements in generation and distribution of electricity, OPG, Hydro One and Bruce Power all limit bidders based on union affiliation. This is something the province should be concerned with, considering the massive amount of planned spending in energy over the next 25 years. This isn't just building new nuclear reactors; this includes things like paving a road or doing minor renovations on those properties. PCA contractor members and non-union contractors are not able to bid on or work in any of those projects because of those agreements.

Again, we are witnessing a severe labour shortage in Ontario. According to Stats Canada, about one third of workers in construction are affiliated with those unions, so we're essentially precluding the majority of construction workers and those firms from bidding on the work, so we think there's a real opportunity there.

Lastly, I just want to say the province deserves recognition for its historic infrastructure investments as well as modernization efforts in our training and apprenticeship system, especially the closing of the Ontario College of Trades and moving to a 1-to-1 journeyperson-to-apprentice ratio. I can say, speaking to our contractors, this has really moved the dial and allowed them to bring on more apprentices and be more active in the apprenticeship space.

With that, I'll conclude, but thank you for your time and I'm happy to answer questions.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much for the presentation. We'll now hear from Oxford county.

Mr. Marcus Ryan: Good afternoon. Marcus Ryan, mayor of the township of Zorra, warden of Oxford county, chair of the Western Ontario Wardens Caucus and today speaking on behalf of Oxford county.

I spent the last three days at the Rural Ontario Municipal Association conference in Toronto, listening to ministers and MPPs—and some faces here—and having some great conversations. We heard about, and I under-

stand, the province's challenges, and we share those same priorities.

Like many municipalities in Ontario, Oxford's population has been growing recently at a much higher rate than the provincial average, and with that growth comes additional challenges, like a lack of mental health and addictions support services, access to affordable or attainable housing and increased health care needs.

Between 2020 and 2024, Oxford county experienced a 56% increase in paramedic call volumes. In Oxford county's 2026 budget, which was a 5.2% tax rate increase, 49% of that increase was health care, including long-term care. If you include housing, it represents two thirds of that increase.

Municipalities can help with this problem if we realign the funding of these services to the appropriate level of government. Residential property tax base should not be the source, nor is it sustainable to fund health care services. Programs and services that are typically administered by other levels of government are underfunded, shifting the fiscal accountability to local municipalities.

In 2024-25, Oxford county is contributing 55% of the total funding for housing, and the province and the federal contributions, combined, represent the other 45%. As the government closest to the people, municipalities are bridging that funding gap to provide much-needed services in areas including housing and homelessness, long-term care, paramedicine and community safety and well-being plans. Until this funding imbalance is resolved, municipalities will continue to experience added financial pressures in order to support community needs and well-being. This added complexity is complicating budget deliberations at councils, where sometimes councils are considering cuts to new initiatives and FTEs for core services in order to balance out the funding demands of health services.

Shifting these funding responsibilities would allow municipalities to focus on core municipal services such as infrastructure to support housing and economic development projects. And with that, I'll end.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you. We will now go to the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, Bruce-Grey district. The floor is yours.

Mr. David Geraghty: Thanks very much. David Geraghty. Thank you for allowing me to speak here today. I'm a Catholic teacher and local president of the Waterloo Catholic Teachers association, a subsidiary of OECTA. I'm here representing over 2,000 professionals who teach from kindergarten through grade 12 in locally, publicly funded Catholic schools in Waterloo region.

Catholic teachers in Waterloo region and teachers across Ontario want nothing more than to do the job they love in a learning and working environment that best suits students. But to be our best, we need a government that makes real investments in the resources and supports that students need in order to learn, grow and thrive. Let's use the opportunity of the upcoming 2026 budget to realize a better future for our children.

Along the lines of investing for the future, as a local union president, I have the honour of visiting each of our 50-plus schools and sites at the Waterloo Catholic District School Board. In fact, today I just returned back from Holy Trinity, a beautiful, brand new school out in the west-south end of Kitchener—a beautiful school.

It's remarkable to hear the incredible stories of student learning that educators endeavour to facilitate in classrooms across the region. However, every day, Catholic teachers report the devastating impact that chronic underfunding is having on our students: a lack of basic school supplies, like paper, pencils and textbooks; overcrowded classrooms; a loss of programs and services; schools in disrepair; and rising incidents of violence in schools with more teachers and other school staff reporting burnout.

I've been in this career for over 25 years, and it's the first time—in the past two years—that I've had full-time, permanent teachers approach and resign from this profession.

1610

So what is a root cause of these issues in education today? Well, the Ontario government has underfunded schools by \$6.3 billion since taking office in 2018, according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, progressively turning off the taps to starve students of their fundamental right to an education and depreciated economic benefits to Ontario.

As Paul Calandra recently announced, we need a fundamental reassessment of outcomes for students. In order to achieve this admirable goal, the government must reverse course on underfunding schools, as every dollar invested in publicly funded education yields \$1.30 in total economic benefits to Ontario, according to the Conference Board of Canada.

How can we make this adjustment in the classroom? Well, class size matters. Classrooms should nurture differences, conversation and civic skills. Smaller class sizes allow for better attention to one-on-one needs, leading to increased student engagement, motivation and academic achievement. We ask that the Ontario government commit to lower class size averages that would more effectively support student learning.

Class size matters even more when you consider class composition. In Ontario, 28% of surveyed classes have five or more students with special education needs. This has doubled in some areas over the past decade. Recently in Waterloo Catholic, teachers have reported significant anxiety when attempting to support students with IEPs when neither the technical supports—for example, Chromebooks in the classroom—nor the paper-and-pencil resources are available.

As these support needs dramatically increase, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives reported that, since 2018-19, Ontario has lost approximately 4,990 classroom educators, of which 1,600 were from kindergarten and over 1,000 from grades 4 to 8. We ask that the Ontario government consider funding that revisits class size and supports in schools such that all students may receive the attention they deserve.

Moving on, another major area of concern that hopefully the budget can attend to is the area of violence. Students, teachers—everyone in our schools—have the right to learn and work in a safe and healthy environment. In recent years, Catholic teachers in Waterloo region have seen a dramatic increase in violence in schools. Here are some examples from my members, verbatim, of the violence they've experienced in classrooms.

One teacher reported, "Students were working on patterns with clay and mini whiteboard at the centre of a circular table. The students threw items off the table and shouted. I spoke with the student," said the teacher, "and he seemed to have calmed down. I asked him to go and pick up the whiteboard from the floor. The student went over, picked up the whiteboard, walked over to me—about three or four feet away—and threw the whiteboard in my face, cutting my upper lip and tooth."

A second incident: "Students chose to sit on a bench instead of joining a group at the carpet. The student was asked to put his bag of cookies away and told the teacher she could not touch them. The teacher repeated the request. The student started swinging the bag of cookies in front of her and threatened to smash her glasses she was wearing to the ground and stated, 'I'm going to kill you.'"

A third instance: "A student wanted to do work other than what was instructed. The teacher was at the front of the class teaching. The student approached her, made a verbal threat while holding the pencil in his fist and pointing to the teacher's face, saying, 'If you don't, I'll shoot you.'"

We want all schools to be safe, not just have the illusion of safety. That means we need to focus on the source of any behaviour and dysregulation in our students and provide the supports and services they need. Research and front-line experience show that investing in the following is crucial to supporting students:

- mental health professionals;
- child and youth care workers;
- restorative justice programs;
- trauma-informed training for staff; and
- additional support for more EAs in the classroom.

I'm asking today that we please consider funding such positions, as rising school violence is directly linked to chronic underfunding, according to a study from Bond and McAllister in 2024.

Speaking of mental health and well-being, students, teachers and families need a fully thought-out, comprehensive and properly funded plan from the government to address systemic issues contributing to mental health challenges in the schools. Locally here at our school board, every time we go and approach for mental health supports and resources, we're told there is no money. That's a problem. We need real investment in enhanced mental health services and expanded—

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

Mr. David Geraghty: One minute. Thank you.

We need enhanced mental health services and expanded school-based resources to address the needs of those most vulnerable in our system.

Lastly, school repair backlog: No one should be forced to work or learn in buildings with leaky roofs, infestation issues and mould. Most recently at a local high school, we had an issue with raccoons in the ceilings of portables. In fact, these raccoons were noted to be heard walking on the ceiling tiles as well as poking their heads through during instructional periods. This is what our students are experiencing in classrooms today. The government must prioritize our students and schools and invest in a real plan that addresses the current \$17-billion budget for school repair backlog.

Lastly, let's invest in students and schools. Every student, regardless of their individual needs, should have access to the resources they need to thrive. A real plan needs to be in place to protect Ontario, to invest in our future and focus on one of our most valuable—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time. Maybe you can get it finished in the questions.

With that, we will start with MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair: I think you were at your last line. Is there anything else you wanted to add?

Mr. David Geraghty: I appreciate it. Yes. Thanks very much.

Let's work towards a better future for our Ontario students. They are the bedrock foundation and our future, and with a valuable investment in them, we look forward to a brighter future. Thanks very much.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: And thank you, David. I appreciate the work that you're doing as the new local president, but also of all of your members as well, because they're in our classrooms and our schools every single day, supporting our students, supporting families and helping folks navigate what is a very challenging and dire, I think, situation in our schools.

No one should have to go into a school and have to deal with incidents of violence that you've outlined today and that we've heard about a lot from your other union local presidents across the province, because it's something that is very challenging and we're seeing educators burn out.

I guess you think, then, in this case, number one, we need more adults in schools, right?

Mr. David Geraghty: Absolutely, yes.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: The impact of class sizes, specifically in the Waterloo region—well, I guess, in Bruce-Grey—how is that looking? What are the largest kinds of class sizes that you're seeing?

Mr. David Geraghty: It's absolutely a great question. Just to clarify, I am representing Waterloo, for sure. I think on the docket and bill, there was some reference to Bruce-Grey. Nonetheless, I mean—just to clarify. Yes, thanks very much.

We do have class sizes in the secondary that can expand to in excess of mid-30s. So we've had classes of 34, 35 and so on. I don't know if you've seen what a portable looks like, but you walk into a portable and try to take 34, 35 students and put them—you know, teenagers—into a

spot that small, that's a very, very challenging endeavour. So absolutely, we've seen them that large.

In fact, scaling down to the elementary panel, if you try to take 32 students and put them in some of these older school kindergarten classrooms, it is remarkable to watch the students try to squeeze into those environments. We've had in excess of 30 down to the kindergarten panel.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: What has been your experience, your members' experience, around split grades? What does that look like? What would be the largest that you're seeing in Waterloo or the challenges associated with that?

Mr. David Geraghty: Fair question. In terms of splits, our board does endeavour to try to minimize the impact of class size. Now, class size is one piece, and I'll get to the second piece in just a moment, but just in terms of split grades, we've seen, once again, them push upwards of 30—to your question.

And I mean, splits matter in terms of whether they're divisional splits between a primary and junior. For example, if you have grade 3-4 split, what you could be looking at, for example, is a class upwards of 30 where you're attempting to take two different divisional curriculum and deliver those. You're also looking at the EQAO requirement for grade 3 while you're trying to balance a back and forth between the requirements to fulfill a EQAO mandate with, also, a grade 4 that isn't required for that purpose. So class size impact matters.

The second piece I spoke to earlier too also matters: class composition. As mentioned previously in my presentation, we can have classrooms where we have five, six, seven, eight IEP students, individually modified programs or accommodated programs, and that class composition, without the proper resources, really matters.

I can provide an example to that effect. If you have a student who has just come in from a different country, out of boundary, and they found residence in Canada—they're excited to start their new life in Canada; their family is excited that they're in your classroom. They come and they have a particular special learning requirement, but they have a hard time accessing the digital curriculum, in light of the fact, oftentimes, they may need onboarding with the use of a Chromebook.

In lieu of that, if they don't even have the Chromebook, to go and try to find paper and pencil, which oftentimes, when teachers—as recently as last week, I spoke with some teachers and they said, "I don't have the Chromebook service, so I try to take the student with these special needs in a split class and I try to actually get paper and pencil resources, and I'm told, 'Sorry, there's no budget for paper and pencil.'"

1620

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Yes, that's wild. So around special education, we need more one-to-one support, and whether that's within the classroom sometimes or outside of the classroom, I think that's probably the experience of your members, right?

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

Mr. David Geraghty: Oh, absolutely. I mean, the one-on-one support is critical. Class size matters in that regard.

But additional supports in the classroom, too, and additional funding for EAs—and this is something that may be a budgetary consideration as well, for the 2026 budget. EAs are pulled regularly for things that we call "emergency response teams." If you have an EA supporting your students with special needs in a classroom, and all of a sudden, an emergency response is external to your classroom, your EA supports are pulled to go respond to that event. What that leaves you with in the classroom is a number of students who don't have the ability to get the one-on-one that, in theory, they're supposed to have received.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Okay.

Thank you, Chair.

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

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you all for your presentations this afternoon. I'm going to start with Stephen. Thank you for your well-thought presentation. You mentioned there other areas of procurement that are restricted based on union affiliation. Can you go into further detail about the restrictions in place for energy procurement and distribution?

Mr. Stephen Hamilton: Sure. It's a great question. Prior to the splitting of OPG, Hydro One and Bruce Power in the 1990s, there were legacy collective agreements through—and it still exists today—the Electrical Power Systems Construction Association. All collective bargaining for those entities goes through that group; I think it represents 12 different unions, and they bargain directly with those entities. As a result of that relationship—which, again, is over 50 years old—our members can't bid on the work at any of those sites, including Hydro One, the entire distribution network in Ontario, as well as OPG and Bruce Power.

Again, we think this is an opportune time. The government is investing billions of dollars over the next little while through transmission and new electricity procurement, and I think it's time to rethink how a lot of these things are built out. If there's a better opportunity, now is the time. Again, I think this is kind of an outdated model which they're using, and it's excluding a lot of contractors from participating.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Okay. Thank you for that. We hear so much with respect to supporting apprenticeships in this province, especially with wage gaps in so many of the industries and sectors. What could this government be doing to support companies hiring more apprentices in the construction industry?

Mr. Stephen Hamilton: Another good question. Again, as I said in the presentation, early on in the mandate, the government abolished the College of Trades. That was a big deal for industry. They moved to a 1-to-1 ratio, meaning if you have one journeyperson, you can hire one apprentice. The ratio before that existed was 3-to-1, three journeypersons to one apprentice, so there was this kind of gatekeeping regulation in place that limited how many people could enter the workforce, especially in compulsory trades like electrical and plumbing. Those were two kind of instrumental things they did early on.

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

Mr. Stephen Hamilton: Skilled Trades Ontario, which took over for the College of Trades, is much more focused on promotion, whereas the College of Trades was much more punitive, trying to create new regulations, more red tape. I think you see industry now is much more united than it was before from a regulatory standpoint.

In terms of apprenticeship, one of the big things our members are talking about now is the inability of their apprentice to move through the system. In an apprenticeship, there are two components: There's the on-the-tools component and then there's—

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

We'll now go to MPP Saunderson.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I want to thank the panel for taking time today to come and share your opinions and input on the upcoming budget.

Stephen, I'm going to let you finish that answer, because my son is an apprentice, so I want to hear the answer.

Mr. Stephen Hamilton: Thank you for that. There are two components: There's the in-class component, where there's a certain number of hours they have to do each year as part of their apprenticeship, and the on-the-tools.

Our members, industry—it's their job to teach the apprentice when they're on the job. For the in-classroom, they rely on training delivery agents to do that training, and there are two types: There's a union-based one and then there are public colleges. All our members' apprentices—all their training goes through the colleges.

We're hearing there's a lack of capacity in Ontario's colleges right now through the TDA system, through their seat purchases, so I think there's an opportunity to invest more. This government has announced, in the previous budget, earmarking more money towards that. It's unclear how that's being funnelled to colleges. But certainly, I think it's capacity within the college system to make sure the in-class training is there when the apprentice finishes each year.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Thank you for that. With recent developments, through the federal government restricting the number of foreign students but also restricting qualifying programs, our colleges are having some issues that we're working with through them. I appreciate those comments.

Marcus, I come from a background similar to yours. I was deputy mayor and mayor of a municipality in Simcoe county, and I was a Simcoe county councillor as well, so your discussion on efficiencies and finding the appropriate level of government and regional government to be paying for critical services on the ground is important.

In my experience at Simcoe county, the county responsibilities, some of which you've mentioned—paramedic services, long-term care, libraries, social services, planning and transportation infrastructure—was largely flow-through funding from the provincial government, in the order of about 60% of the global budget of the county. So

40% was tax-driven, and 60% was flow-through funding. Is that comparable math in Oxford county?

Mr. Marcus Ryan: "Comparable," I would say, is accurate. Thank you for the question, MPP Saunderson. I think your question also speaks to who's paying, and not necessarily who delivers the service, right? I think we know, in Ontario, for instance, that municipalities delivering ambulance service do an exceptional job. The question is, is property tax the most appropriate and effective, frankly, method of funding for that? Because every dollar that we spend on that service is then something that we don't spend on roads or pipes in the ground to support housing.

I think much of it is flow-through. But when it comes to the flow-through, the province funds half of the ambulance cost but a year late. The municipality is funding half of that cost, but also to bridge funding of the cheque that doesn't come for a year. It is true that it's flow-through, but all of the dollars then have to be managed in a municipal budget to actually come up with a tax rate and deliver a service—but approximately, it's the same.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Okay, I appreciate that. I know sometimes people tell me the lights are on and I'm not home.

You guys have a very unique model in critical infrastructure which has proven to be a pinch point for development across the province. You guys do, on a regional basis, your water and waste water, and I understand the Chair was pretty critical in getting that accomplished.

I know you're separate, but can you just talk a bit about the regional layer taking over those services, and your experience in Oxford county? Are you seeing pinch points that other municipalities are, and that Waterloo is seeing today as we talk?

Ms. Marcus Ryan: Again, thank you for the question. I did speak to this committee about a year ago on the regional government review that you were doing at that time. I would say the same thing now that I did then.

The first thing I would say is: I'm here on behalf of Oxford county. I'm not here to throw—whether it's this board, Simcoe or any other—under the bus as to how they're structured. But, in my opinion, I think that the people who came up with the system—the way Oxford works—at that time were very wise. I don't, frankly, know if they realized how wise they were when they did it, because it's a unicorn in Ontario. It's Oxford county, but it actually functions more like a regional government in that we have a single official plan at the regional level, and water and waste water down at the county level.

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

Mr. Marcus Ryan: In terms of addressing those pinch points, the people who develop that official plan are on the third floor of the building; the people who do water and waste water are on the second floor of the building. It's all done by the same council. When we're managing our growth pressures—whether that's agricultural land, industrial land, housing land—this is done at a high level by all the same people in the same building and judged by the same council.

I think that, in my opinion, in Oxford, we are delivering housing at a higher rate than a lot of the rest of our large, urban partners, which goes for a lot of our other counties in southwestern Ontario. In my opinion, we are not experiencing the same pinch point. The numbers speak for themselves: We are delivering housing at a higher per capita rate than some of the large urbans and some of the other regional municipalities that have other complications, or counties that don't have that structure.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Well, I'm probably going to run out of time, but just before we leave this, I would like to follow-up with you on DCs—

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

MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you to all three of our presenters who have come this afternoon to speak to the committee.

I want to start with Marcus Ryan, warden of Oxford county. Congratulations on your election to the Western Ontario Wardens Caucus.

1630

I think that the numbers that you presented today are very significant. When you talk about the fact that Oxford county is having to increase property taxes, almost half of that increase is related to health care responsibilities—which really is the reason that all of us pay provincial taxes, so that health care can be delivered by the province.

You talked a bit about some of the health care pressures that lower-tier governments like Oxford county—I'm sure Zorra—are experiencing around public health programs and services, paramedics, long-term care, even access to primary care. We're hearing about more and more municipalities that are spending property tax dollars to participate in primary care recruitment and retention.

In your last response, you said very definitively that property taxes are not the most effective or the place where funding should be available to fund those health care services. Can you elaborate a little bit more on why you believe that so firmly?

Mr. Marcus Ryan: It's pretty clear when you look at how municipalities were established—the core services we were intended to deliver, the property taxes and mechanism to deliver those services—that it was intended to deliver land-based services. That's essentially how municipalities were created: who is going to manage this land and who is going to manage these roads to these properties and the services required to build and maintain the road, clear the snow off the road, drainage for the roads and all those kinds of things.

The property tax rates, the impact assessment, goes up with the value of the land. It does not go up and down with economic activity in the province, i.e., income and sales taxes. For instance, an example that I use a lot of the time when I'm talking to residents trying to explain this is a coffee shop in the village of Thamesford that operates with one employee pays a certain property tax rate. If that coffee shop is extremely successful and hires four people and sells a lot more coffee—as someone who loves good

coffee and as someone who lives in that community and probably goes there, I love that for them. They're my neighbour and they're a good business person and that's great. But they're paying the same property tax rate with three or four employees. They're making more income tax, their employees are making more income tax, they're paying more sales tax, but the municipality is collecting the same property tax even though there's more people coming and going from that shop—which, again, is all good.

When you look at health care services, multiply that. For instance, with the example that I used about ambulance care, there are people who are struggling to get access to primary care. A lot of that demand is a homeless population that is experiencing exposure issues, mental health and addictions issues. They can't get access to primary care and frequently it comes to the point where their primary care is somebody else calling an ambulance for them. Hence our calls for ambulance have gone up so much more than our population growth, completely out of proportion.

In that case, those are people who literally do not own a property, i.e., no property tax is collected. Yet we provide the service, and of course, we do provide the service because we're not going to not provide the service. But there's literally no mechanism other than taxing other people to provide that service. So that's what we do and hence the tax rate goes up 5.2%, half of which is health care.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Right. Certainly, at ROMA—many of us were there yesterday and we heard from many municipalities who are facing the same kinds of pressures, specifically with mental health and addictions and homelessness, and are having to make decisions about not fixing bridges and culverts because they simply don't have the resources.

I wanted to turn to David from Waterloo OECTA and ask you about the rising violence that educators are experiencing in classrooms in Ontario. This was something we heard about before COVID, but I understand that it's become worse since the pandemic. I wondered if you have any comments on that and have you had support from the government to address it?

Mr. David Geraghty: That's a great question. Thank you very much for the question. It's a very relevant question for education because, for all of us who experience having children going to schools or grandchildren going to schools, we care that they see and experience violence in the schools.

We have more visibility today than we did pre-COVID on the numbers associated with violent incidents. The reason I say that is our provincially sponsored union had to fight through an arbitration referred to as the Hayes settlement to actually get visibility on, essentially, what kind of violent incidents are occurring in schools. And to that end, more recently, there is a mechanism in place in schools whereby teachers or any other education worker, when they see an instance of violence, can record it, for example. They're called employee violent incident reports.

Teachers are now trained on how to do that. To that end, they become better and better at reporting, so we have greater visibility.

In terms of visibility in 2025, just to give you some context, there were 1,912 employee violent incident reports completed by Catholic teachers. You know those incidents, those examples I provided you with earlier? Those are the kind of incidents that teachers are reporting on. There's still an uptake in learning how to fill out the forms, being confident to fill out the forms, but that's the teachers who are—

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

We'll now go to MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair: Thank you, Warden Ryan, for your presentation.

I think when the province looked at municipalities and how we set up a structure and who's responsible for what, I guess over 30 years ago now—times have changed, and I think the pressures on municipalities have changed with that.

Are you suggesting that the province take over some of those services that are being delivered locally through the region or provide more money for some of those services?

Mr. Marcus Ryan: Well, ultimately, it will be up to the provincial government. We're creatures of government, and it's their decision to make.

I think that the evidence would suggest that in a lot of those cases, municipalities are particularly good at delivering the service. The challenge with delivering that service and having appropriate property tax increases is—again, similar to the answer that I gave to MPP Sattler—the disconnect between the rate of increase in demand for that service and the rate of increase in property tax assessment. That's the challenge.

Again, I'll circle back to ambulance as a great example. Ambulance service as delivered by municipalities in Ontario is generally considered to be excellent. In Oxford, I'm particularly proud of the way we do it—we have a challenge, frankly, with some urban centres and large rural areas and how our response times go, but we do well at that. So I would not necessarily be a fan of the province taking those over, because I think our residents are getting good service.

When I look at long-term care, though, for instance—and the example I've used in that case is, if we took a random person off the street, blindfolded them, brought them to a long-term-care facility, and then took the blindfold off and asked them where they were, they would say, "I'm in a hospital." And I would say they are right, because there are people lying there in beds, with nurses caring for them, who could not be there without a nurse caring for them. I think most of us would say, whatever the legal definition is, "That's a hospital." The province has its own mechanisms for how it funds and operates hospitals.

So I think the answer could be different in different circumstances. Certainly, when you look at northern Ontario, again, you may have a whole other can of worms to deal

with there as well. But I think in general, it's more the method of funding of these services—more so than who delivers the services.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Just to pick up on that—and specifically, around social housing and also homelessness services: What level do you think would be most appropriate to be delivering those services, based on Oxford county?

Mr. Marcus Ryan: An easy question.

It is interesting to me that Ontario is the only province in Canada where municipalities fund housing. I don't necessarily think that we shouldn't play a role in it. Again, in Oxford county—in response to MPP Saunderson's question—we have the official plan for land use. So it's hard to say—and we do all the water and waste water service. So, directly or indirectly, we play a role in whether housing can be made available, whether through the market or through our active involvement. Also, we know our market. We know who the developers are. We know what the need is. I don't think that it would necessarily be appropriate to have no role for municipalities in doing it.

Again, I would emphasize the funding struggle of—and housing is a great one. My method of funding things is to tax properties. The problem with the housing problem is that there are not enough properties. It is easy to see how that will inevitably lead to property tax increases. How can I fund a lack of a thing by funding that thing—you can't circle that square. It's going to happen, and we're experiencing that. We have more than doubled our spend in Oxford on housing, and yet the number of people actively unsheltered, in my by-name list, is about the same as it was.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I think there are broader issues that are affecting some of those pieces as well. I think Ontario is the only province where it is delivered at the municipal level without the full funding supports that go along with it. So I think the province would be well taken to start rethinking what this model is; otherwise, I think we're going to end up in many situations—not everywhere in the province, but in a lot of situations where, to your point, more money is being invested but the problem isn't being addressed and dealt with.

1640

Frankly, as local mayors, and I hear it in the town of Ajax and when I go to other parts of this province, the same thing from local mayors and councillors that they're having to deal with this and the supports aren't there, and sometimes in a two-tier municipality structure as well, where you get some other challenges. It sounds like in Oxford county there's a little bit more collaboration and working together, and in some other places I hear some of the oppositional aspects to it, so I appreciate hearing from you on this. Thank you.

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

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Stephen, just quickly around skills training in the skilled trades: Amongst your membership, what would be the best way that we're delivering skills training so we're getting more apprentices and that you have a workforce in order to build the things that we need to build in the province?

Mr. Stephen Hamilton: Great question. Big question. There are a number of elements to it. The government did introduce—there are supports when an employer hires an apprentice, and supports every year that they move up through their apprenticeship, so there are subsidies there when you hire.

What's important for decision-makers is the distinction between a compulsory trade, like electrical or plumbing, where you need to do the apprenticeship to do the work and a voluntarily trade like carpentry. That's important because—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. Your time is up.

We now go to MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I am appreciative of all of you coming today. Thank you, as a municipal leader, for talking about the funding quandary you find yourself in because you have to go grocery shopping and it's good to have a partner.

I also thank you for talking about the construction sector and your workers and how we can look positively and cut red tape to help more people get into this and create more competition and opportunity.

I'm going to direct my questions to David. I've seen a massive change as an education worker, a school social worker, in the well-being of students. You talk about violent incidents, but I think we can look more broadly at what's going on for kids these days, how they're experiencing distress at younger and younger ages. Can you talk a little bit about the trends you've seen in the last five years and how that translates into the school workplace environment?

Mr. David Geraghty: Absolutely. Thank you for the question. It's a multi-faceted answer, so let me see if I can touch on a few. One point that I can mention is the transition into technology. COVID drove people online and, as a result of that, students in front of technology on an ongoing basis has made challenges about transitioning back into the schools. I know that the Ontario government spoke to actually eliminating cellphone usage in schools—and we're not isolated in that concern—and sent direction through the code of conduct, which is listed through the Ontario ministry website, to try to mitigate the use of technology. Some of that has been effective insofar as technology serves a purpose, a fantastic purpose, but I think there's still that challenge to try to move away from screen time as one of the impacting features to attention span, learning skills and so on like that. I think that's one piece.

A second piece is the demographic that we serve. It has transformed dramatically over the course of the past few years since COVID times, so that requires resource allocation to determine, essentially from an assessment perspective, what are the concerns in terms of dysregulation? If I don't understand what's being said here today because it's not a language I understand, if I don't understand what's being said here today because I don't have the ability to determine, I'm going to probably start to fidget,

move around, check my cellphone, act out. This is what happens in schools too, in terms of the accessibility to education—it's limited by the lack of assessors. We need more mental health professionals who can actually do effective assessments of the new demographics of what we see in the schools.

We're exploding in the Waterloo region and we see this dramatically, that the resources aren't available to attend to assessments and determine the source. Let's put the experts in charge to actually go out there and find out what the source of dysregulation is so we can attend and allocate resources.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I think of the classroom as the emergency room, as we have over 65,000 families waiting for autism funding, for example, lots of disability. I feel like when those kids don't get timely help, it means that they are coming to school with an inadequate tool box to regulate and make it through the day, and attention span is shrinking—

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

MPP Babikian.

Mr. Aris Babikian: My question is to the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association. To support students, the government is investing \$30 billion over the next 10 years, including close to \$23 billion in capital grants to build new schools, add child care spaces and modernize school infrastructure. This includes \$2 billion for the current school year to support the repair and renewal needs of schools. For the 2024 school year, 41 new schools and additions have opened, operating over 17,700 new student spaces including five French language school projects. In the 2025 Ontario budget, the province is investing \$75 million over three years to train up to 7,800 additional post-secondary students across the province for in-demand construction-related jobs.

So my question is, how do you think these extra investments will assist Ontario students?

Mr. David Geraghty: Thank you very much for the question. There is no doubt whatsoever that there has been significant investment in education. I can't argue that, but to see the impact on classrooms and students, we need to see it in schools on a day-to-day basis in the trenches. The examples that I provided in terms of escalation of violence, we need to draw resources into that attention. We did a recent audit of the schools, just for the Waterloo region, to determine outcomes for building and structure issues such as there are no guardrails on a lot of portables so students and teachers and staff don't have guardrails to grab on to in winter conditions walking up to their portables. There are no traction strips on basic portables—simple investments—that for the sake of all our portables across our entire region here would cost—\$2,500 was the determined estimate. We need to see those kinds of investment dollars in the classroom. We need to see them in our structures and currently, frankly, from what we've seen locally with our audit and the take-aways from mental health concerns, violence is exploding. I don't see those

dollars coming to the classrooms. If they do exist, let's see the action in the classroom on the ground, grassroots level.

Mr. Aris Babikian: So you agree that the current government made substantial investment in our education system, but you have to consider that for 15 years, before this government, the education system was ignored, and this current government doesn't have a magic wand to address all the issues that accumulated over 15 years, but at least there is substantial improvement in our education system.

Mr. David Geraghty: I guess my question would be, if that is truly the case, then some of the metrics that we take issue with as an organization, like EQAO—I don't even think your Minister of Education speaks about the noted improvements that you're speaking about. So I'm concerned about the source of where you're coming up with the noted improvements.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Thank you. I will pass my time to my colleague.

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

Mr. Brian Saunderson: How much time?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): You have two minutes.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Okay. I'll see if I can work this through with you, Marcus, because we're talking about housing crisis, housing affordability and getting houses built. We're also seeing pinch point on critical infrastructure, and I know you in Oxford county have a very different delivery system model which is unique across the province. But I'm wondering, the cost for DCs, either at the regional level or the local level, do they include infrastructure cost?

Mr. Marcus Ryan: Yes.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Yes?

Mr. Marcus Ryan: My lights aren't on either. Yes, they do.

Interjection: But you are home.

Mr. Marcus Ryan: I'm not, actually, but yes.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Okay, and so what then between the county and the municipality would a single-family detached home roughly be then? I know you had more than one municipality.

Mr. Marcus Ryan: Yes, you got me and it varies from municipality to municipality. I'm hesitant to say a number out loud because it's going to go to in Hansard now and I can certainly get you back more accurate numbers later, but I mean, depending on the size of the home and the municipality that's in, we're talking in the \$50,000-ish range kind of thing. Certainly not some of the horrific numbers that I heard around the province, let me say that—an order of magnitude different.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: And that's I guess where I'm headed, because what we're seeing with the municipalities that are handling the water and waste water, notwithstanding the fact—

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

Mr. Brian Saunderson: —that they are having trouble delivering on those to the point where one municipality in my county had an ICBL and effectively another is going

to be putting one in place—meaning no development—and I guess we're seeing that in Waterloo region as well. These DCs are \$80,000 to \$100,000—so the price point there. So looking at a different service delivery model like a municipal service corporation would remove that entirely from the desk of the municipalities, so it's not part of their debt load, it's not part of their asset management plan responsibility and their DCs should hopefully be reduced by a reflective amount because they're telling me 35% to 55% of their DCs is linear infrastructure-related.

1650

I guess, going back to the sufficiency thing, because yes, municipal responsibilities have grown: Do you think it is a worthwhile exercise to look at changing in a linear infrastructure service—

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

We'll now go to Jessica Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you so much. To the best of my knowledge there is not a single shred of evidence that indicates that the government is investing in schools at a level that's actually needed when you factor in inflation and population growth. They are the facts—

Mr. Aris Babikian: I already stated the record—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Order. Through the Chair.

Ms. Jessica Bell: My question is to the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association. David, thanks so much for being here. Some of the issues that you raised in your presentation are things that we're also seeing in the public school board in Toronto. I spoke to a teacher 48 hours ago. She said, "We can't use the textbooks; they're too old. I have to buy my own paper. We have up to 12 kids in each class having IEPs"—so having their own individual education plan—"and yet there's only one educational assistant in the entire school to provide additional support."

The EQAO results were released in December 2025, and they showed that Ontario's standardized testing has not achieved the desired improvement in student performance in reading, writing and math. Up to 51% of grade 6 students are not meeting provincial standards. Now, Minister Calandra went out and hired a consultant—\$1,500 a day—to look at the education curriculum and try and work out how we can improve these learning outcomes. What advice do you have for the minister about how we can improve learning outcomes for our students in your board?

Mr. David Geraghty: It's a great question. Thank you very much. I spoke before about, and a plea for the budget, is to consider additional supports in staffing as one of the ways in which the budget could be improved: Mental health professionals, additional EAs on-call to assist in classrooms where the one-on-one is so desperately needed.

I gave the example of emergency response teams where EAs are pulled from classrooms. And the example that you provided, where that one EA is simply attending to that large ratio, just imagine if they're pulled from a classroom and then the teacher is told, "Teach to the test to create the

result you're looking for." It's simply not possible. Compound that with violence as a result of dysregulation. Once again, we need EAs and mental health professionals to attend to that.

We need textbooks. If the government is going to be rolling out brand new courses on a regular basis as PR endeavours—to really meet the needs of what the constituents are looking for, perhaps—then we need the resources to support that. We need the training to support that. Teachers are thrown new curriculum last minute and said, "Figure it out. Determine your own resources." My wife is a retired elementary school teacher, and we almost went broke with things such as Teachers Pay Teachers, seeking their own resources.

Last week, I was talking to teachers in terms of investment, and the question that came up before about the value of the investment in education. Then if that's the case, why are teachers out buying their own paper from Staples to photocopy for students because they don't have textbooks. If we don't have resources supporting these ministry initiatives, if we don't have health professionals supporting those in the classrooms and additional EAs, yes, I see our system as very deeply broken and the investments are not meeting the attended needs that were desired. Those are just recommendations from my view.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you so much. The government has cut about \$6 billion, when you factor in inflation and population growth, from our public school system. We're seeing the impact of that day in and day out. Our teachers are telling us. We can see it with our kids.

My next question is to Marcus Ryan, the warden from Oxford county. Thanks so much for coming in. I just want you to speak a little bit about the impact of homelessness and the services that your municipality needs to provide to deal with the homelessness situation in your area. What does that look like and what does it cost your property tax base to provide those services?

Mr. Marcus Ryan: I'll struggle to give you a specific number, because it comes out of several different envelopes, so off the top of my head, I couldn't give you a number of what does it cost us to do that. But, as I said, in terms of the tax rate increase, 49% of the rate increase was health, and you can certainly take long-term care out of that entirely. But in terms of public health spend and

ambulance spend, which are health—the ambulance one in particular is significantly impacted by homelessness.

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

Mr. Marcus Ryan: I will say that one of the main contributors to persistent homelessness in our community, and I think it's not unique to Oxford, is mental health and addictions. We have been fortunate enough to have very recently a HART hub open in Oxford county, which is in an interim location and operating at about a 10-bed status when it's ultimately supposed to be operating at about 40, and it will get there eventually, and I have high hopes for that to make a big difference, and the province has funded that. But, again, when it comes to the issues of homelessness, the real challenge that I've tried to explain to residents is, even if we tripled, quadrupled it and we built all kinds of units, if we take a person who is experiencing mental health and addiction issues on the street and put them in a unit without addressing those mental health and addiction issues, I've just wasted a unit. I've wasted those taxpayer dollars and I've wasted that person's time.

So without those health care supports, we cannot address it. To some extent, I would say the dollars are almost irrelevant. If the problem is that a person is living under a tarp in a park, then the problem for that person and the person adjacent to that park is that that is happening at all, and it cannot be addressed without the health care spending. So, to some extent, it costs what it costs, and every time we don't spend it, I'm inevitably just pushing out—

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

This concludes the public hearings for today. Thank you, all of you, for your participation and particularly this panel—I didn't individually thank you, but thank you very much for your presentations. It will be of great assistance as we move on with our consultation.

As a reminder, the deadline for written submissions is 6 p.m., Thursday, January 29, 2026, if anyone has any added information that they would like to present, we will accept it until then.

This committee now stands adjourned until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, January 21, 2026, when we will resume hearings in London, Ontario.

The committee adjourned at 1656.

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