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**Standing Committee on
Finance and Economic Affairs**

Pre-budget consultations

1st Session
44th Parliament

Wednesday 21 January 2026

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

Consultations prébudgétaires

1^{re} session
44^e législature

Mercredi 21 janvier 2026

Chair: Hon. Ernie Hardeman
Clerk: Lesley Flores

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

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Wednesday 21 January 2026

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES FINANCES
ET DES AFFAIRES ÉCONOMIQUES

Mercredi 21 janvier 2026

The committee met at 1001 in the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel London Ontario, London.

PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to London. 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 distributed 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.

Each presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation. After we've heard from all three presenters, the remaining 39 minutes of this time slot will be used for the 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 time speaking.

With that, we are ready to go. Are there any questions from the committee?

LONDON ST. THOMAS, CHATHAM-KENT,
SARNIA-LAMBTON, WOODSTOCK
INGERSOLL TILLSONBURG AND AREA
ASSOCIATIONS OF REALTORS
MIDDLESEX-LONDON HEALTH UNIT
COUNCIL OF ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll go to our first panel: London St. Thomas Association of Realtors,

Middlesex-London Health Unit, and Council of Ontario Universities.

You've heard the rules of engagement, so I would just say we will start the presentations with the London St. Thomas Association of Realtors.

Mr. Adam Miller: Thank you, Chair, and members of the committee. My name is Adam Miller. I'm here to represent the London St. Thomas Association of Realtors, Chatham-Kent Association of Realtors, Sarnia-Lambton Association of Realtors, and Woodstock Ingersoll Tillsonburg and Area Association of Realtors. Together, we want to flag a homelessness emergency facing southwestern Ontario, including in communities like London, St. Thomas, Chatham-Kent, Sarnia and Woodstock. Shelters are strained, encampments are growing, and numbers are rising across the region. Ontario-wide, more than 80,000 people were known to be homeless in 2024, with a sharp increase in recent years.

We recommend providing provincial leadership through a dedicated regional homelessness task force focused on scaling supportive housing and rental supply, strengthening community-based response models like the HART hubs, and supporting coordinated encampment transition and moving people into stable housing with the right support.

In addition, we want to draw the community's attention to the challenge facing Ontario's rental housing. It's clear that there has been a buildup over time and no single action, other than maybe COVID, will fix the problem overnight. But taken together, modernizing the Residential Tenancies Act, expanding mediation, incentivizing new supply, and acting urgently on homelessness can restore balance and build systems that work for tenants, landlords and communities.

Ontario's rental market needs rebalancing. The reality is that the current framework is not delivering for either side. Recent polling by the Ontario Real Estate Association conducted by Abacus Data found that seven out of 10 landlords and tenants support updating rental rules to reflect today's realities in achieving a fair balance.

We recognize that the province worked through Bill 60, the Fighting Delays, Building Faster Act, 2025, to improve efficiency, fairness and accessibility at the Landlord and Tenant Board.

First, the Residential Tenancies Act needs a comprehensive, evidence-based update and has not been fully reviewed in nearly two decades. The Ontario rental land-

scape has changed dramatically in that time. The system often treats very different housing situations the same way, and that drives confusion and conflict and disrupts that ability to move through the system quickly. We recommend a structured review process that is practical and credible, including an expert advisory panel, meaningful stakeholder engagement and citizen referral groups so that reform reflects real-life experience on both sides of the lease. Substantially, we proceed to—a tiered approach to tenant protections based on housing style. Purpose-built rental buildings should have the strongest protection. Small independent landlords should have moderate protection that still ensures fairness. Units within owner-occupied homes should have lighter regulation because the relationship and risks are different. This would make rules clearer, reduce preventable disruptions, and better align policies realistically in a community like ours.

Second, Ontario should expand and formalize mediation in the landlord-tenant act. While there have been improvements, delays and backlogs still create uncertainty for tenants and landlords. The backlog was over 53,000 cases in 2024; by September 2025, it has improved to 37,000, a roughly 30% reduction. Still, wait times remain lengthy, and new applications keep arriving. We recommend using British Columbia's model as a guide, screening cases for eligibility and directing suitable disputes into mandatory third-party mediation before a hearing is scheduled. This matches public sentiment. Polling shows 71% of Ontario supports broader access to mediation before hearings. Faster resolution benefits tenants, landlords and the tribunal alike.

Third, Ontario should help unlock new rental supply by supporting small landlords who have units in areas of the highest demand. Small-scale landlords provide essential rental options, especially throughout secondary suites and accessory units. High borrowing costs and economic uncertainty have reduced new investment. Polling suggests nearly one in five Ontario owners have space to rent in their home. We propose a targeted income tax credit for small landlords who have five or fewer rentals, are in good standing with the tribunal and add new rental units in high-demand municipalities.

Thank you for your time. I appreciate it.

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

Our next presenter will be Middlesex-London Health Unit.

Ms. Emily Williams: Thank you. Through you, Mr. Chair: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I'm Emily Williams, the CEO of the Middlesex-London Health Unit, a local public health agency.

Growth in the population of London and Middlesex continues to outpace the provincial average, and we are now responsible to promote and protect the health of over half a million people who call our region home. A healthy economy is not possible without healthy people. As a foundational component of Ontario's health care system, we prevent illness, protect communities, and promote long-term health. Local public health contributes to higher

productivity, reduced health care costs and a strong economy, and must be supported in the 2026 budget through sufficient, equitable and sustained funding to ensure its long-term stability.

Unfortunately, funding for local public health agencies is currently not equitable across the province when population size is factored in. As of 2024, the Middlesex-London Health Unit was the third-lowest-funded health unit in the province. Ministry data from that year noted that the MLHU received \$50 per resident in our region in provincial funding and the average health unit received \$57 per resident. That \$7 difference represents over \$4.7 million less in funding for our health unit.

1010

Provincial funding capped at a 1% increase in 2024, 2025 and 2026 has not kept pace with either population growth or inflationary pressures. The MLHU has been forced to reduce 22.5 full-time equivalent positions of public health professionals over the last two years. This includes significant decreases in public health nursing positions, as well as dietitians, health promotions staff, and leadership. This comes with significant reductions in the public health programs and services we provide to our region, including:

- the discontinuation of most chronic disease and injury prevention strategies, including no ongoing work on obesity, heart disease, cancer, sun safety, motor vehicle collisions, or poverty;
- reductions in support for vulnerably housed individuals, including support for bedbugs;
- reductions in home visiting support for young families. We are currently only screening approximately 70% of births in our region for risk factors;
- significant reductions in prenatal support for the general population;
- a complete retreat from public health nurse presence in schools, except for immunization, oral health screening, and tobacco enforcement;
- reduced capacity for tobacco enforcement, and a limited ability to address the increase in cannabis consumption;
- limited ability to support municipalities with public health expertise; and
- a significant reduction in vaccine clinics for the general public.

Despite historically contributing less than other municipalities, the city of London and Middlesex county have increased their support of the health unit significantly over the past two years, with 6% and 8.9% increases to their contributions in 2025 and 2026. This year, they have also each committed to assisting us in paying down debt we incurred when moving to a new location. No capital funding was approved by the province. This \$2.8-million investment has enabled us to redirect almost \$250,000 from debt repayment to public health programs and services.

Despite these increases from the municipal contributions, MLHU is still not able to keep up, maintain or evolve to the ongoing public health needs of our commu-

ity without a change in the provincial funding formula. According to the Bank of Canada, inflation has averaged nearly 4% over the past five years. During this same period, public health funding increases of approximately 1% annually have effectively amounted to year-over-year funding cuts, as I have outlined. The majority of our costs are related to staffing, and our union contracts have been negotiated with 3% increases to wages for the next two years.

The Ministry of Health funding review for local public health originally scheduled to occur in 2025 has been delayed until this year. One of our concerns is that further loss of public health professionals and important services for the Middlesex-London community will occur while we await the outcome of that process.

As you build the next budget for our province, I am here asking for your consideration of consistent, sustained and sufficient funding for the Middlesex-London Health Unit. The MLHU, like all other local public health agencies, is a foundation of economic strength. A healthy population is more productive, incurs lower health care costs, and contributes to long-term economic resilience and prosperity. With sufficient funding, we can be a strong partner in the provincial government's commitment to protect Ontarians.

Thank you for your time today. I look forward to any questions.

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

Our next presenter will be the Council of Ontario Universities.

Mr. Steve Orsini: My name is Steve Orsini. I'm the president and CEO of the Council of Ontario Universities. On behalf of Ontario universities, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

As you're all aware, we're facing historic challenges, whether it's geopolitical tensions and tariffs, supply chain disruptions, escalating technological change, or intensifying global competition. The question we need to ask ourselves is, what do we need to do to protect and grow our economy? Building a strong foundation for talent and innovation is key.

Ontario universities are helping to build a strong province by generating the talent our employers need, driving the research and innovation to boost our productivity, and supporting community economic development throughout the province. We don't just want to help Ontario get through these tough times; we want to support a strong province. The ability to compete and succeed both at home and on the global stage depends on its people, its ideas, and universities are committed to working with the province to protect and grow our economy.

Every year, more than 135,000 university graduates enter the labour force equipped with the skills and ideas and resilience to power our economy.

Universities are responding to changing labour market needs. Since 2010, STEM enrolment at Ontario universities has increased by 76%; enrolment in health care programs by 40%. And students are voting with their feet.

Since 2020, we have seen an 18.5% increase in the number of Ontario high school students applying to an Ontario university.

However, domestic student demand far exceeds funded spaces. Nearly 28,000 Ontario students are currently unfunded due to the provincial funding cap on domestic enrolment. As you hear every year, top students across the province are having more difficulty getting into a program of their choice. Without raising the funding cap, students will face even more difficulty, and we estimate that there will be a lack of funded spaces to accommodate the additional 77,000 Ontario high school students expected to apply to an Ontario university by 2030, limiting the province's ability to grow our highly skilled workforce for the future.

Ontario universities are working hard to boost our economy. Last year, they conducted \$4.1 billion in research, focused on innovative and applied solutions that support Ontario companies, industries and economy. Between 2021 and 2024, university-led research generated more than 3,000 invention disclosures and launched 185 start-ups in critical industries such as AI, life sciences and advanced manufacturing.

We welcome the government's investments to date, including the \$1.3 billion over three years for colleges and universities—funding, I should add, that is scheduled to end in just over a year—and the \$150 million a year to support STEM enrolment.

However, the combined impact of the tuition cut and freeze, along with the federal reductions to international students, which alone are predicted to result in a cumulative revenue loss of \$5.4 billion by 2028-29, far exceeds the additional funding we have received.

Universities have taken considerable steps to drive greater efficiencies and have already absorbed significant cost pressures. Nearly \$1.28 billion in cuts and deferrals have been implemented across the system over the past three years. Despite these cuts, the sector faces deficits of \$265 million this year, and the funding gap is expected to grow to \$1.3 billion by 2028-29.

The consequences are real: reduced spaces; cuts to student services, such as work-integrated learning, career coaching, student mental health; and reduced support for commercialization and start-up programs which are driving our innovative economy. Cuts such as these weaken the very foundation that helps Ontario adapt, grow and compete.

Ontario universities are committed to growing this province, but they need the province to ensure they have the resources to deliver the talent and innovation that our economy needs.

That's why we're calling on the province to increase operating funding by \$1.2 billion starting in 2026-27, growing to \$1.6 billion by 2028-29, to enrol more students, to drive more research and innovation, and to support more community economic development. Together, we can protect and grow Ontario for our students, for our community and for our economy. This is an investment in our future.

Thank you.

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

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

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you to our three presenters today.

I want to begin with the Middlesex-London Health Unit. Certainly, the reduction in programs and services you described that you have been forced to make because of the inequitable funding model that the province currently has in place has significant consequences for the health of our population.

You talked about the need for consistent, sustained and sufficient funding to enable the health unit to continue to provide the services—even the reduced services—that you currently offer.

Can you tell this committee, at a minimum, what kind of annual increase you would need to see to your budgets from the province in order to be able to maintain the services that you currently provide?

Ms. Emily Williams: Thank you for the question.

Through you, Mr. Chair: At a minimum, 3% annually would enable us to maintain current services. However, that wouldn't address the cuts and reductions of services that have had to occur over the last 10 years. A minimum of 5% for the next three years would ensure that we're able to keep up with the growing pressures and the growth in our community, ensuring we can provide vaccination services, prepare for emergencies, talk to young mothers and support them, as well as address youth vaping. If we want to tackle those problems, which are growing in our community, then we would need 5% annually, at a minimum.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: And what is at risk if you don't get the 3% or 5%?

Ms. Emily Williams: Further reductions, essentially, is what we're faced with, and putting our board of health in the position of needing to make difficult decisions, prioritizing services. I can tell you, through this year's budget process, one of the things that—if our municipalities had not stepped in with the increase they did, we would have had to cut our family planning services; those clinics that we provide to folks who don't have primary care access, who are highly vulnerable. They would have been cut if our municipalities hadn't stepped in with their increase. So services like that would need to be reduced.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you very much.

I now want to turn to Steve Orsini from Council of Ontario Universities. Again, the numbers that you have provided should certainly sound the alarm for the government, when we're looking at over 100,000 domestic students in this province who won't be able to get access to Ontario university programs that they want to get into and that our province needs graduates from in order to grow our economy.

Your budget asks for the \$1.2 billion in increased operating funding. Can you talk about the difference between

the three-year funding that the government made that's going to end next year—tuition revenues—versus the base operating funding that the university system needs to be able to continue to function in this province?

Mr. Steve Orsini: Thank you for the question.

Right now, Ontario universities are the lowest-funded in the country when you look at it, per student; we are funded at 55% of the rest of Canada on a per-student basis. The \$1.3 billion that the provincial government announced a little over two years ago essentially was addressing funding that hadn't occurred for the sector. There hasn't been an increase in operating funding for over a decade, and their expert panel made this point. And that funding is scheduled to end in just over a year. That will plummet the sector into deep financial challenges, if that funding is not renewed and increased. For us to even get close to the national average—we're at 55% now, to the rest of Canada—we would need to double our operating funding.

We're really looking for financial support because universities are facing a perfect storm: the cut, freeze to tuition—

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

Mr. Steve Orsini:—operating grants that haven't kept up and scheduled to end, and cuts to international students. That's going to have deep, deep implications for the university sector. Universities acted responsibly. They had modest growth—international students only representing 90%. We are facing a perfect storm right now.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: You talked about the \$1.28 billion in cuts and deferrals that have already been made by universities over the last three years.

Do you have a sense of how many universities are facing deficits as we move into the coming fiscal year?

Mr. Steve Orsini: Well, we needed, just for the—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll have to wait for that answer in the next round. The time is up.

MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you all for being here this morning.

I'm going to share this round with my colleague from Etobicoke-Lakeshore.

A quick question—and then hopefully a quick answer—to Mr. Orsini from the Council of Ontario Universities: You talked about some of the shifts that students are making in terms of their choices, like going into STEM and into health care because they see that's where the opportunities are. I wonder if you could talk a bit about how your universities are responding to that changing demand for programs—how nimble you've been in doing that.

Back to the shortfall: It's interesting that the \$1.2 billion is about the same as what's being spent on the Skills Development Fund, and I would certainly argue that investing in our educational institutions would be a better use of that money. I wonder if you could comment on what you'll do with that money when you get it, what it allows you to do.

Mr. Steve Orsini: Universities are responding to changing labour market needs. We're also responding to

student demand. Even though we had an 18.5% increase in the number of Ontario high school students applying since 2020, we've had a 39% increase in applications for STEM since 2020. For health care, because of the shortage of health care professionals, we've had a 93% increase in applications. Universities are capped on their ability to enrol these students. So demand for STEM is up, demand for health care professionals is up, and universities are capped. We have 28,000 already that are unfunded, and 77,000 more that will not have a funded space at an Ontario university, reducing access for these students.

In terms of the use of the funds, we spend \$1.8 billion in student services, which includes mental health, career counselling—\$1.8 billion. That will almost equal our entire shortfall by 2028-29, plunging students into very difficult circumstances—the lack of supports. Students need supports in a very uncertain world. They need the career counselling. They need work-integrated learning. These are the things that universities invest in that we won't be able to invest in to the same degree in the future.

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

Mr. Adil Shamji: Emily, my question is for you.

In the last year, we've seen the resurgence of pathogens like measles. We have seen a particularly brutal flu and respiratory season this fall and winter. We've seen hospitals over capacity to the tune of 110%, 120%. I understand that you're doing everything you can, but in some areas you have had to, to use your own words, signal a complete retreat from some of your health promotion and public health activities.

If you were funded adequately, in what ways could you have prevented some of the consequences that we have witnessed in the last year in Ontario, and here in London?
1030

Ms. Emily Williams: Through you, Mr. Chair: One of those important prevention strategies, particularly around the pathogens you mentioned, would be vaccination. At the moment, we are currently limited in our ability to vaccinate for the general public. We rely on the pharmacy model to promote that.

I think the other is our reduced presence in schools. Our nurses are completely removed now from the schools in Middlesex and London. So those upstream conversations around contraceptive support, smoking cessation, vaccination—we're not able to provide those.

I think all of our health promotion at the far upstream end, in terms of municipal policy, provincial policy in tobacco cessation and vaping—all of those have downstream effects of preventing health care visits.

If you fund public health appropriately, you can avoid health care costs.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Most Ontarians have been subjected to self-promotional advertising about the Ring of Fire and Ontario Place, which I'm sure is very relevant to the people of London.

If you had had a fraction of that funding, what could you have done in terms of health promotion activities?

Ms. Emily Williams: We would have focused on, as I said, tobacco and vaping cessation, which is a rising prob-

lem amongst our youth, and, certainly, promoting vaccination.

There is a surge in misinformation and disinformation, particularly around vaccines, which directly contributed to the measles outbreak in the region surrounding Middlesex and London. So we're wanting to do some comprehensive work on vaccines, in reminding our public that they are very safe and effective.

We would also want to partner with primary care through Ontario health teams, because one of our roles is promoting access for primary care—

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

MPP Brady.

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

Adam, I don't want you to feel left out, so I'm going to start with you.

You said seven out of 10 landlords support creating a balance at the LTB, and we've heard that a number of times on this committee as we've been travelling.

I represent a very rural riding, and I often hear from small landlords who become very frustrated with the game that's played by some of their tenants. They can't get them out. They wait a long, long time to go to the LTB. They're not collecting rent, and they say to me, "It doesn't pay for me to actually be a landlord."

Housing supply, we know, depends on landlords being willing to remain in the market.

From your perspective, Adam, what practical reforms could actually streamline the removal of truly bad-faith tenants while still protecting responsible renters, so that we can keep those small and medium-sized landlords encouraged to continue providing rental housing?

Mr. Adam Miller: Through the Chair: I've been at this a couple of times, so I usually don't get a lot of questions when we have these guys up here. I appreciate your question.

We do talk about this—that there is a difference in landlords. When we talk about small business and how it's the engine—it's the same thing with landlords: Small landlords are the engine of the rental supply.

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

Mr. Adam Miller: We have the exact same rules for the large renters that are coming in and doing the wrong things—where we have the local mom-and-pop shop being treated exactly the same way.

When we talk about streamlining—it will make a huge difference if we can get to a quick mediation, so they don't have to go through the entire process. As you were saying, some of these tenants know this system extremely well. If we could go to mediation and say, "We know this is the rule that's going to be broken; we need to change this right away before it has to go all the way through the entire process," it will bring those wait times way down, and also dial back a little bit of the negativity of being a landlord. There's a lot of "Landlords are bad. Tenants are good." If we could treat them differently, I think we would see a lot of quicker mediation to get those tenants out.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: So maybe some common sense and discretion?

Mr. Adam Miller: Absolutely.

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

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I want to thank all of our panel this morning, not only for taking time to share your expertise and comments with us, but also for the important work you do in our communities.

Adam, I'm going to pick up with you as well; you might feel like you're getting more attention than normal. Hopefully that encourages you to come back next year.

In my past role, I was parliamentary assistant to the Ministry of the Attorney General and was working specifically on this file.

The Landlord and Tenant Board has been an issue. It went through significant process changes, obviously, over the COVID pandemic, moving to virtual hearings and then having to change the entire platform to support it—so significant IT expenses.

I want to delve a bit into the numbers to clear up some issues and then get your opinion on others.

You talked about the backlog. At its peak, it was over 53,000, but there are about 7,000 or 8,000 files coming in on a monthly basis, and the gold standard would be to clear those in three months—so 90 days from filing your claim or application to getting an order. That's three months, so your stasis, then, is approximately 21,000 to 24,000 files, given the number of 7,000 or 8,000 intakes on a monthly basis. So getting down to 38,000 now is quite a considerable reduction. And there's still work to do; you're right. We've doubled the number of both full-time and part-time adjudicators. There are about 85 full-time adjudicators right now, and 56 part-time. As I said, we're working to the idea of 90 days from filing your application to getting your resolution.

Pre-pandemic, it was about 75% that were rental arrears or nonpayment—we call those simple cases, and the hope is that we can get those done in six weeks. We're finding that we are able to get that done now, but we're seeing a rise in complex cases that have issues other than just rental payments. So we're looking at streaming, to try having the simple cases move forward as quickly as possible, to help our landlords and our tenants get resolutions.

I agree with you—and the minister has said this many times: We want to have a balanced system that recognizes the issues on both sides of the table.

What would your thoughts be, then, on streaming applications so that simple applications like rental arrears and nonpayment would be dealt with expeditiously?

Mr. Adam Miller: Absolutely, we 100% support that. That has been similar to the problem in what I was just saying: that simple cases are running on the same timeline as the complex cases. So if you could go through the process and say, "Great. Here we can subsection these guys. These guys can go into a quick mediation"—and some of them do get complex, because the reason they're not paying rent is certain things that the landlord does. But a lot of times, we can go through the simple cases quickly and move that. The problem is that, yes, they're going

through quickly, but tenants are still, even if losing at the Landlord and Tenant Board, refusing to leave. So the other aspect of it is having the sheriff come in, removing them from the property.

There's the one side that says, "Yes, it would be fantastic. We can get them quickly out"—through the easy ones. But once we come to a decision, the system is helping it through the process as well.

Especially with smaller landlords—they don't understand the process. They've won at the landlord tenancy act, and they say to the tenant, "We won. You're supposed to be out." And they say, "Good luck." So we still have that issue of almost a continuing service needs to allow—because what's happening is, then that is resurfacing as another application of, "I've won, but I'm still having issues with them getting out." Some of those cases can be then dealt with quickly that way.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: You raise a good point when it comes to enforcement. We've been looking at ways to expand—

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

Mr. Brian Saunderson: One minute.

Right now, it's just limited to sheriffs. We're looking to expand that, to have other services that you can get to help enforce it.

You were talking about rental units. While our housing starts have stopped over the last two years, we've had about a 17% increase in rental units being built. I think that's in large part as a result of the 25% reduction in DCs for rental units. In 2023—that was the high across Ontario.

I think you're right, in terms of protecting smaller landlords. With the housing affordability crisis, we'd like to see additional rental units going in, to first-time homebuyers, so that they can help pay their bills.

Are you seeing, in your practice or across the region, first-time homebuyers looking at having a rental unit to help them pay their bills?

1040

Mr. Adam Miller: Yes. It's a massive—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll never know. Time is up.

MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to all our presenters for coming here today.

I would like to begin with Adam.

Adam, in December 2024, in terms of our health and homelessness whole-of-community response, there was a review and analysis conducted by CRHESI and Ivey Business School, where 180 students from Ivey analyzed the direct and indirect costs of homelessness, including emergency health care, policing, incarceration, shelter use and social services. They estimated that each individual would cost around \$100,000 in system costs, whereas correctional facilities cost \$132,000 per year, in-patient mental health care is \$204,000, and psychiatric hospitals is \$378,000.

My question is, would you like to see the province take a more active and responsible role when it comes to alleviating homelessness?

Mr. Adam Miller: That's a great question. Thank you.

There's an old saying, especially in real estate: It's that most people say they have 100 issues when they're homeless and 94 of them are taken care of with shelter. That's where I try to hit the right supports with homeless shelters, when we have encampments. You need to take the homeless from an encampment into a situation where they're getting the support. Shelter takes care of quite a bit. And we know that absolutely one of the most affordable ways to get the homeless off the streets is providing them with stable shelter.

Tiny homes are starting to pop up. A lot of individuals are seeing them as a great solution because it is that stability that they're looking for. They have a door, so they're safe. They have heat. They have a roof. The rest of the systems can be easily brought to them once they know where they're going to be seven days a week—through the system that way.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you very much.

I would like to move over next to Emily with MLHU.

Emily, in your presentation, you spoke about preventive models. Can you speak to the cost-effectiveness of prevention in terms of chronic disease as well as injury?

Ms. Emily Williams: Through you, Mr. Chair: Thank you for the question.

We've done some early analysis on return on investment for public health services. We were talking about vaccination in particular, or our early intervention with young parents, new parents, who are vulnerable.

Partnering with our nurse-family partnership program, for example, can prevent early preterm births, complications—less substance use in teenagers, less involvement with youth justice. So that nurse-family partnership program is a great example of how upstream intervention with new parents and vulnerable individuals can prevent long-term impacts not just for health but also for social injustice systems.

In the case of vaccination; for example, vaccination for measles—we were talking about the outbreak earlier. Preventing an admission to a pediatric in-patient bed, as an example—having formerly worked in the acute-care sector, it can run between \$500 and \$1,000 a day for those types of stays.

So those are some of the numbers that we talk about when we talk about upstream prevention minimizing those costs to other parts of the system.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It would be a wise fiscal expenditure, wouldn't it?

I noticed, from your notes, that the MLHU was forced into a situation because of underfunding—to close the Strathroy location. Can you speak to the impacts for that community in terms of that closure?

Ms. Emily Williams: We were a presence in the Strathroy community for over 30 years, with our main office. We have retained our dental office and clinic there. However, we now are pivoting to mobile services as well as leveraging the dental clinic to provide other services, like vaccination, like sexual health clinics, in the dental clinic—

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

Ms. Emily Williams: It has impacted our visibility in the Strathroy location. As I said, we are attempting to pivot to mobile clinics, which will then further our reach out into the county. But certainly, we've had feedback from the mayor and residents there that they miss us in that space.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you very much.

Lastly, I'd like to move over to Steve.

Ontario is dead last when it comes to post-secondary funding and has been for decades; in fact, it has been described as the bottom of the barrel.

With your request for operational funding increases of \$1.2 billion and \$1.6 billion, where would that place Ontario in comparison to other provinces?

Mr. Steve Orsini: It would go a long way to close the gap. It wouldn't close the gap. At 55% funded, compared to the rest of Canada on a per-student basis, it would require to almost double the operating funding we get, so more than—

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

MPP Fairclough.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I'm going to be splitting my time with my colleague MPP Cerjanec.

First of all, thank you all for coming to present today. They're all very important topics.

I was pleased to hear the leadoff on homelessness and some of the suggestions that you've got to address that, especially in this community; I know that it has been rising. This week, the report said it's now up to 85,000 across Ontario. And having visited here in the summer, I saw it first-hand.

I support your asks around really doing a comprehensive review of the legislation, and I'm also quite compelled by the data that seven out of 10—both tenants and landlords—would like to see these kinds of changes.

With three out of five people, though, worried about losing their housing if their financial situation were to change tomorrow, are there other recommendations that you've got for how we can help people hold on to their housing, so that we can actually start to really address this homelessness crisis further upstream?

Mr. Adam Miller: We talked about it at the end of the presentation. A tax incentive would be a great idea for people who are in their home now, to create a secondary suite.

Across southwestern Ontario, a lot of people are living in homes that are 2,500 to 2,700 square feet, where they probably could be down to 1,200. They're the first to admit—"I live in a big home, and I could do a basement unit. But what's in it for me?"

We're seeing more and more of the struggling with the bad markets the last couple of times, with equity sort of lowering houses—the houses aren't there, the bank accounts that they have been. So people are looking at incentives to creating secondary units, garden suites; even secondary units that are not attached to the house, so in the backyard—things like that. It's slow-going, because a lot of times, they want to see them before they get there. But

we are starting to see more and more people who are getting into that situation, looking at alternatives to renting basements and parts of their homes.

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

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair: Thank you, Steve from Council of Ontario Universities, for your presentation today.

It's very clear that our universities need a lot more support if we're going to not just keep the lights on but be able to grow our economy and drive innovation and create new jobs and opportunities and deal with things like AI.

From your perspective, what does the provincial government need to do—focusing around new job creation, businesses, enterprises coming out of our universities—in order to deal with the challenges that we have coming in the future?

Mr. Steve Orsini: Thank you for the question.

There are a number of things the province can do. They're currently reviewing the funding formula, which hasn't been reviewed for some time. It's a chance for the province to put universities on a sustainable, predictable track; address the funding shortfall so we can maintain enrolment for talent our communities need, so we can invest in research and innovation, and we can support communities throughout the province.

There was a recent study done looking at Canada's innovation economy. They said the bright spot for our economy was universities. Both the talent and innovation, and the invention disclosures, the research and innovation, the cutting-edge technology—whether it's AI, quantum computing, advanced manufacturing, nuclear energy, our future economy depends on the skills, talent and research that universities are generating. Failing to have those funds undermines our economic future.

1050

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: If we're able to do some of the things that you're saying—

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

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: —we would very likely see new businesses, new companies, new enterprises supporting things in agriculture, supporting health care, coming up with solutions in our education system.

What would be the impact if we don't make those investments?

Mr. Steve Orsini: One of our challenges is lack of productivity. We can't scale up companies. We need to attract investment—not big anchor projects, which we welcome, but the small scaling up of innovative companies which will become dominant players in the future. Our innovation ecosystem is essential to take those ideas and bring them to market. So we need the resources to commercialize technology. Our tech transfer offices are unfunded. We need resources from our revenues to put aside, to commercialize. That is an unfunded area that's holding us back. So by providing the funding, allowing universities to—

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

MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Steve, let's just recap here. The council has called for an end to the ongoing domestic tuition freeze which has been in place since 2019. Correct?

Mr. Steve Orsini: The cut and freeze.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: And you said that domestic applications have surged by something like 17% since 2020. We know that universities are projecting a \$265-million deficit this year, despite this record demand for domestic students.

So please forgive me for asking this, but I think it's an important question and answer to actually have on the record, because I hear from people in my travels who believe that universities might be holding the domestic student spots hostage to force the province to end the 10% tuition cut and freeze.

What would you say to those people?

Mr. Steve Orsini: We have 28,000 Ontario students above the corridor. In other words, we are doing our best to support Ontario students; otherwise, they wouldn't get into a university in Ontario and may have to leave the province. We would like to enrol more. We've had an 18.5% increase in the number of high school students since 2020; we expect 77,000 more. We don't have the resources to enrol those students. In fact, we're cutting back. We've cut nearly \$1.28 billion. We've reduced employment by 2,500. We've cut 2,700 programs and courses. We're not growing to meet demand, which undermines our economic objectives to grow and protect the economy. We need to grow to meet that demand. Universities are doing their best to enrol them, but when they're not funded—

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

Mr. Steve Orsini: It's impossible to expand when the funding is not keeping up with the pressures that universities face, and when you add to that the reduction in international students that impacted all post-secondary, universities acted responsibly. International students represented 19% of our students. We didn't overrely on them. But when the federal government announced the cuts, they admitted they took a blunt instrument, so we're getting impacted—not the ones that the federal government wanted to target, but we're all being impacted, and we need provincial support to come in, wanting to address the complete underfunding of our universities compared to the rest of Canada. And they need to support our students, generate the talent and innovation our economy needs. We're under economic threat right now. We should be investing in our foundation of talent—

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

MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you to all the presenters for coming out this morning and sharing your expertise with us. I really appreciate it.

My question is to Adam. I'm going to ask a bit of a multi-part question here, so bear with me.

In your professional opinion, in the province of Ontario, do we need more rental housing?

Please summarize for us: What is the primary barrier you see to getting more landlords, that one third of homeowners we have in the province of Ontario who have the space—what is the barrier to them creating that rental housing. And how would more rental housing in the province of Ontario assist tenants like my peers?

Mr. Adam Miller: Through the Chair: Great questions.

Do we need more purpose-built rentals? Is that what you're asking there?

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: All types of rentals.

Mr. Adam Miller: We do need a diverse increase in all type of rentals.

We have seen decent growth in purpose-built rental units in the last couple of years, just with some incentive dollars. We're probably on the healthy side of purpose-built rentals—larger apartment buildings, larger structures that way. I would say we're probably very healthy on that side.

What is stopping people getting into rental is fear; I don't know if it's necessarily all called for. But media hasn't been super helpful on promoting the benefits of rentals—it's more of bad tenants and bad landlords get the top story. So 1% of the tenants are bad, 1% of the landlords are bad, but we don't hear about 99%—of the good side. Everybody has a horror story of a tenant who won't get out, or of a landlord. I think that's the number one barrier. I know that sounds ridiculous, when I could say interest rates and costs to create units would probably be there too. But our biggest barrier is fear.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Again, how would getting that one third of people who have the space, who are afraid right now, giving them confidence—what is it going to take to give them confidence? And if they do and they create that housing themselves—the small mom-and-pop landlords you talked about—how would that benefit tenants?

Mr. Adam Miller: I think the thing is creating a system that is a tiered system, so the mom and pop get treated differently with the landlord and tenant act; having a media that is saying, "If you only have one unit or two units, you are not going through the same system. So here is a quick way."

BC does it really, really well. They have a very quick system. If the tenant is not paying, it can be a quick system—to get them into the system, get a mediation, "Why are you not paying?" If they refuse, if they're not going to continue to pay, the system moves them out quickly.

We need to have a system that is made for what kind of landlord you are, instead of painting them all with the same brush.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: As you know, our government recently passed the Fighting Delays, Building Faster Act, which made a lot of changes to the Landlord and Tenant Board and the rules around it, trying to bring some fairness back into the system, to build that confidence. I know there is more to do, like you said in your presentation, but how have those changes helped the situation, in your mind?

Mr. Adam Miller: Absolutely. We do give credit where credit is due. We saw a pretty steep decrease from—we were seeing 57,000 cases down to 37,000. When we first heard these numbers, my thing was, "Are we processing 25,000 cases a month?" If that is the case, then the backlog is nothing. The problem is when you throw giant numbers out there—like there are 37,000 in the backlog. How long does that take?

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

Mr. Adam Miller: We have seen improvements in the system and have supported seeing that we're moving in the right direction, for sure.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Shifting gears a little bit—our government recently announced that we're rebating 8% of the provincial portion of HST for first-time buyers of new homes. How do you think that will help young people like myself, people who have no equity, the first-time homebuyers, get into the housing market and also provide more incentive to build?

Mr. Adam Miller: Yes, we certainly don't want to take away from it. It's a great plan; I would love to see it given to everybody. The problem with first-time homebuyers is that they're not the driving force in or the purchasers of new builds. So it would be great to expand that program to all candidates looking to buy a new build.

1100

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

We want to thank all the panellists for a great job. Thank you for taking the time to prepare and come here and help us with our deliberations. I'm sure it will be quite welcome.

MYSTORIA INC.

CMHA THAMES VALLEY ADDICTION AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We will now ask the next panel to come forward: myStoria Inc., CMHA Thames Valley Addiction and Mental Health Services, and the city of St. Thomas.

We will start the panel. I understand one of the panellists is still keeping the city intact, in St. Thomas, but hopefully he'll be here before we get to him. He's last on the list.

As you heard, with the presentations, your seven minutes—a notice at six, and then at seven we cut it off.

With that, thank you very much for being here.

We'll start with myStoria Inc.

Ms. Holly Tiessen: Thank you to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs for the opportunity to be here today.

My name is Holly Tiessen. I'm the co-founder and CRO of myStoria. We're an Ontario-based women's health company focused on supporting families through one of the most emotionally and financially difficult journeys there is: trying to conceive.

I'm joined by myStoria founder and CEO Jessica Chalk on video, as you see there. Jess started myStoria after six years of fertility treatments, over \$100,000 spent, and no baby. Together, we're here today on behalf of thousands of Ontario families who are quietly struggling, often for years, without support, guidance or a clear path forward.

Ontario has taken an important step by investing \$250 million to expand in vitro fertilization treatments. For families who need this advanced reproductive technology, that investment is life-changing. But IVF is the end of the road, not the beginning. And today I want to speak to the long, unsupported stretch before families ever reach that point.

Infertility affects one in six people globally. In Ontario alone, over 100,000 family-building units are struggling right now, with tens of thousands more entering the journey every year. Yet, when most families first ask for help, the answer they receive is painfully simple: "Try for 12 months, and then we'll talk." For families in their mid-thirties, for families without a GP, for families already noticing something isn't right, that year can be the difference between success and heartbreak. During that waiting period, there is no coordinated support, no guidance, no monitoring, no navigation. Families are left alone at the exact moment when early actions matter most.

Here's the reality: 85% to 90% of infertility cases are not treated with IVF. They are treated with medications, minor interventions, or lifestyle and health optimization, if they are identified early enough. But Ontario's system offers nothing to families during this early window. Instead, families are pushed into limbo that can last 12 to 18 months, while waiting for referrals, specialist appointments, spending thousands of dollars out of pocket on treatments they may not even need, and often blaming themselves along the way. For those who can afford it, this journey costs an average of \$20,000; for those who can't, it often ends quietly, and not because they don't want children, but because the system made it impossible.

This gap hits hardest for families without a family doctor. Members of this committee know very well that 2.5 million Ontarians do not have access to primary care. For them, there literally is nowhere to turn for human guidance; no one to ask if their symptoms are normal, or to advise on next steps.

Even for those with a family doctor, the system isn't designed for this level of care. Most family physicians simply do not have the time or specialized training to provide ongoing fertility guidance. And that's not a failure of doctors. That's a failure of system design.

This is where our proposal comes in. myStoria is asking the province to fund a \$500,000, one-year pilot program to provide proactive preconception support to 2,000 Ontario families who have been trying to conceive for six months or more. This program fills the gap between primary care and specialist fertility treatment. It would provide families with nurse-led assessment and ongoing personalized support from our care team. We would provide evidence-based fertility education and guide them to mental health support during what is often an isolating

and deeply emotional experience. The program would be inclusive across 2SLGBTQ+ families and single parents by choice, and it would be delivered digitally, accessible anywhere in Ontario, serving urban, rural and remote families, addressing what are often referred to as fertility deserts.

Why does this matter? Through our pilot, we estimate that 300 to 400 families could avoid treatment entirely; an estimated 600 to 800 will navigate more efficiently to appropriate care in our system, avoiding trial-and-error spending on wrong treatments and, most importantly, get to their root cause faster. At least 200 families will optimize their health before IVF, increasing their success rates, reducing both emotional and financial strain. We will help them get to the right care faster, with better outcomes and less spending. This is better for families. It's better for our health care system. And it's better for Ontario's economy.

According to the McKinsey Health Institute, women's health conditions are projected to cost the Canadian economy \$37 billion in lost productivity by 2040. Every dollar invested in closing the women's health gap returns \$3 in economic value. Supporting families during their fertility journey keeps people healthier, happier, and allows them to keep working and contributing during peak career years.

This pilot is modest by design. At \$500,000, it represents just 0.2% of Ontario's IVF investment. It has clear success metrics, and it will generate the data Ontario needs to decide whether to scale. If it works—when it works—Ontario will become a national leader in proactive reproductive health.

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

Ms. Holly Tiessen: Doing nothing guarantees the status quo continues: families waiting and waiting, spending, suffering, and aging out of their chances to build the families they want, our next generation of Ontarians.

I want to leave you with this one thought: Infertility is one of the most common health challenges facing people in their 20s, 30s and 40s, and yet we ask families to face it alone until they reach crisis. This pilot is about meeting families before that moment. It's about saying Ontario sees them, supports them and understands that family-building is foundational to the future of this province.

We would respectfully urge the committee to recommend funding this pilot in Ontario's 2026 budget.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to speak today.

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

We now will go to CMHA Thames Valley Addiction and Mental Health Services.

Ms. Pam Tobin: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Pam Tobin. I'm the CEO of Canadian Mental Health Association Thames Valley Addiction and Mental Health Services. We are the region's leading community-based provider of mental health, addiction, crisis and supportive housing services. We work across rural and urban communities, in close

partnership with municipalities, hospitals, police services and community organizations.

I would like to thank the Ontario government for last year's base funding increase for the community mental health and addictions sector. That investment mattered. It helped support a move towards stabilization, at a time when demand and cost pressures are accelerating. It helped organizations like ours maintain services and manage immediate pressures related to inflation, wages and operating costs.

However, stabilization is central to my message today. Mental health and addiction care depends on stability. People need stability to engage in care, to recover and to remain housed. Staff need stability to stay in their work. Organizations need stability to plan responsibly, to retain skilled teams, and to deliver consistent services in the community.

Across Ontario, one in four people experience moderate to severe psychological distress. Crisis service use has increased by 30%, and youth hospitalization for mental health has risen by more than 136% since the pandemic.

Here in Thames Valley, we're seeing that same pressure reflected in higher acuity, longer service involvement, and increasingly complex needs. At the same time, we continue to operate under long-standing structural underfunding.

1110

Over the past 11 years, sector funding has increased by roughly 9% while inflation has risen by more than 30%. That gap has real consequences in our work.

Across the CMHA network, nearly 200 positions remain vacant, simply to balance budgets. That translates into approximately 8,000 Ontarians who do not receive community-based support. That's 8,000 people who are more likely to end up in emergency departments, shelters, or in the justice system instead. This is not their workforce issue in isolation, alone.

Community mental health workers earn up to 20% less than their hospital counterparts, while doing highly complex, emotionally demanding work. Retention is becoming increasingly difficult, and turnover disrupts continuity of care for people who need consistency the most.

Despite these pressures, we continue to deliver strong outcomes and system value. At CMHA Thames Valley, we work closely with municipal partners, hospitals, police and social services to reduce system strain and to improve outcomes. We operate crisis services, mobile crisis teams, rapid access addiction medicine clinics, assertive community treatment teams, early psychosis intervention programs, and supportive housing.

We recently opened a HART hub, a Homelessness and Addiction Recovery Treatment Hub, in London, working collaboratively across sectors to integrate recovery and treatment, housing and wraparound supports. While it's too early to measure full support or full impact, we are confident this model will strengthen coordination and improve access for people with complex needs. Supportive housing is a critical part of this system.

CMHA is one of the province's largest supportive housing providers, with more than 6,000 units across Ontario. More than 800 of those units are supported by our branch alone.

Supportive housing delivers better outcomes at a lower cost. A month in supportive housing costs \$4,000; compare that to \$6,000 in a shelter, \$12,000 in jail, nearly \$30,000 in hospital care.

These programs are a part of an integrated community-based system that prevents crisis, reduces pressure on emergency services, and delivers care where people live.

That's why CMHA Thames Valley is asking for a 4% base funding increase in the 2026 provincial budget, along with a commitment to sustained stabilization funding in future years. This year's increase is essential in supporting the maintenance of current services and staffing, while long-term stabilization is needed to address ongoing demand and rising costs. A 4% base increase would support us in maintaining current services, stabilizing the workforce, and protecting access to care. It aligns with the Financial Accountability Office's assessment that mental health and addiction spending must grow by at least 5% just to maintain existing service levels. Sustained base increases would help retain skilled staff and allow us to continue supporting our clients in need. It would reduce pressure on emergency departments, pressures on policing and corrections, and advance the province's Roadmap to Wellness by strengthening care in the community.

CMHA Thames Valley is a trusted partner in this province. We deliver on provincial priorities. We're innovative, in collaboration with health, with housing and municipal partners—

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

Ms. Pam Tobin: —and we're committed to being accountable stewards of public investment.

With a 4% base increase this year and sustained base increases in future years, we can preserve continuity for people accessing care, strengthen partnerships across the system, and ensure that community mental health and addiction services remain reliable, effective and accessible.

Thank you for your time and your consideration. I'd be pleased to answer any questions you have.

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

That concludes the presentations, as number three was unable to make it.

We will now start with the first round of questioning. The third party: MPP Fairclough.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you for your presentations this morning.

I want to direct my question to Pam Tobin.

The picture that you've painted here is one of the community mental health sector working hard to meet the demands in this community and actively trying to expand. Certainly, when I visited some of the different locations, your RAAM clinic and the 24/7 urgent care centre—I see it as a leading model, provincially. So I get very concerned when you're describing the implications of the funding levels, of denying up to 8,000 people of their care.

I've got two questions. Can you (1) describe that model that you've got—the urgent care model, with the paramedic and police drop-off—because I think it's important for people to know what that investment could look like; and then (2) can you tell us a little more about the decision to lean in more to supportive housing at this time?

Ms. Pam Tobin: Thanks for those questions.

Our urgent care model is a best practice within the province. It's 24/7. We have drop-off for any crisis, at our centre. I often use an example that a police officer shared with me of a neighbouring nation—he said he can drop off a client at our centre and be back into his community to police within half an hour. We'll see somebody within 10 to 15 minutes, as soon as they arrive at our crisis centre. We can often support somebody and have them back in the community or have wraparound supports provided to them within a very short period of time. If that same police officer didn't have our service and had to drop that client at the emergency room—they're often waiting with that client for up to eight hours or more, unable to police their community. So that's the difference that our model makes.

We often provide supports to our first responders as well. First responders also need supports. They're on the front lines; they see things every day that they need supports with, and we support those as well.

We have stabilization beds at our crisis centre. Those stabilization beds—we can keep clients there for up to 72 hours, to provide them supports.

We have psychiatry. We have physicians. We have registered nurses. We have regulated staff. We have 24-hour crisis lines as well, available at that site, providing supports to our whole region.

It is a best practice, and it's a model that's working really well in our community.

Leaning into supportive housing is the thing to do. Everybody is well aware of the homelessness situation in London and throughout our region that we serve. Supportive housing provides people with dignity, compassion and support, and it's a model that helps to keep people housed.

Affordable housing can provide housing for individuals, but without the supports. And oftentimes, with the complexity of clients that we see, of mental health and addiction challenges—they need those wraparound supports, to keep individuals housed. And that's where we provide an exceptional model of support for supportive housing—where we're scaling up the supports that we provide in the community because we see it as a sustainable model.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: How many more minutes of the time?

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

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Go ahead.

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you for your comments this morning.

I would also like to talk about mental health in London. I know that it has been a crisis for a number of years.

I know that in Toronto, Dunn House has been a very effective model of supportive housing. There have been some announcements that there will be a second one like that very soon in Parkdale.

I'm wondering if you could talk about any progress around that kind of model happening here in London and what your role could be in terms of, again, facilitating that, working with the clientele who might be eligible for that kind of program.

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

Ms. Pam Tobin: CMHA is the leader in community mental health and addictions services. We can absolutely run a model like that.

We have a similar model under way right now. We had a groundbreaking on Hill Street, where we're building supportive housing—33 units. We're doing that through local donations. We need sustainable operating dollars for something like that. We need government support and financial support in order to make sure that is a sustainable model. So we absolutely can copy and improve on models such as Dunn House.

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

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you, Holly, Jessica and Pam, for coming out this morning.

Pam, I'll start with you.

Ontario is currently spending \$4 million annually on homelessness and mental health. Yet, since 2021, we have seen homelessness surge by over 50% and nearly 2,000 encampments dot our province.

The Mental Health and Addictions Centre of Excellence was set up to be a central point of accountability for those who needed help.

But my constituents tell me, time and time again, that even though we continue to throw significant amounts of dollars at these problems, we still see silos; we still see a patchwork of approaches that are not producing the outcomes that we would expect—so more and more money, and no positive outcomes as we see numbers rise.

I am left wondering who is ultimately accountable for the failure to bend the curve on these numbers. And as a committee member sitting here, considering the spending of taxpayer dollars—what metric should we be looking at, so that we know increasing our pocket of money to CMHA is actually going to produce the outcomes that we need, not just support a broken system?

Ms. Pam Tobin: Thank you for that question.

That's exactly it—it's a system. By putting money into one aspect of the system, it doesn't help the whole of the system. We need a whole-of-the-system response.

For example, we received funding for the HART hub, and that's a very promising practice for recovery and treatment. It doesn't help with all of the other aspects of care. There's a full continuum of care that needs supports; it needs wraparound supports, and it needs to be available when clients need the service, and that's not always the case. If the service isn't available at the beginning of somebody's journey into mental health and addictions—

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

Ms. Pam Tobin:—their acuity will increase quite quickly. So we need to target every aspect of the system in order to see a difference.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I understand the continuity of service. I understand the system. But I don't see a central point of contact, and I think that's part of the problem. There's a disconnect.

Who should the central point of contact be in this province?

Ms. Pam Tobin: You're right; there is no central point of contact because there are so many different service providers out there.

Community-based services is who should be the central point of contact, because if you can prevent people from going into the larger system of the hospital, where it's more expensive, you're really supporting the individual where they are and you're supporting the system. So it needs to be a community-based approach, in my mind.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll now go to MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you to the presenters for coming out this morning. I really appreciate your comments today.

My question is for you, Pam, as well.

Just on Friday, I was with Helen Fishburn of CMHA Waterloo Wellington. I was able to join her, touring the youth wellness hub that's in Fergus, which our province is funding through CMHA Waterloo Wellington. They're doing great work there. One of the first meetings I had after the 2025 provincial election was with Helen in Guelph, talking about the need for that 4%, and I advocated for that. I was really, really happy to see that in the 2025 budget.

So thanks for recognizing that. I think that was an important investment in our mental health.

Going back to the youth wellness hubs, I know there's one here in London, on Richmond Street, I believe. Has your organization been able to partner with that youth wellness hub?

Our government has really been a leader when it comes to youth wellness, youth mental health. We're the first government in the history of Ontario to have a mental health and addictions ministry. Minister Thanigasalam is doing a great job and is really passionate about youth wellness and youth mental health.

So just share how you've been able to work with that.

Ms. Pam Tobin: We offer many youth programs throughout CMHA, and we do partner with YOU on Richmond Street. We've partnered with them for years. I think that's one of our strengths at CMHA. We're not going to make a dent in the challenges we have in the community alone. It is critical to partner with other community organizations—with the hospitals, with police—and we partner well with everybody in the community. We have a strong partnership, a formal agreement, with YOU.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: That's great.

Going over to HART hubs: Why do you think that's a good model? I know you're still kind of seeing what the impact will be as you test it out, but I think it's an exciting

change and approach. I wonder if you could share your thoughts on that.

Ms. Pam Tobin: I'll speak to need. Since we opened just recently, we've been at capacity and our waiting list is full. We need more. But it speaks to a number of individuals in the community who are ready to go into recovery and treatment.

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

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you to the presenters. Thank you all for being here.

Chair, it's good to be in London. I have a personal connection to London. I'm so sentimental for London. My daughter went to the University of Western Ontario. It's where my wife started her first-year internship, as an IMG, to become a doctor. She started in London and she stayed here for a year and a half, before the residency program. London is a great city.

My first question will go to myStoria Inc. We don't want to leave you alone.

Thank you for your leadership and passion. For women, fertility issues are very, very important issues. I know so many people from my area of Markham had to go to India and South Asia to get the treatment, because of the affordability crisis.

You are right—even some of the provinces are dangerously declining in fertility. It's a very serious issue in Canada, especially in Ontario and Quebec.

That's why the Ontario Fertility Program is helping connect more families to fertility treatment, by investing \$250 million over three years. It started in 2025-26. You may be aware of that. That's a provincial government program. It expanded access to in vitro fertilization treatment. Can you please speak to the impact of this investment we did last year, in 2025?

Ms. Holly Tiessen: I appreciate diving into this topic because—actually, let me start with: Silence speaks a thousand words. It's a super important topic here, but one of the things I just want to leave you with today is that there's a lot of silence around infertility.

In Ontario, we haven't been silent about it. So thank you all, because everybody has played a role in getting that \$250 million.

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

Ms. Holly Tiessen: That's helping that 10% to 15% who actually need that type of invasive treatment. It is super expensive. Jess and I are here today acknowledging, respecting that investment because it helps people get to babies. And that's what we're all looking for—to build healthy families.

However, as I said, at least 85% of individuals struggling with infertility actually don't need IVF. They don't need thousands and thousands of dollars spent on them, but they still need support, because their silence does not mean they're not struggling. Today, there's just a gap in the system.

What Jess and I are trying to do with myStoria, an Ontario-based start-up business, is help bridge the gap between those individuals struggling and the health care—

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

MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to our presenters who are here today to present for us. It's just the second group of presenters, and already homelessness is becoming a major theme.

Pam, I trust the committee listened and heard when you recommended leaning into supportive housing.

I have always been impressed by CMHA's collaborative and coordinated approach.

It bears mentioning that you've shown how CMHA Thames Valley Addiction and Mental Health Services meets provincial goals. It incorporates recommendations from the Financial Accountability Office and is a wise fiscal investment. You literally save the province money through your work.

According to Addictions and Mental Health Ontario, supportive housing costs can cost between \$24,000 to \$60,000 per year, while the Ivey Business School and CRHESI have found that leaving someone in homelessness will cost about \$100,000 per year.

You mentioned a distinction that I think the committee also really needs to grasp and understand. Can you please explain for the committee the difference between affordable housing and supportive housing?

1130

Ms. Pam Tobin: Thanks so much for the question, and thank you for acknowledging the work that we do. I appreciate that.

There's a big difference between affordable housing and supportive housing. Affordable housing is, simply, you can afford to have a roof over your head. Supportive housing is wraparound supports, around the individual, to keep them housed. It also has to be affordable. Affordable housing doesn't have to be supportive, but supportive housing has to be affordable. And then you have the wraparound supports of addiction and mental health workers, crisis and supports—whatever support that individual needs to keep them housed. That's what we do.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I think your figures—supportive housing costing \$4,000 per month versus \$6,000 in shelter, \$12,000 in jail, or \$30,000 in hospital—are really quite interesting numbers and ones that I hope this government will listen to.

You talked about wage parity, and it's an issue that the government is well aware of and has been aware of for years. It is a perennial issue—that people in addictions and mental health work are treated completely unfairly.

What would it mean to those workers if the province finally admitted that they pay them unfairly, that it's an inequitable situation, and address this by closing the pay gap?

Ms. Pam Tobin: It would mean stability in the system. It would mean retention of staff. It would mean continuity of care for individuals who need it the most. And it would make a huge difference in the work that we do every day.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Would you say wage parity has a direct impact on not only recruitment but retention of staff?

Ms. Pam Tobin: Absolutely, it does. Depending on the location, recruitment is going pretty well. Retaining the staff because of the difficult work that we do is very difficult. If we had wage parity—it makes it a little bit easier.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: What is it like, as an organization, when you have staff who are really drawn to the work that they're able to perform well with your organization, and yet they have to leave because, during a cost-of-living crisis, they need to seek better wages in order to support themselves and their family?

Ms. Pam Tobin: I'm struck every single day by the passion that our team brings to the work that they do. Of all the places that I've worked in my career, this is the one organization where every single person is there for the right reasons.

When they have to leave—and there are tears in their eyes because they've had to leave our organization, because they have bills to pay—it breaks their heart as well as ours, and the clients they serve. It has an impact right across the board, and it can set clients back considerably in their journey to wellness.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I want to know if you could speak to COAST funding. Is it cost-effective, and is the funding for the COAST program completely covered by the province—

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

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: —or are there gaps there?

Ms. Pam Tobin: The COAST model is an exceptional model, where we're walking hand in hand, literally, with the police, and it's compassionate care for the individuals we serve. It is a model that is cost-effective, and it is covered. I think that's another promising practice that we have here in London that we don't have in other jurisdictions. And we've been able to branch out from that COAST model. So, yes, I think it's an excellent model.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll now go to MPP Shamji.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Thank you for your deputations and for your work in areas that, far too often, are difficult for people to talk about out loud.

Pam, I want to begin by inviting you to share with us the scale of the mental health challenges and crisis that we're seeing in this region, and what you assess is your adequacy to meet that crisis with the resources that you have.

Ms. Pam Tobin: There are so many different experiences of individuals who are going through mental health and addictions issues.

When we talk about homelessness—because that's a hot topic today, I think. Somebody might not be homeless because of mental health or addictions issues. They might be marginally employed, something has gone wrong, and they've lost housing. The longer that you are homeless, the more likely you will develop mental health issues—and will you become addicted to something because you're

trying to survive? It's so important to have those prevention and early intervention services available.

We serve clients who are low-acuity—someone who just needs a helping hand, just needs somebody to talk to to help stabilize them—right through to high acuity and somebody who has been living rough for many years. We provide supports to those individuals every step along the way. We need an incredible amount of supports and services to keep those individuals well. Whether it is helping somebody to stabilize from an overdose—we have a withdrawal management program in Elgin, for example, that is an exceptional model of supports for individuals. Whether it's something like that, that we can just help people get back to work, whether it's something that we can help people to get off the street and be stabilized—we provide every aspect of that care.

Are we doing it adequately? We have wait-lists in every one of our programs. There's only so much that we can do. Since the pandemic, in particular, the complexity of individuals we serve has increased considerably, and it continues to increase. And with the complexity that increases, you need more and more supportive services and wraparound supports, where we come together with our community partners, and internally as well, between our programs and services, to make sure that we're providing the best care. What that also does internally is, it increases the likelihood of burnout. There are only so many hours in the day, and we have only so many staff. We are understaffed. We're holding vacancies. We have an increased demand in community, and our programs have wait times. So I don't think it is adequate.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I'm going to come back to that in just a second, but there was something else I wanted to ask you about, in relation to the HART hubs.

How does the current HART hub that just started compare to the services that it replaced? And is it adequate?

Ms. Pam Tobin: It's not a replacement of the services that it aimed to replace. The HART hub is focused solely on recovery and treatment. CTS sites were for harm reduction. Harm reduction is evidence-based, and it shows that harm reduction has a place in the services that we provide. The HART hub is simply one dot along that continuum of care, but it can't replace all of the services. CTS sites, harm reduction, is another dot. As I spoke to earlier, we have to provide all those dots and all those services, because no one individual, no one journey is the same.

Mr. Adil Shamji: So there is a dot that's missing, to use your own language. What has been the consequence of that?

Ms. Pam Tobin: I would say it's an increased number of individuals who are clogging up our emergency rooms unnecessarily.

Community-based services do an incredible job in emergency room diversion, which saves the government an incredible amount of money every year.

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

Mr. Adil Shamji: I'm hoping we can turn to you briefly for a moment.

Could I ask you to elaborate a little bit on your proposal? I understand that the current funding for IVF meets about 20% of the overall need to address infertility issues. What would you perceive is the perceived need for the service that you would like to scale up, and can you meet that?

Ms. Holly Tiessen: I do want to bring Jess into the conversation here.

Jess, do you want to answer the doctor's question? Thank you.

Ms. Jessica Chalk: Yes, absolutely.

It's nice to meet everyone.

A couple of things: One is—Holly mentioned it—of everyone who's struggling with infertility, less than 15% of people actually need to get to the stage of IVF. So when you look at that, IVF success rates, on average—of taking home a live baby—are less than or equal to 30%. So you've got this huge amount of people who either don't know where to go until they get to the fertility clinic or don't have access to the resources for—

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

1140

We'll now go to MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Would you like to finish your thought on that?

Ms. Jessica Chalk: Yes. Thank you. That would be great.

What we're proposing is the upstream gap, between a family doctor who only has so much time to help someone get through and dig into what's going on with them in a multi-system situation, multiple aspects of your body, and what happens when you get into that fertility clinic—to actually understand what's going on at the root cause and hopefully, through low-cost intervention, through lifestyle changes, through understanding what the diagnosis is, actually get someone to pregnancy or to understand what's needed to get to pregnancy a lot faster.

About 30% of the population is diagnosed with unexplained infertility when they get into clinic, and then they're routed through IVF.

I've spent \$100,000 out of pocket trying to get to baby, and it didn't work for us—only to be diagnosed five years later with endometriosis. This shouldn't happen.

We should have the ability to have that support earlier, and that's what we're proposing—that stopgap between the family doctor and the fertility clinic, to help that 85% of patients.

Thank you for that time.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you.

This whole 12-month “go home, relax, and try”—there is no scientific data that there's something magical that's going to happen in that 12 months. I feel like it's medical gaslighting.

I'm just wondering if any of your clients who have been armed with the amazing information that myStoria has given them are hitting barriers with other practitioners in the health care system.

Ms. Holly Tiessen: Jess, do you want to speak to that?

Ms. Jessica Chalk: Yes. We actually really support the alignment in communication flow between patient and that family physician.

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

Ms. Jessica Chalk: We work with Dr. Victory—he's a well-known fertility doctor out of Windsor, head of our medical advisory board—to understand that communication gap back and forth.

That information the patient has, the digging of what's going on, the talking to our nursing actually then results in practical output with physicians. We've had incredible feedback on that—to actually get, for example, a diagnostic through the family physician a lot sooner, or through the testing that we are supporting patients in doing, especially in some of the rural areas.

That is a huge component of myStoria—it's not to put a roadblock in for the family physician, the OB/GYN, the fertility doctor; it's to have a patient armed with the information to say, "I have this gut feeling, I didn't even know to communicate it to you, but I now know what's going on," or, "I didn't know this was related," or, "Actually, I had something else going on that I think is relevant, and I've done the testing, and I think this is what's happening." It's really about bringing the two together and acknowledging the fact that the health care system just doesn't have the time to dig into the—

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

We will now go to MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Pam, I want to come to you first.

I've been on the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs for seven years now. We've done this budget consultation a number of times. One of the frustrations I have with it is the lack of central knowledge or central sharing of knowledge across the province of Ontario.

You pointed out that your HART hub is a certain model, and Dr. Shamji talked about changing some of the services.

Did you have CTS—an injection site or a overdose prevention site?

There are three different models, and my understanding is, at present, there are only two CTSs using that model and there have only ever been two using the model of CTS in Ontario.

Ms. Pam Tobin: We don't have a CTS site. We never did have a CTS site.

Mr. Dave Smith: So there was never a closure of that in this area.

Ms. Pam Tobin: Not through CMHA. I can't speak for any other organization.

Mr. Dave Smith: Do you have residential detox and rehab in this area?

Ms. Pam Tobin: Yes, we have a site in Elgin.

Mr. Dave Smith: Is that run by CMHA, or is it run by someone else?

Ms. Pam Tobin: Yes, CMHA.

Mr. Dave Smith: In terms of the collaboration with other organizations, which organizations do you work with—community service providers?

Ms. Pam Tobin: We work with many different organizations. We work with the Salvation Army Centre of Hope. We work with St. Leonard's, Ark Aid. We work with the London Police Service. We work with the hospitals. We work with a long list of community providers.

Mr. Dave Smith: That's great to hear.

The reason I'm bringing all these things up is, when I was first elected in 2018, getting immersed into some of these things in Peterborough—I never envisioned that it was going to be as much of my time as it has been.

What I discovered early on was that the community providers in Peterborough were not working well together. Fourcast was our addictions company. CMHA pretty much exclusively dealt with the mental health side of it. We had an organization for harm reduction. We had E. Fry. We had John Howard Society. We had the Salvation Army. We had a whole bunch of service providers.

We have a HART hub now as well. Our HART hub is different than yours, and part of the reason our HART hub is different than yours is that there was a significant focus early on, prior to the HART hub concept coming up, to address some of the other mental health and addictions challenges that our community saw.

We did not have a detox and rehab centre; we now do. It's a 12-bed facility. It opened for rehab in November, and in February they will start with the detox portion of it. They've staged it because there are different challenges, I'll say, with detox than there are with rehab.

We didn't have an injection site, a safe consumption site, or a CTS when I was first elected. We do have a CTS now that is focused on getting people into treatment, first and foremost. Our paramedics now have the ability, when someone overdoses, to take that individual to the CTS rather than to the emergency department, and that has really cut down on a lot of the strains at the hospital.

It took about five years of beating our heads against the wall to bring all of those organizations together to recognize that they were companions of each other, that they were not fighting with each other, and I think that we're in a much, much better place now as a result of it. Our HART hub is different because our HART hub actually combines all of those things. Those groups are working together. And the largest component of it is supportive housing; it's not the other portions of it.

Where I'm going with all of this now is that when I look across the province of Ontario, we have very, very different models in each of the different communities. As I said, I've been on this committee now for seven years, and what I'm hearing across the province with it is, there really is a lack of coordination, not only at the local level, but across the province with all of them.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: Is this something that we should be taking, as the government, a much larger lead on—to share those successes, share those best practices, so that we

don't have organizations working in isolation in each of the different regions?

Ms. Pam Tobin: Thanks for that overview.

You're right; it's not a coordinated support throughout the province. It varies from community to community.

There's very little success anybody is going to have in providing any sort of service, if they're working in a silo. Partnership and working together is where you're going to see significant change in anything, and certainly with mental health and addictions.

I don't understand why partners wouldn't work together in Peterborough. That's unfortunate because—

Mr. Dave Smith: They do now. They didn't before.

Ms. Pam Tobin: That's good. I'm glad to hear that.

Could you just ask me your question again?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. He didn't have any time the first time.

MPP Sattler.

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

Pam, thank you for your ongoing advocacy and commitment to serving our community. I'm going to focus my questions on your presentation.

There were a lot of alarming statistics that you shared. One of them is the fact that there are an estimated 8,000 Ontarians who need mental health supports and currently don't have access to community-based mental health programs.

Can you give us a sense of how many Londoners require mental health services but don't currently have access? You talked about the fact that every single one of your programs has a wait-list. What's the scale of the problem in this community?

Ms. Pam Tobin: Because of the region that we serve, we are an integrated agency that provides mental health and addiction—again, that working-together component. We service four different regions. We are the largest CMHA in Ontario. So we typically don't look at numbers solely in London alone—but I would ballpark that out of the 6,000 through Ontario, the majority of those would be within the region that we serve, because we serve the largest population throughout the largest region.

1150

Ms. Peggy Sattler: That's a lot of people who are waiting for mental health supports and have probably nowhere to go other than the emergency room, as you mentioned before.

Another very alarming statistic for me is the 136% increase in youth hospitalizations since the pandemic, because of mental health issues.

Can you talk about how a 4% base funding increase for CMHA Thames Valley would help address that crisis in youth mental health and help reduce youth access to emergency room services because they have nowhere else to go?

Ms. Pam Tobin: Thank you for that question, Peggy, and thanks for your comments about the work that we do.

A one-time 4% investment will do very little to support growth; all it will do will help us stabilize and help us to plan.

If we had a 4% base ongoing increase year over year over year, we'd be able to support youth in our community. We would be able to support many more clients in our community than we can now. We cannot plan ahead when we don't know if we're going to receive any base increase.

So as far as supporting youth in—those numbers are astounding: 136,000. That's a lot of individuals.

But with the current 4%, all we can do is stabilize the existing services—we're not doing anything to address new.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: So the 4% increase won't help bring in those 8,000 Ontarians who are currently waiting—it won't help to reduce. It will just stabilize the current services.

Ms. Pam Tobin: That's correct.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I know that CMHA Thames Valley is a valued partner for hospitals, police, many, many community agencies.

When another agency approaches CMHA Thames Valley to partner on a new initiative, does the province fund that, or do you have to look within your budget to try to move money around so that you can enter into these other partnerships with community agencies?

Ms. Pam Tobin: It depends on who approaches us to partner or who we might approach to partner. Sometimes it's grant dollars and sometimes it's another organization that may bring money to the table. Sometimes we'll try a partnership and provide in-kind support in a short period of time to see if that model might work. But otherwise, we would have to look within our existing budget and take from elsewhere in order to expand into a new initiative.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Are there things that CMHA Thames Valley is currently doing that are required by the province, that don't get funding—mandates that you have to fulfill?

Ms. Pam Tobin: Yes. There are two in particular: the First Nations, Inuit, Métis and urban Indigenous strategy, as well as anti-racism, anti-oppression strategy. Those are requirements within our M-SAA, but there's no additional funding for them.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: How do you fulfill those requirements without additional funding? You have to take money away from programs that you are delivering?

Ms. Pam Tobin: Yes, or depend on donor dollars. So it's not sustainable.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Can you tell us about the issues with staff retention and vacancies that you have within the agency?

Ms. Pam Tobin: We're currently holding vacancies in order to ensure that we're not operating in a deficit. We have about 200 vacancies, and we have a staff of about 650 individuals. We have relief staff, part-time contracts, that sort of thing. But we have a high turnover of staff. We need a huge relief base in order to keep our programs operating.

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

We thank you very much for taking the time to come here and present today. It will be very helpful in our deliberations as we go forward in the consultation process.

Now the committee stands recessed until 1 o'clock.

The committee recessed from 1155 to 1300.

HALTON INDUSTRY EDUCATION
COUNCIL (HIEC)

PILLAR NONPROFIT NETWORK

LONDON FAMILY COURT CLINIC

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

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

I will provide a verbal reminder to notify you when you have one minute left for your presentation or allotted speaking time, and at the end of that, I will thank you.

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

We will now call the first panel up. The first panel will be the Halton Industry Education Council, the second one will be Pillar Nonprofit Network, and the third one will be London Family Court Clinic.

The only instruction to add is that when you start your presentation, give us your name so we can make sure it's recorded properly in Hansard for the presentation that you're making.

We will start with the Halton Industry Education Council.

The Clerk pro tem (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): They're online.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Oh, there we are. They're on the screen. This is a virtual presentation.

Ms. Kelly Hoey: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Kelly Hoey. I'm the executive director of HIEC. We're a not-for-profit social enterprise with more than 36 years of experience working at the intersection of education, industry and workforce development across Ontario.

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to speak about two cost-effective investments that respond directly to Ontario's current labour market pressures while strengthening the province's long-term talent pipeline. Over the past several years, Ontario has been navigating significant economic change: global trade uncertainty, supply chain disruptions, rapid technological shifts, and persistent labour shortages in critical sectors like construction, manufacturing and the skilled trades.

What we're seeing very clearly is that workforce resilience depends on two things happening at the same time: First, young people need earlier, clearer exposure to the full range of career pathways available to them. Second, employers, especially small and mid-size ones, need practical support to continue hiring and training apprentices even during periods of economic volatility. Our two recommendations are designed to address both.

First, renewing and expanding on the Ontario Career Lab: The Ontario Career Lab is a province-wide initiative delivered by HIEC and funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education, and a first of its kind. It provides structured, high-impact career coaching to grades 9 and 10 students and is fully aligned with the ministry's Creating Pathways to Success framework. The reason this program matters is simple: Career pathways are shaped earlier than we often think and are increasingly complex. This is reinforced by international research, including findings from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which shows that earlier, structured career guidance supports stronger education-to-employment transitions.

By grades 9 and 10, students are already making decisions that can affect their post-secondary options. Through the Ontario Career Lab, students participate in small-group industry-led conversations that expose them to the full range of post-secondary and career pathways: apprenticeship, college, university, and work-based options. They hear directly from people working in those fields, learn how classroom learning connects to real jobs, and build the confidence to make informed decisions earlier in their education. This early exposure reduces the mismatch we often see later, where students complete programs that don't align with labour market demand while employers struggle to find talent.

Renewing and expanding the Ontario Career Lab allows the province to build on an investment that is already working. It sustains momentum and protects the value of existing provincial investments, as the program delivers system-wide impact at scale. The program reaches 315,000 students a year across 73 school boards, including public, Catholic, French-language, alternative education and youth justice settings. It operates at a cost of just over \$35 per student, making it one of the most cost-effective workforce development initiatives available. The outcomes are strong and consistent. You can see the stats on the slide there: 96% of students report increased awareness of career options, 94% say they feel more confident exploring and making career decisions, and 96% report a better understanding of local labour market opportunities. Just as importantly, the program engages more than 3,000 industry volunteers across each sector each year. That means real-world labour market expertise is embedded directly into publicly funded education, at minimal cost to the government.

The second recommendation focuses on employers and apprentices. We are recommending targeted funding to expand employer and apprenticeship job matching through [ApprenticeSearch.com](https://www.apprenticesearch.com). Construction, manufacturing, automotive and industrial trades continue to face sustained

pressure from global tariffs and supply chain disruptions. These pressures don't just affect project costs; they directly affect employers' ability to recruit, train and retain apprentices.

For many small and medium-sized businesses, especially those without dedicated HR, even short-term uncertainty can delay hiring and have impact on their bottom line. When apprenticeship hiring slows, the impact on Ontario's future workforce is felt for years.

Small and medium-sized employers train the majority of apprentices in Ontario, yet they're also the most sensitive to economic volatility. They are also most likely to pause hiring when costs and uncertainty arise.

ApprenticeSearch.com helps reduce those barriers by connecting employers with job-ready apprentices. Importantly, the platform works in close alignment with Skilled Trades Ontario, with each organization playing a distinct and complementary role. ApprenticeSearch.com supports individuals in securing employment with an employer and having the connection, and once that employment is in place, Skilled Trades Ontario oversees the registration and ongoing management. This approach builds on existing provincial investments in apprenticeship training and workforce development, ensuring those investments translate into real employment outcomes for both employers and apprentices. The return on investment from this targeted support is clear. The platform supports 2,500 Ontario-based employers, and 95% of them are small or micro-businesses.

In the past five years, over 33,000 job seekers have come to us for support. And currently, 5,500 job seekers are using the platform along with our targeted programs and services to find employment opportunities in priority sectors, with engagement concentrated in construction, service trades, industrial trades and automotive.

Research shows that better employer-apprentice matching improves retention and completion. Nationally, employers report an average return of \$1.47 for every dollar invested.

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

Ms. Kelly Hoey: In practical terms, this kind of targeted investment helps employers continue training even when external pressures make hiring more difficult, while ensuring Ontario keeps building the skilled workforce it needs.

In closing, Ontario's economic strength delivers on clear pathways from education to employment and on employers having capacity to invest in the next generation of the skilled trades. Renewing Ontario Career Lab and expanding employer-apprentice job matching through ApprenticeSearch.com is pragmatic and evidence-based, building on existing infrastructure and responding to economic realities.

We look forward to working with the government of Ontario and thank you so much for your time and consideration.

And congratulations on the strategic investments you've made and your impact on Ontario's economic competitiveness.

Thank you. I'm happy to take questions.

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

We'll now go to Pillar Nonprofit Network.

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: Good afternoon, Chair Hardeman and committee members. Thanks for the opportunity to appear before you today to make some recommendations on behalf of the non-profit sector.

My name is Maureen Cassidy. I'm the CEO of Pillar Nonprofit Network, which is an intermediary organization supporting over 2,000 non-profits, charities and social impact organizations across southwestern Ontario. I'm here to share why Ontario's non-profit sector must be recognized as essential economic infrastructure and why the 2026 budget is a critical opportunity to act.

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Ontario's non-profit sector is sometimes referred to by policy-makers as "nice to have," but the data tells a very different story. The sector contributes over \$65 billion annually, representing almost 8% of Ontario's GDP, and employs over 844,000 people. This is one of the most diverse workforces in the province, delivering services that keep people housed, fed, employed and supported. In times of economic uncertainty like now, non-profits don't pull back; rather, they step in where systems are strained or failing.

Despite this economic contribution, non-profits are under unprecedented strain right now. According to the ONN—the Ontario Nonprofit Network—2025 state of Ontario's non-profit sector survey, 85% of non-profits saw increased demand last year; two thirds scaled back their services; 17% discontinued programs entirely; and half reported longer wait-lists, which is a 15% increase from the previous year. These aren't abstract numbers. When non-profits scale back, communities lose access to food programs, housing supports, mental health services, youth programs, and care for seniors and people with disabilities. This is not a sector efficiency problem; it's a structural funding problem.

Today I'm coming to you with five recommendations. The first one is: Treat non-profits as essential to economic protection. Ontario has committed over \$40 billion to protect the economy from trade disruption and economic fallout, but there is no clear plan for non-profits within these investments. Our first recommendation is simple: Ensure non-profits can access trade-related and economic hardship funding quickly and fairly. Shift away from short-term, project-based funding and move to stable, multi-year operational funding that reflects real costs and inflation. Non-profits cannot stabilize communities if they themselves are unstable.

Recommendation number 2: Invest in capacity—upstream, not just crisis. Ontario's non-profit sector is core social infrastructure, yet it's funded as discretionary. That approach is no longer sustainable. We are recommending a provincial capacity-building funding initiative modelled on Alberta's Enhanced Capacity Advancement Program. This would provide multi-year funding to non-profit intermediary organizations like Pillar and ONN. These

organizations train non-profit leaders, provide shared services, and strengthen governance and financial sustainability. Investing in intermediaries is cost-effective. It strengthens thousands of front-line organizations at once. Alberta has shown that this works, and Ontario can and should adapt this model at scale.

Recommendation number 3 is one I've brought to you before: Create an office or a home in government for non-profits. Despite the size and impact of the sector, Ontario has no single point of access to government for non-profits. This leads to fragmented policy, inconsistent engagement, and unnecessary strain on non-profit organizations. We recommend appointing an associate minister within the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, supported by a deputy or ADM focused on non-profits, charities and social innovation. British Columbia has already done this. Jurisdictions that integrate non-profits into economic development planning are better positioned to stabilize labour markets and respond to shocks. Without a coordinated approach, Ontario risks slower recovery and higher downstream costs.

Recommendation number 4: Address workforce volunteers and immigration barriers. Workforce shortages are one of the most serious threats facing non-profits today. Nearly two thirds of organizations report recruitment and retention challenges. We recommend a coordinated workforce strategy with the Ontario Nonprofit Network and volunteer centres; action on wage parity, benefit stability and training; and removing fees for vulnerable sector police checks, a small change with a really big impact. Immigration is also very critical to our sector. Non-profit professionals are often excluded by wage thresholds and point systems, yet they deliver essential services across the province. Immigration systems must recognize social value, not just salary levels.

Recommendation number 5: Protect affordable housing through non-profits. In just five years, Ontario lost nearly 50,000 deeply affordable rental units. Non-profits and co-ops are uniquely positioned to preserve affordability, but they lack access to capital. We recommend a non-profit housing-acquisition fund; expanding Infrastructure Ontario's Loan Program to all public benefit non-profits; and a dedicated stream for Indigenous-led housing solutions. This is prevention, not reaction, and it's far more cost-effective.

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

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: In closing: The non-profit sector is not asking for special treatment. We're asking for recognition, partnership and smart investment. Non-profits already complement government capacity every single day.

The 2026 budget is an opportunity to future-proof Ontario's social and economic resilience. We urge you to seize it.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to any questions you may have.

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

We now will hear from the London Family Court Clinic.

Mr. Stewart Blair: Chair and members of the committee, thank you very much for braving the weather to be with us today. I'm Stewart Blair, and I'm the vice-chair of the board for the London Family Court Clinic. I'm presenting on their behalf, along with Joelene Bamford, the executive director, on Zoom here.

The London Family Court Clinic is a non-profit charitable organization in London that has supported children, youth and families involved with the justice system since 1974. We work at the intersection of mental health, justice and youth. From March to December 2025, LFCC has provided service to 935 children and families, exceeding our initial budget target of 675.

The critical services that are offered at the court clinic include Beacon House—this is our child and youth advocacy centre, a dedicated space for children as young as four who are victims of abuse, violence or exploitation. They come here to meet with police, children's aid, counsellors. It provides an area for coordinated forensic interviews, jury documentation, and family support. From March to December, Beacon House had seen 174 children. This area is used to reduce the harm and trauma of taking children to a police station after these events have happened.

We offer alternative dispute resolution. This link program, managed by LFCC, offers services assisting families involved in child protection cases in resolving disputes before or during court proceedings.

We have a child witness/victim program, supporting youth who are victims or witnesses of crime, commonly in cases of abuse, peer assault or domestic violence. This is trauma-informed court preparation.

We do section 34 youth justice assessments. These assessments of a youth's mental health and risk assist courts in considering accountability, along with the youth's maturity and mental health needs, before sentencing.

We have a youth therapeutic court program, which is intensive, coordinated support to justice-involved youth from our youth mental health court worker, to make the trauma of attending court a little easier.

Of note, almost 15% of our funding is in the form of grants which are set to expire in the coming months or year. Beacon House itself will have to cease operations on March 28, without continued funding. Of our funding, 74% is spent on budget, staffing, benefits, and our link brokerage fees; 11% is capital costs.

LFCC has taken steps to establish a new fund-development committee to enhance our community giving, and to try to fill the gaps where we can.

The critical needs and the ask that we have for your consideration: secure and stable long-term funding for Beacon House; secure and stable long-term funding so that we can establish a remote testimony suite within Beacon House, to allow children to participate in court proceedings without ever having to enter the physical courthouse. I haven't spent much time in a courthouse—I'm sure none

of you have either—but what is not uncommon here is that youth who are victims of abuse will have to wait in the same waiting areas as their abusers. Establishing a remote court clinic would stop that from happening.

In addition to stability in our current funding, we're respectfully requesting up to \$150,000 per year to maintain operations in Beacon House, with a one-time investment of up to \$25,000 to initiate the remote testimony suite within that unit.

Thank you for your time.

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

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

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you so much to all three of you for your presentations.

Maureen, I'll start with you. You went over it quickly, but it made my ears stand up: police background checks. I'm happy to hear that Pillar continues to advocate for the removal of barriers created by these police background checks. I see them as a primary obstacle to rebuilding Ontario's volunteer base on the heels of COVID, and I've talked to so many people who have actually lost jobs because they are waiting on a background check.

How do we reconcile the heavy reliance on these police background checks, which often disproportionately flag marginalized individuals for non-violent or historical incidents, with the sector's need for safety? And then the follow-up question on that would be, is Pillar developing an alternative screening framework to help non-profits move beyond the check box of police background checks?

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: Because so many non-profits are—Stewart's organization could be an example. A lot of these non-profit organizations are serving vulnerable individuals, and so that's how these people are—one way to help them to maintain safety for these individuals is to ensure that background checks take place.

What we would like to see is a recognition of the non-profit sector, of those kinds of organizations that require volunteers, that volunteers are their lifeblood—50% of non-profit organizations either have only one employee, which would be the executive director, or no paid employees; it's all volunteer-led. So we're recommending that fees be reduced or removed for non-profit sector volunteers, to remove those barriers.

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

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: A lot of times—going back to my comments on immigration—a lot of the folks who are newcomers to Canada, who are coming in as temporary workers, or some other kind of student visa, things like that, they're all volunteering as well. They're giving back of their time, to the new community where they want to make their home, by being volunteers. Police background checks are just one more obstacle that's in their way, as newcomers to Canada. So we'd like to see—not removing police background checks, but removing the barriers that aren't allowing people to volunteer. Nobody should lose

their job because they can't afford the fee to do a police background check.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Exactly. Thank you.

How much time there, Chair?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): You have 29 seconds.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Okay.

We've lost, nationally, something like 377 registered charities throughout 2025. The losses are outpacing the new registrants. Is this a matter of the taxpayer saying, "I don't have money to support all these charities"—or is it the lack of government funding, or is it a combination of both?

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: It's a combination of everything.

We get told often, "Act like a business." Non-profits—

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

MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Kelly, I'm going to start with you. I worked with your organization in another lifetime, it seems, before I was ever involved in politics. I thought at the time that we needed to have HIEC, or the model of HIEC, move across the entire province. It was when I was doing some software for the Grand Erie District School Board.

One of the things that jumped out at me was your ApprenticeSearch.com. You've got about 2,500 employers. There are just over 70 school boards. It works out to about 35 employers per board; I know that's not actually the case, because certain school boards are much larger than others, and the reality is that the coterminous boards work together on it. How do we find a way to help you promote that to more employers so that there is a much larger bank for those apprenticeship students to find things in? The reality is, we have about 150 trades, and if we only have 35 employers for each of those boards, we're not hitting on somebody in each of the different trades. We want to make sure that there are opportunities for every student going through an OYAP program.

Ms. Kelly Hoey: It's great to see you again. I know you've always been a fan.

Just to let you know, HIEC has expanded. We are province-wide, and so that's why we go by HIEC rather than Halton Industry Education Council. That's where we were born out of.

I threw a lot of numbers at you, and I'll just give you a couple of clarifications on that. With the Ontario Career Lab, we have more than 3,000 volunteers who are going in and coaching in the schools, and those are fabulous, half-hour opportunities for students to talk to employers, many of which are in the skilled trades, to learn about areas of growth and need. So we are always looking for new employers as a new initiative. We actually have about 33,000 users on ApprenticeSearch.com across Ontario, and we have about—Meghan, help me with the most recent number so I don't make it up. It was in my notes here somewhere—6,000 employers—

Ms. Meghan Paton: About 8,000.

Ms. Kelly Hoey: Is that right?

Ms. Meghan Paton: Yes.

Ms. Kelly Hoey: —across Ontario, and it changes all the time. These are folks who have an active account on Apprenticesearch.com and they're hiring and training, and they come back to us; same with our users—our 33,000 job seekers.

Scalability is our biggest challenge—consistent funding and scalability. We have great brand recognition after 35 years, but we're always knitting together funding pockets to keep things going.

So I would echo a lot of what my colleagues are saying: that if we could have multi-year funding—if we could have consistent funding—we can keep our volunteers engaged, we can scale the impact of our work and we can have consistent offerings. I think those are all really important things.

The skilled trades regional networks that we're running throughout the province are to help school boards find experiential learning with those employers so that they can learn about the great jobs that are in the skilled trades. We just need more exposure. Mentorship and speed mentoring and guidance—education can't do it alone. We have to help them extend learning beyond the classroom.

Mr. Dave Smith: I will sing the praises of your organization until the end of the day because I think you do fantastic, fantastic work.

This is the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, though, and it is budget consultations. Give me a dollar amount that you're looking for.

Ms. Kelly Hoey: Oh, I'm happy to.

We need the additional \$12 million a year to run the Ontario Career Lab for all 73 school boards. It's a small investment of \$35 per student—less than—for them to have these incredible opportunities and build these relationships.

For Apprenticesearch.com, we need \$1 million to \$2 million to operate so that we can get young people who are going into the skilled trades the resources, the mentorship, the financial and math therapy that they need to get those jobs and be successful.

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

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

Because we only have a minute or so left, I'm going to jump over to Pillar. You have given us a few requests on it, but you haven't given me a dollar amount on it. Can you give me a dollar amount that you're looking for? I'll be a bit sarcastic, facetious, however you want to describe it: I could say, "I'll give you \$4 more—a dollar for each of those programs," and I will have met your request of additional funding. That's why I'm asking.

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: We've provided a written submission as well for the committee, but we align our requests with Ontario Nonprofit Network.

So for Pillar alone to have adequate, ongoing funding, knowing we have other funding sources as well—

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

We will now go to MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you very much to all three of our presenters this afternoon.

I want to begin with the London Family Court Clinic.

Your description of the incredibly important services provided by Beacon House for children who have experienced unimaginable trauma, I think, really touched all of us around this table.

The ask that you have, the \$150,000 a year to provide the stable and secure long-term funding that Beacon House would need, and then the additional \$25,000—have you brought that request to the government before, or how is it that you're coming to this budget committee to make this ask? Have you made the government aware of the services that you provide and the need to continue those services and to enhance those services?

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Mr. Stewart Blair: We have a new executive director: Joelene. We have a new board, and part of our new mandate has been this outreach. We have met with Minister Flack, but just at the end of last year. I'm not sure that this direct ask has been made before this committee, no.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: So you're just putting this on the radar for the government, that this is what is needed.

If you don't get the \$150,000, Beacon House will close. What happens to those 174 children who have had to access those services?

Mr. Stewart Blair: Within our region, they won't have anywhere else to go. They would have to—Joelene, you can correct me if I'm wrong. So the incident would happen. They would be taken by the police to a police station. They might then have to go to a CAS office. They might then have to go to the hospital. Beacon House just allows it all to happen in the same place.

I invite anyone who is in London at any time to reach out. You are welcome to come and visit, because nothing sends the message home quicker than standing in a room that is set up with cameras and a screen and a doctor's table—and you know that as young as four years old, they're having their injuries documented in the room.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: You also started out by saying that you served 935 children and families between March and December, but you had only budgeted for 675. How do you accommodate that increased demand for service from children and families in the region?

Mr. Stewart Blair: Our cycle runs from March to March—which is why it's March to December. I'll maybe let Joelene step in there, but my understanding is that everyone basically just pushes their sleeves up and gets it done.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay.

I'll turn to Maureen from Pillar [*inaudible*] Maureen for being here today and for advocating on behalf of the sector.

I want to go back to the vulnerable sector police checks and the very simple request to remove the fees that nonprofits have to pay. What is the dollar amount for the removal of the fees? How much would that cost the government?

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: I'm sorry, Peggy; I don't know that number.

That is one of our advocacy and policy priorities going back many years, and again, it mirrors what ONN is advocating for as well. It's a significant barrier for some voluntary organizations.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Yes, for sure, and particularly when—you said 50% of volunteer organizations only have one employee or none, which means they rely entirely on volunteers, who have to get those checks.

Can you talk to us a little bit more about the importance of creating a home in government for the non-profit sector? And what are the implications of not having that kind of access?

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: Right now, different non-profits—if they want to get a policy priority or some kind of initiative before government, they may have to access multiple ministries and multiple individuals across the government. By having one point of access, it would ensure that the lens of the non-profit sector is there no matter what ministry would be connected to that particular policy or initiative. It streamlines things. We hear that overcapacity in the sector is an ongoing problem; you just get the work done somehow. Adding multiple visits to different ministries is just increasing that overload that's on the non-profit sector. It streamlines it for both the government and for the non-profit sector.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: And finally, the figure you gave us, that 50,000 affordable units were lost last year in the non-profit sector—can you elaborate a bit about what the government can do to protect and make sure that we have those units back and expand?

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: It's across the board; across housing, affordable units have been lost for different reasons. Service agreements expire, and things like that. Focusing on the non-profit sector ensures that community lens around housing—housing as a human right rather than a way to turn a profit.

Pillar works directly with the city of London. They support 63 non-profit housing operations that are providing some of these units—

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

MPP Shamji.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Maureen, I want to come back to you. Earlier, you had been responding to my colleague MPP Smith. He asked for a specific dollar amount. You just started to give us the number, but your microphone got cut off. It's important to get that on the record.

Could you repeat for us the kind of funding that could really make a difference for your organization and how it could make that difference?

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: Pillar, as an intermediary organization, could benefit greatly from ongoing funding of about \$250,000 a year.

The way that an intermediary organization like Pillar or Ontario Nonprofit Network or other organizations around the province—we amplify the effect of funding. So rather than funding individual organizations—which still need

funding; I'm not saying to forgo funding altogether to organizations like Stewart's that are serving critical services. But Pillar serves to strengthen the capacity of those organizations.

There is limited access, for non-profits, to leadership development, for succession planning, for board governance training, which is essential, because—the board chair is here—the strength of an organization is based on the strength of that governance structure, which is their board. So we amplify the funding by helping to build capacity across the non-profit sector, strengthen their leadership, strengthen their staff supports, their learning and development—things like that.

Mr. Adil Shamji: This has already come up at least once before, but I did want to circle back to it: In regard to your comments about having a single place for not-for-profits to turn to within government, to access services and that kind of thing, can you help me understand what exactly that looks like? Are we talking about a single person, a division within a ministry, a separate ministry unto itself? Having a clear idea of that will help us to know what to advocate for.

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: We recommend an office within the Ministry of Economic Development. That would be an associate minister or an associate deputy minister—something like that, so not in and of itself a separate ministry, but an office within a ministry. The reason we think it should be economic development rather than social services is because of the importance to the economy that the non-profit sector is. People don't realize we are one of the largest—if not the largest—employers across the country.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Next, I want to ask some questions in relation to the London Family Court Clinic.

You had some very specific asks. Actually, I was hoping to take a little bit of a step back and just invite you—from your bird's-eye view perspective, what are challenges you may be seeing in the court system, in access to justice and delays to access to justice, especially as it relates to children?

Mr. Stewart Blair: I'm going to defer to Joelene. She was a clinician for a number of years as well.

Ms. Joelene Bamford: There are definitely many challenges when it comes to access to justice, especially in London; we are experiencing, I think, double what the rest of the province is, just in terms of youth justice.

Timeliness has always been an issue when it comes to managing and processing cases, and COVID has certainly had a pretty big impact on our court system, with backlogs etc.

It's not a secret that London has had several programs reduced. Our supports and our resources to the community have diminished. Our youth justice facilities or detention facilities have now been moved to other places in the province, which has left major gaps for the youth and others in London. So it has definitely been an area that needs to be revisited.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Do you have any sense as to what the biggest drivers have been for these delays and short-comings in access to justice?

Ms. Joelene Bamford: Yes. I think COVID has had an impact, but the reduction of resources and the reduction of programs and staffing also has had a big impact on that.

The courts really are backed up. When it comes to our youth and children who need to provide testimony as witnesses or victims, oftentimes trials are being stacked, so we have five in a day. There are constant delays; there are constant adjournments, which creates anxiety and all sorts of issues.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I understand.

Finally, I want to turn to Kelly. I know that your organization is engaged in work around skilled trades, apprenticeships and that kind of thing.

I've heard that apprenticeships are becoming more and more difficult to find because of construction slowdowns and that kind of thing. Has that been your observation as well?

Ms. Kelly Hoey: Oh, I have lots of observations. I'm so glad that you asked.

I really do believe, when the volume of people that we see come to us who are interested in working in the skilled trades, that it is not a shortage; it's a mismatch, and that a lot of people come to us—and I'll use an example that people identify with. They come and—

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

The next question goes to MPP Brady.

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Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Maureen, I'll go back to you. I asked whether this was a sign of the times, of taxpayers choosing between where they're going to put their dollars with respect to charities. Is this a government problem? Is this a taxpayer decision?

I think you are going down the road where you are expected to act like a business but perhaps you are not being treated like a business. There is this mindset that maybe if you are acting like a business—businesses come and go; they thrive or survive. Is this the same or different when we're talking about charities?

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: It's slightly different. In an economic crisis, the non-profit sector often sees a spike in demand. At the same time, that's when revenues go down, because people are tightening their belts.

What happens is—we have a good example right here—service is going up, funding is going down, and non-profits can very easily work themselves out of business. They can't keep up with demand, and then the more they are spending and using their resources to deliver their services, their resources go down. They go bankrupt—not because nobody wants their product. They are going bankrupt because too many people need their product and there isn't funding to support.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you.

I will turn to Kelly. I appreciate that career planning is a journey, not a destination.

I want to follow up on a response to MPP Smith with respect to the 68,000 employers having an active account. That is heartening to hear, but I often hear on the ground that employers are afraid of taking on apprentices for fear of training them and then losing them to someone who might be able to offer that employee something bigger and better.

How do we incentivize employers? A lot of them, in my riding, are saying no to apprentices. So how do we actually incentivize all employers to raise that number so that they say yes instead of no in 2026?

Ms. Kelly Hoey: I think there are a number of reasons why the retention can be an issue. It's not always just related to dollars and cents and pay.

What we hear—and we've done a number of studies in our 26 years of work with the system. It comes down to workplace culture. I think when you build a strong workplace culture—a place where people feel that they can grow, that they can complete their apprenticeship, that they can have growth opportunities and training opportunities—they tend to stay.

I think we have some real workplace culture issues in our skilled trades environment—predominantly, sometimes, in our areas like construction that have had some real challenges. I think some of the work we're doing and programs we're doing with workplace culture—

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 time in your busy schedules to come here and for the important work that you do in our community. This is probably our fifth or sixth day for this committee, and we also do these hearings locally, to talk to our own local stakeholders.

I'm wondering if we can get a general agreement that since the pandemic the need has increased more dramatically than ever before in our history. Would you agree with that?

Maureen, you've talked about volunteerism, but also the cost of doing business—meaning the demands that are becoming increasingly more difficult too. We are kind of in a perfect storm in the private sector and, also, as you point out, in the public sector and in the not-for-profit. I appreciate the important work that our not-for-profit sector does; I see it every day in my community. Finding that sustainability point is really the challenge I'm hearing.

Maureen, you put an interesting spin on it or lens on it when you said the not-for-profit sector is a huge employer and GDP producer of critical services that are otherwise difficult to support. I'm the parliamentary assistant to Minister Fedeli in economic development, job creation and trade, so I'm very interested in your suggestion.

When we do grant programs for private sector businesses, there are usually matching funds that are required—there's a grant or a loan and then they pay it back—and their operating dollars are part of their business model.

I'm wondering if you could walk me through what the metrics will be and how we would then assess and look at our not-for-profit sector, because I think you make an excellent point about workforce sustainability and service providing.

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: The way funding generally works right now is project-based, so it's temporary. Once that funding goes away, the program generally goes away.

So what the non-profit sector needs—not only Pillar, but other non-profits, as we've heard today—is that core operational funding, for paying salaries, keeping the lights on.

A lot of times, project funding will limit administrative costs to a small percentage and want to just pay the incidentals or the program itself. But how do you run the program without the people?

How would KPIs and all of that be reported? It would vary amongst the non-profits that you're looking at funding. An intermediary organization like Pillar could report on the number of learning opportunities that we provided and the number of non-profits that came through the door and benefited from those kinds of learning opportunities. Stewart's organization would report on the number of children they serve, the number of families they serve through their programs.

A lot of reporting, right now, when it's project-based, is often also output reporting. There is opportunity to provide outcome reporting—how many non-profits were able to access a certain program and what they actually learned from that program; if they went on to develop new policies around human rights or around human resources or around whatever.

Right now, non-profits struggle with even creating basic policies within their organization to help them run their organization efficiently and effectively.

So it would be different for each non-profit. But it's that core operational funding that is really necessary.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: This morning, we've heard from different interest groups, like CMHA. We are trying to implement things provincially, but there's local expertise and programs that have started, like the COAST program here for linking mental health issues with police and taking that off the police docket.

In my area, we have mental health professionals who travel with police cruisers five days a week and are able to stream, and we've seen our 911 calls for those types of issues go down dramatically.

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

Mr. Brian Saunderson: So you raise good points.

I'm going to switch, Stewart, to you for the last little bit.

I was a small-town lawyer. I did family law, and it is a very difficult process.

When you talk about the programs that you provide, what's the division between criminal—if you're dealing with victims of crime, I would imagine that's the criminal system, so it's either the Ontario provincial court or Superior Court. In family cases, when you might be involved with allegations of abuse or sexual abuse in a

family law context—can you walk me through the division there?

Mr. Stewart Blair: Joelene would be able to.

Ms. Joelene Bamford: Predominantly, we work with families and people who are navigating the criminal justice system. Our ADR program does work within the Family Court's child protection matters, predominantly, I would say—

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

We will now go to MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to our presenters who are here in person as well as virtually today.

I'd like to begin my questions with Stewart and Joelene.

You spoke about the problems with sustainability in funding and the incredibly rising demands. It's pretty jarring to learn that you've served 935 youth and families since March, and that number was only set to increase until the closure of your fiscal year.

What is the impact of the London Family Court Clinic's reliance on grant-based funding, and how difficult is it to plan, to staff or to respond to community needs with that grant-based funding?

Mr. Stewart Blair: It's difficult. I can speak to a governance point of view. We see first-hand the incredible service that Beacon House offers. We are trying to strengthen partnerships with London police, with CAS, but the conversation, ultimately, is going to come around to how strong we can make these partnerships when we know that the funding is going to end and we'll just have to shut down.

1350

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I want to thank you, as well, for identifying that massive structural, organizational issue. It's unthinkable that a young person would have to face someone they've accused in the hallway, in the courtroom, or have to give testimony in that same space, considering they've already shown the strength and the courage to stand up and speak about it.

It's incumbent upon this committee as well as the government to support young people at Beacon House, both with ongoing funding and the remote testimony suite.

What's the effect on a young person and, by extension, what can happen to their testimony if they do have to see this person in the hallway or see them within the courtroom while delivering testimony? How can that impact their testimony?

Mr. Stewart Blair: As a clinician, Joelene would probably be in a better place to answer.

I know that these kids are already going through a devastating process, so I can imagine that this is just an absolutely abhorrent set of circumstances that they have to face.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Joelene?

Ms. Joelene Bamford: Quite frankly, MPP Kernaghan, it shuts it down. It can really change the trajectory for a trial, for the outcome, because this is a really traumatic situation.

While we've been in business, doing the same work with these child and youth victims and witnesses—we do not have a dedicated space in the courthouse. This has been a long-standing issue for us, so I thank you for bringing that up today.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you very much.

I'd like to move over to Pillar with Maureen. I want to thank you for your comments about how non-profits are essential to the economy, to the social services, and how they fill that gaps that the government has ignored. It's pretty clear that the government doesn't understand the quality and breadth of services that non-profits provide.

I want to ask about the problem that you've identified, of project-based funding or program-based funding. How are these limiting and problematic in terms of a funding regime? What happens to people who use the programs when the programs then disappear?

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: Yes, exactly—they're just gone.

At Pillar, when we've ended projects that were based on specific funding, we've tried to absorb that learning and the take-aways from the project. But we often have staff who are affiliated with that project, and those staff have to go away because we just don't have the room in our budget. And that's the case for many non-profits.

I don't necessarily think that the government doesn't understand the importance of the non-profit sector.

We're like the nice sector, right? We go along, we get along, all the while scraping through. We're extremely efficient. We can make a dollar go 10 times further. We heard it here today—that somehow we make it happen and somehow we keep delivering the service we can. But the stats I gave you about cutting services—many non-profits have cut services over the last few years, and the pandemic was especially devastating to the sector.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: How would that home in government that you as well as the Ontario Nonprofit Network are recommending serve not just non-profits, but also help the government? Would it avoid the duplication of efforts? Would it actually save time and promote efficiency for the government themselves?

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: Absolutely.

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

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: In different programs, when the government is preparing policy, one ministry might not see what effect that policy could have on the non-profit sector. Having a dedicated staff person, a deputy minister or something like that, with that lens and constantly looking—that would be their job: to consider the viewpoint of the non-profit sector and how every single policy could have an effect on that sector.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Wonderful.

And thank you for your comments about how so many affordable units were lost and how non-profits, with an acquisition fund, could help maintain and create yet more truly deeply affordable housing that will stand the test of time.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We will now go to MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you for being here today.

I certainly want to also thank all the volunteers. It sounds like all of your organizations have a significant number of volunteers who are contributing in very meaningful ways—including yourself, Stewart, as a volunteer board member. Thank you.

I want to talk a little bit about the not-for-profit sector. The government often talks about—as you said, Maureen—that not-for-profits should be operating like a business.

The government members often talk about how they run the government like a business, despite the fact that they've been running deficits and they've added \$100 billion of debt in the last few years.

Finding some funds that could help the not-for-profit sector, which is such an important part of our economy and our social infrastructure—they fill the gaps along the continuum of service from government services. When government services stop or don't exist, they fill that gap.

So I wonder if you could talk about why government should make funding your sector a priority, instead of spending money on things like a tunnel under the 401 or spending money on helping friends and family, so to speak, via the Skills Development Fund, which is—again, the purpose is a good idea, but we're seeing things that are actually problematic in how they're spending that money—a lack of accountability, transparency, according to the Auditor General. Could you talk a bit about why it's important to prioritize your sector and how accountable you are for every dollar that you spend?

Ms. Maureen Cassidy: A big part of the work that non-profits do—as you said, we fill gaps. We're often the first line of support that the government turns to. We saw it during the pandemic, and even at times like now, in the kinds of things and supports that people need. When we have to scale back our services, which is what has been happening, those needs don't go away. The cost is simply shifted. If we're not going to provide housing supports to individuals, they're going to go to jail or they're going to go to the emergency room.

London is a really good example of some of the stuff that's going on in deeply supportive or highly supportive housing. We have case studies here in London that are actual and going on right now, in seeing individuals—their interactions with police, their interactions or admissions to hospital, their visits to emergency room go down incredibly, hundreds of per cents. One individual I remember they tracked, as an example—their police visits in one month were something like over 30, so more than one per day interactions with police; they went down to less than a dozen. Their emergency room visits, which leads to the wait times that other people are experiencing because they don't have a doctor—if they choose to get health care, they have no choice but to go to the emergency room, or they're taken there by EMS.

So there is a societal cost that we are all paying. Some of the most expensive forms of health care are emergency room or being treated in hospital. A lot of times, these

people are admitted to hospital, and they keep using a bed because they have nowhere else to go. These are huge costs.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you very much, Maureen.

Stewart, I want to turn to your organization for a moment.

I'm not sure if you're aware, but the last budget from the government showed that spending in the justice sector is forecast to go down both next year and the year after that. Of course, that raises a whole bunch of concerns about access to justice; safe jails; the number of courts; timely trials for people, including for dangerous offenders. So I certainly hope your organization isn't affected by that. Certainly, your ask is very small. Your budget is modest, and yet you're doing incredible work to help young people, in particular, who are very vulnerable, especially with youth unemployment rates of over 15% right now in Ontario.

We want to make sure kids are supported—

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman:—especially as they're facing issues in the justice system.

Could you just, again, talk about the size of your ask in relation to your overall budget and how it's modest but it would make a significant difference to the youth living here in London and the surrounding area?

Mr. Stewart Blair: Our total funded revenue is just over \$1.8 million from various ministries. We are just seeking an additional \$150,000 a year to keep Beacon House stable, with the initial \$25,000 investment, also, to let us set up a remote testimony suite.

In terms of the accountability, we work closely with our ministry funders, who are very detailed in what they ask for. Every dollar is accounted for. I'm a business person. I have an MBA. If I could make a dollar turn into two with the magic of a spreadsheet, I'd happily do it, but that's just not how it works.

1400

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Right.

Again, when do you need that money by in order to keep Beacon House open?

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

I want to thank all of you for the time you spent preparing for this presentation and the great job you did of getting your message across. Thank you very much for being here. We very much appreciate it and wish you all well.

CHEMISTRY INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION
OF CANADA

MUSLIM RESOURCE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL
SUPPORT AND INTEGRATION

FANSHAWE COLLEGE

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Our next panel: Chemistry Industry Association of Canada, Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration, and Fanshawe College.

As they're coming forward, I would remind them that the rules are the same: seven minutes for the presentation and—hopefully, most of them—I'll give you a one-minute notice if there's one minute left, and then we'll carry on with that.

We ask each one to identify yourself as you start your presentation.

The first one is Chemistry Industry Association of Canada. Welcome.

Mr. Don Fusco: Thank you. My name is Don Fusco, and I'm speaking on behalf of the Chemistry Industry Association of Canada. We represent leaders across Ontario's chemistry and plastic sectors.

We appreciate the Ontario government's continued focus on competitiveness, investment attraction, and long-term economic growth.

Our message today is straightforward: Chemistry and plastics are foundational to Ontario's economy, to its clean growth ambitions, and to the success of every priority manufacturing sector in this province.

Chemistry manufacturing is not short-term or mobile. These facilities have life cycles exceeding 30 years. When Ontario wins at chemistry investment, it secures decades of high-quality jobs, tax revenues, infrastructure and community benefits. When we lose one, those benefits are gone for a generation.

I'll just note that the average wage for a chemistry production operator exceeds \$100,000 a year. That's nearly 50% more than the industrial manufacturing average.

Today, Ontario's chemistry sector is valued at \$35 billion, plastics manufacturing at \$17.1 billion, with over 90,000 Ontarians directly employed, and \$40 billion in exports in 2024 alone. Chemistry remains the third-largest manufacturing sector by value-added output in Ontario. Importantly, more than 95% of all manufactured products rely on chemistry in one form or another, and global demand is rising for low-carbon, circular and advanced materials.

Our submission focuses on five practical recommendations to ensure Ontario remains competitive in attracting and retaining this investment.

First, we must fully integrate chemistry and plastics into priority sector strategies, including automotive, EVs, defence and critical minerals. Chemistry companies supply the materials that make these sectors possible: battery separators, composites, polymers, lubricants, specialty chemicals and advanced rubbers. Ontario-based firms already support critical mineral extraction and processing, battery components and light weighting materials that reduce emissions across transportation and manufacturing. To strengthen these supply chains, we are asking the province to maintain chemistry and plastics as explicit priority sectors for investment attraction, engage multi-national investors proactively, and advocate federally to ensure chemistry is fully eligible under the clean manufacturing investment tax credit, particularly in critical mineral processing, where the production of solvents and surfactants for mineral processing is currently not eligible.

Second, Ontario must enable Invest Ontario to compete for world-scale investment. Large chemistry, plastics and recycling projects increasingly flow to jurisdictions offering predictable policy environments, competitive incentives, and streamlined permitting. Alberta is an example, with its Alberta Petrochemicals Incentive Program, that Invest Ontario should model. Ontario should expand Invest Ontario's mandate and introduce a modern, transparent investment attraction framework—one that is long-term, technology-neutral and outcomes-based, tied directly to innovation and economic impact.

Third, Ontario must continue to advocate strongly for business interests in federal trade and tariff discussions. We heard this already. Chemistry and plastics are deeply integrated into North American supply chains. With the upcoming CUSMA 2026 review and increasing uncertainty around US policies, Ontario's voice matters.

Fourth, Ontario must reduce red tape and modernize regulatory processes. Our sector is capital-intensive and highly regulated. While we support strong environmental and safety outcomes, duplicative requirements, unclear guidance and unpredictable timelines deter investment. We recommend:

- clear, multi-year carbon policy trajectories with revenue recycling that improves competitiveness;
- streamlined environmental compliance approval processes with predictable timelines;
- a strengthened, one-window approach across ministries; and
- greater recognition of industry-led systems like Responsible Care and Operation Clean Sweep, which already meet or exceed regulatory objectives.

Reducing red tape does not mean reducing protection; it means regulating smarter.

Finally, Ontario has a real opportunity to become a North American leader in the circular economy, particularly for plastics. Ontario's manufacturing base, population scale and standardized blue box system give it a competitive advantage. To unlock investment, the province must recognize advanced recycling technologies, modernize waste classifications so materials are treated as resources, and support recycling hubs through coordinated provincial-federal financing and public-private partnerships.

In closing, chemistry and plastics are not peripheral industries. They are enablers of every major modern environmental, economic and industrial objective that Ontario has set itself.

With the right policy signals on investment attraction and regulation, trade, and circularity, Ontario can secure decades of sustainable growth, good jobs and emission reductions. We look forward to working with the government and our community stakeholders as constructive partners in building that future.

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

We now will hear from the Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration. I believe that's a virtual one.

The floor is yours. You have seven minutes to make your presentation.

Mr. Elyas Farooqi: My name is Elyas Farooqi, and I'm the executive director here at the Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration, based here in London. We're not a faith-based organization; we're an anti-violence and a social service agency.

Alfredo, did you want to introduce yourself?

Mr. Alfredo Marroquin: My name is Alfredo Marroquin. I am the manager of programs and services at the Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration.

Mr. Elyas Farooqi: For over two decades, the Muslim resource centre has worked at the intersections of mental health, family violence, newcomer integration and stabilization of families, in close partnership with school boards, health care, justice policy, policing, and settlement and community agencies.

I'm here today, alongside my colleague Alfredo, not to speak about social services in the abstract, but how Ontario can reduce high-cost system pressures by investing earlier, smarter and closer to the community.

Across Ontario, including right here in London, we're seeing a growing pattern. Families, women, girls and youth reach systems too late, in crisis and at maximum cost. When culturally diverse and newcomer families cannot access timely, trusted family supports, the result is not no service; it's ER visits, police response, school disengagement, homelessness, labour inefficiencies, and justice involvement. These are not hypothetical costs. These show up in provincial budgets across health care, justice, education and social services. What we're seeing on the ground is not a lack of programs; it's a lack of coordination, trust and family-inclusive interventions early enough to change the trajectory of intensive costs.

1410

We operate a culturally integrative, family-inclusive model here in London that mostly focuses on prevention, early intervention and coordinated care, not just crisis response. Practically, what does this mean? Practically, it means supporting vulnerable groups—underserved, at-risk groups and their families, supporting them with family violence, mental health, but also stabilization supports. It means strong partnership with trusted community spaces, whether that is schools, community centres, culture groups; sometimes, faith spaces and partner agencies. It also means coordinating across systems so that families and individuals are not bounced around between disconnected services that are not just duplicated but also inefficient. This model is what we call the culturally integrative model. This model works because when the engagement happens earlier, risks are identified sooner and families stay connected to care earlier. The outcome is really reducing escalation into high-cost emergency enforcement-based responses—whether it's child welfare, police, hospitals and justice. From a fiscal perspective, this is where the value lies. Lower-intensity prevention and early intervention work will cost far less than repeated crisis response later. This culturally integrative model is also scalable. It has been selected as a prototype to help the

Ontario government redesign its child welfare system, and it was funded to be shared in six communities across Ontario. The federal government has also funded our model in the context of gender-based violence, to be shared in two communities across Ontario. What it is still missing is the stabilization of the model, here in London, with sustainable multi-year funding.

When it comes to recommendations, based on our experience, we would like to offer three concrete recommendations for the 2026 provincial budget.

First, establish or expand multi-year funding for community-based, culturally integrative navigation hubs, starting in high-need regions like London. These hubs stabilize individuals and families earlier. They reduce system duplication and prevent escalation into higher-cost systems.

Recommendation number two: Invest in early intervention and prevention programs, addressing family violence in high-risk situations, including working with men and the entire family before justice and child protection systems become the default response. This approach directly reduces pressures on courts, policing, shelters and hospitals.

The final recommendation is funding cross-sector implementation and coordination, not just short-term training. This will help education, justice, settlement and community services actually work together effectively. System efficiency requires infrastructure, not just goodwill, and each of these investments is modest compared to the long-term cost that they help avoid.

In closing, I just want to emphasize once again that this is not optional social spending we're talking about. This is about reducing fiscal risk, supporting workforce participation, and using public dollars more efficiently by intervening earlier and closer to the community itself.

MRC stands as a ready partner with Ontario to demonstrate how strategic, community-based interventions in investments can prevent far more expensive outcomes down the line.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. Alfredo and I welcome any questions that the committee has.

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

Our next presenter will be Fanshawe College.

Mr. Peter Devlin: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. My name is Peter Devlin. I'm the president of Fanshawe College, and I'm here to advocate on the urgent need for more robust and reliable funding for Ontario's colleges.

All 24 public colleges across Ontario share a common concern: The choices made today will shape Ontario's workforce and communities for years to come.

Colleges are central to Ontario's economy. By 2035, the province will need one million college graduates in skilled trades, health care, energy, and advanced manufacturing. Colleges supply more than half of the workforce in these sectors.

Here in our region, our students are training for high-demand sectors, including health sciences, skilled trades,

technology and aviation through hands-on programs such as nursing, electrical techniques and aircraft maintenance engineering—all stepping directly into jobs Ontario needs.

Colleges also have a profound impact on local communities.

Fanshawe's regional campuses in Simcoe/Norfolk, St. Thomas/Elgin and Woodstock/Oxford as well as regional delivery sites in Huron/Bruce play an important economic development role by sustaining local health care, skilled trades and small business ecosystems. Overall, Fanshawe's economic contribution to the communities we serve is \$1.9 billion each year, with the greatest impact coming from graduates' incomes, which add close to \$1.5 billion to the region.

Despite this essential role, colleges face mounting financial pressures. Tuition was reduced by 10%, then frozen in 2019. Costs per student increased by \$600 each year due to inflation.

Without increased funding sources, by 2027, colleges will lose, on average, \$5,200 per domestic student. With 200,000 domestic students, that's a shortfall of \$1.5 billion.

Ontario colleges are the poorest-funded in the country. Operating grants are just 44%—or \$7,700 below national average per-student funding. Previous funding announcements represent 10% of what the sector needs, were time-limited, and have not been adequately allocated to the college sector to enable colleges to keep pace with inflation or address the structural deficit.

Fanshawe has acted responsibly, cutting costs and reducing our workforce, so far, by 300 employees and suspending more than 40 programs in 2025.

Overall, the 24 public colleges have cut \$1.4 billion in costs, suspended 600 programs and eliminated more than 8,000 positions. These measures have been felt deeply by our communities, yet they are insufficient.

Without additional support, program closures will continue; fewer students will graduate; labour shortages in key sectors like construction, health care, technology, life sciences and the trades will worsen.

In fact, because of funding pressures, in just the last 16 months, Ontario has graduated 2,000 fewer students in the very programs the Protect Ontario plan relies on.

The public is noticing and weighing in. According to a recent Abacus poll, nearly eight in 10 believe Ontario cannot build the skilled workforce it needs without expanding and modernizing college programs; more than eight in 10 say post-secondary education is critical to protecting the province's long-term prosperity; and seven in 10 say it is urgent for the provincial government to increase funding for colleges so Ontario can prepare for a future shaped by AI, automation and global competition.

To address this, Colleges Ontario has worked closely with all 24 colleges, including Fanshawe, to identify clear, achievable solutions.

Today, we ask the provincial government to take four key actions. With Colleges Ontario, we respectfully ask the provincial government to:

(1) Close the structural deficit by providing \$1.1 billion through operating grants and tuition adjustments to ensure that programs remain sustainable;

(2) Support high-priority programs by investing \$200 million to create 20,000 additional seats in trades, technology, health care and advanced manufacturing;

(3) Maintain regional access by committing \$200 million annually for small, northern, rural and French-language colleges; and

(4) Reinforce collaboration and innovation by establishing a \$100-million fund for shared services, cyber security and sector-wide partnerships.

Every dollar invested in colleges generates jobs, skills and stronger communities. Stronger, well-supported colleges mean a strong Ontario—competitive, growing, and ready to meet the challenges of the future.

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Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

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

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

Mr. Robert Bailey: Welcome to all the presenters today, both online and in person here.

I would like to start with a question I had after Mr. Fusco's presentation earlier this afternoon.

I know the province, through innovative technology and rules they've put in place, have created somewhere—I think the number is over one million new jobs, or well-paying.

What other programs could we do to keep the momentum going, Don?

Mr. Don Fusco: We live in a global, competitive environment. As I mentioned, attracting investment is—unfortunately, it's not like the Winter Olympics coming up; there's no silver or bronze medal. If you don't win the gold, you lose. It's a matter of an all-of-government approach to attracting investment, from the standpoint of looking at competitive offerings of other jurisdictions and what they're doing to attract investments—creating the right environment that is supportive of not only bringing a facility here for the first time, but for allowing it and giving it the opportunity to expand over time. That is predictable regulation—when I said “smart regulations.”

Some argue that Ontario is still one of the most complex jurisdictions in which to operate a manufacturing facility, because of red tape. That, I think, needs to be reviewed and looked at. I've got a few examples. If you talk about decarbonization and circularity—circularity, right now, plastics. Post-use plastics are classified as a waste, but they shouldn't be classified as a waste if they're used to recycle, to produce more products. If you want a new advanced recycling facility in Ontario, you have to go through the same process that a landfill site has to go through. You don't need to do that in many US jurisdictions. In fact, you don't have to do that in Alberta. So we shouldn't do it in Ontario. Those are certain examples.

Mr. Robert Bailey: I think you told me once, a number of years ago, and maybe you can speak to that, that the

expansion by Nova Chemicals—Nova, at the time; I don't know what they're called today. That was a real vote of confidence in the Ontario chemistry industry. If they hadn't built that plant in my riding, for example, it would have been a long-term loss to the industry as a whole. Can you speak to that, about foresight and—

Mr. Don Fusco: Those are anchor investments that ensure that a sector will continue to function and employ high-skilled workers in Ontario.

That was, roughly, close to a \$3-billion investment that was announced in 2017, and it was completed a few years ago. There has not been another chemistry facility of that scale since. There have been smaller investments. We applaud Ontario for supporting Jungbunzlauer Canada in Port Colborne. Asahi Kasei is building its battery separator plant there, as well. But nothing that you would say—like Nova, has come since.

There have been many large investments being made in Alberta, the US Gulf coast and the Midwest, in our sector.

We hope that we can turn the tide and bring more certainty and clarity to Ontario for attracting investment, with focus on competitiveness at home and, of course, access to global markets.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Minister Lecce—I was just thinking of some of the presentations I've seen him make.

Of course, I follow the American news a lot, about artificial intelligence and how—

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

Mr. Robert Bailey: —they're going to need more electricity to power them. Do you think there are a lot of opportunities, in southwestern Ontario especially, for those?

Mr. Don Fusco: Absolutely. We know that power needs are going to grow in Ontario, and AI data centres are forecasted to require a lot. Our sector requires a lot of power, and ensuring enough clean and affordable industrial power is available will be a key enabler for attracting investment.

Mr. Robert Bailey: I want to say to Mr. Devlin that I met just recently with the president of Lambton College, and he echoed many of the same comments you did. So the story is getting out there—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): And that is all the time you have to say it. Thank you.

We'll now go to MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: My question is to Peter Devlin from Fanshawe College. Thanks so much for coming here.

What you were saying about the situation facing colleges is something that we've been hearing a lot of, as we've been touring around the province.

We've certainly heard from public colleges about the role public colleges play in providing a really affordable education to students—especially students who live in smaller cities or towns—to learn the skills they need to enter those workforces where we really need workers, like construction, manufacturing, health care and life sciences. Clearly, there's a huge value in investing in colleges in our economy.

It's pretty concerning to hear about the cuts that you've made to Fanshawe already and the decline in the number of students who are eligible to come.

If we don't restore funding to public colleges, what kind of knock-on effects do you see this having on Ontario's economy?

Mr. Peter Devlin: If the college sector doesn't receive the funding that is requested, there will be even fewer graduates—graduates in exactly the areas that Ontario needs as part of the Protect Ontario plan; the graduates who drive innovation, who drive economic strength, who drive health care, skilled trades.

You'll also see fewer programs, more staff reductions, and the potential for additional campus closures—more than what have already been made. I think I can also add that there's a threat of reduced productivity and weakened provincial economies.

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

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to our presenters who are here in person as well as virtually.

I would like to begin with MRCSSI. Elyas and Alfredo, I want to thank you for explaining for this committee a model that's cost-effective and efficient and that meets needs before a crisis occurs. It's not only the right thing to do, but it actually costs less.

I want to also have you talk a little bit about your recommendations on year-over-year or multi-year funding. Can you speak to the issue of the problem with project-based or grant-based funding? What impact does that type of funding have on your organization?

Mr. Alfredo Marroquin: Thank you for your question.

Basically, I think one of the main impacts is, the quality of the services is impacted by not having sustainable funding, as this impacts the kind of staff we can hire. It also impacts the quality of the services to the service user, in the sense of having a program for one year and not having the program the following year, even though we know that the needs remain. That also largely impacts society, as less individuals will be at their capacity to become self-sufficient individuals integrated into the school system, integrated into civil society. So I think the impact is great.

When we look at the human capacity that is lost by not having those sustainable—because a lot of the people we provide services to come from very difficult environments, but they also have strong resilience. With some of the help we provide, they become self-sufficient individuals.

1430

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I really appreciate your comments.

I'd like to move now to Fanshawe College, with Peter.

We see a situation in Ontario that is a decades-long problem, which is the underfunding of post-secondary education.

I want to thank you for the statistics and the concerns you've outlined.

Can you speak to some of the 40 local programs that have been lost because of the funding pressures? Were these programs cut because of a lack of interest in these programs? What did that look like?

Mr. Peter Devlin: There were two elements to it: predominantly, a lack of interest—so, low enrolment—and others that were not eligible for a post-graduate work permit for international students; in fact, that was the real driver for the majority of those programs. Programs that aren't designated as such by the federal government therefore mean that international students are not interested in those programs. So those were the programs that have been cut first.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you for all of the work that Fanshawe does to help build and support and future-proof our economy as well as our society.

Apologies to Don for not making it to you for any questions in this round.

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you for being here this afternoon. As someone who was born in London, raised here, and whose mom is a graduate of Fanshawe, it's great to be in London today and in your company as well.

I think Fanshawe is a great college and certainly, as you've outlined here, is a big contributor to the local economy and beyond.

I had the chance, actually, this morning, before our pre-budget consultations, to meet with the London Economic Development Corp., and they talked a lot about the value of diversifying the economy here in London, in terms of having a strong manufacturing sector, pharmaceuticals, education etc. They highlighted the importance of education in being able to train that workforce for jobs of today but also for tomorrow.

I want, Peter, for you to speak a little bit about the way that Fanshawe has been able to respond to shifts in demand from employers—local employers and beyond—in terms of the programs that you are offering. Certainly, being nimble is part of what we need to do, especially in this time of economic uncertainty. So if you could speak a little bit to that—and maybe how the instability around college and university funding makes it difficult for you to be able to make those plans for the future, in jobs that might be needed in the chemical industry and beyond.

Mr. Peter Devlin: Thank you for that. It's a wonderful point.

I would begin by saying that one of the beauties of the college sector is its connectedness with industry and business partners—in fact, a lot of our faculty come from the industries that they teach in. They have a wealth of current experience. They also alert us to opportunities of how to tweak our programs to make them more relevant, or suggest new programs. We have program advisory councils that support all of our programs. Fanshawe College is one of the provincial leaders in bringing new programming every year. We courageously sunset programs that are less relevant and bring on programs to meet local labour market needs.

We work closely with the London Economic Development Corp. as well as those industry partners to be able to ensure that we have graduates who have the skill sets—both the technical skill sets as well as the human skills—to be able to excel in their fields.

And to your other question—it's difficult. If I could do one thing, it's to underline the fact that there's a structural deficit, and in 2027, without a response from a budget point of view, we will lose \$5,200 for every domestic student who comes to an Ontario public college—and those graduates are the ones the province needs for the Protect Ontario plan and to drive our economy.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Peter.

Donald, I'll turn to you for a moment.

Certainly, manufacturing is an important sector in our economy.

The PCs actually promised to bring 300,000 manufacturing jobs back to the province in 2018. They have yet to bring back even 30,000, so they're over 90% short of their goal.

I'm wondering if you could talk about what is needed, from your perspective, in order to increase manufacturing jobs both in your sector and beyond. What more can the government do? Certainly, economists and think tanks are talking about things like corporate tax cuts—not just incentives and “handouts” to various sectors, but to actually bring significant tax reform to be able to attract long-term capital and investments to our province.

Mr. Don Fusco: Manufacturing is a strategic industry.

Studies show that for every direct manufacturing job that is employed in Ontario, there are at least seven more jobs in the broader economy. So I'll start with that.

It's not just one single thing that's going to drive more investment attraction and job creation in the manufacturing sector.

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

Mr. Don Fusco: You do need to create the right conditions to attract the investment, but beyond that, then it's maintaining it and ensuring that it's viable in the long term—so, consistent and simplified regulatory frameworks, attracting it at the beginning.

The fierceness of rivalry for investments is strong internationally; it is even more fierce within companies. Many of Ontario's manufacturing base are foreign-owned subsidiaries or foreign-owned multinationals. They are trying to win investments from within their organization. The value proposition for Ontario has to be translated to foreign offices to understand that we are —

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

MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you to all of our presenters this afternoon.

Don, I'll start with you. This is a very techy type of presentation that you have here.

You noted that while mechanical recycling can only handle about 50% of plastics and that we require advanced recycling for the rest—I do know that critics argue that processes like pyrolysis are significantly more energy-

intensive and have a greater greenhouse gas footprint than traditional recycling.

So how can the chemical industry guarantee that scaling these technologies in Ontario will actually result in a net positive environmental outcome? What specific guardrails would you be interested in, or what are you proposing to ensure that advanced recycling doesn't simply become a rebranding of high-carbon incineration?

Mr. Don Fusco: Thank you very much for that question. I'm really happy to address it.

Advanced recycling is hard to explain. There are different forms, beyond mechanical, that diverge it into what is considered advanced recycling: pyrolysis, gasification and dissolution. You mentioned pyrolysis, but because there are other forms of recycling technologies that are being developed in Canada and around the world, it's not a one-size-fits-all approach. And taking the post-use plastics from landfill and diverting it through these mechanisms actually has more environmental benefits than not.

There are many studies that show that pyrolysis and gasification—

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

Mr. Don Fusco: —and dissolution facilities actually are not heavy emitters. In fact, the more carbon you capture to keep within that molecule in order for it to be manufactured again is better. So those facilities are incented to not emit because they want to keep as much of the value of that molecule in order to manufacture it again and again and again.

I'll just say, mechanical recycling—there are certain plastics like PET, plastic water bottles, that can be mechanically recycled easily seven times. But plastics are very complex, and you need these technologies in order to be able to divert it from landfill, keep that molecule in the economy to start producing more products time and time again. There's actually no limit on how many times you can recycle a molecule under those new, innovative technologies.

1440

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We will now go to MPP Saunderson.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I want to thank all our presenters this afternoon for taking time out of your busy schedules to come and speak to us, and for the incredible work you do in our communities.

My questions, to start off, are going to be for the Muslim resource centre.

Thank you very much for your submissions. You talk about anti-violence—so I'm imagining that talks about social inclusion and anti-hate. How much of your work focuses on those issues?

Mr. Elyas Farooqi: On anti-hate as well?

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Yes, and social inclusion.

In London, four years ago, we had that tragic accident. And we've seen, with geopolitical events in the world, anti-Islam hate and anti-Semitism on the rise. I'm just wondering, in your world, what are you seeing of that?

Mr. Elyas Farooqi: Yes, addressing hate and its impact is an important part of our work. It's not just the stand-alone program siloed—it's integrated across our broader mandate of family safety, mental health and community stability. We respond to hate-related harm where it intersects with trauma, safety and system access, especially for racialized and newcomer communities. This may include culturally integrative counselling, community outreach, coordination with schools here—we have a strong partnership with the school board—our justice partners as well, and any other services where individuals or families are impacted by hate or Islamophobia.

From a systems perspective, our work has recognized that unrelated, untreated hate-related trauma increases risks of mental health crises, more disengagement and, ultimately, escalation into what we call “higher-cost services.” So integrating anti-hate responses into our broader prevention and coordination work is far more effective and far more cost-efficient as well, rather than treating it as a separate issue. It's kind of embedded into our work as well.

Mr. Brian Sanderson: I appreciate that answer.

Yesterday, we heard from B'nai Brith. They were talking about the rise in anti-Semitism. In Canada, the Jewish population is about 1% of our population. Globally, they account for over 70% of our hate crimes. I'm wondering—they had a very similar message—if you have recommendations for the government on how we might make investments to tackle anti-hate in all forms.

Mr. Elyas Farooqi: Really good question.

Hate is the same across the board, as you see, whether it's Islamophobia or anti-Semitism. We are seeing that rise, as well, with our partners that we work with—whether it's anti-Semitism or Islamophobia. The core issue, I guess, is that it stays the same—hate drives fears, disengagement and trauma, which, again, increases pressure on schools, policy and health systems.

The way we look at our work is always that it should combine prevention, protection and post-incident supports; sustain any anti-hate funding as core capacity, not just as one-off projects—so moving away from these short-term pilots; fund stable, community-based capacity for prevention, response and healing—is where, we think, it makes most sense—but also resource a coordinated, local response pathway for incidents and ensure municipalities and communities have a clear “what happens next” protocol; and, finally, invest in any school-based prevention and rapid support as well.

To me, a coordinated approach, but investing in organizations that are acting as a coordinated hub to do the work, is really important.

Mr. Brian Sanderson: I appreciate that answer. Thank you.

For my next question, I'm going to turn to you, Peter.

I have Georgian College in my riding, and I taught at Georgian College for a number of years. My son just graduated from Georgian, in precision machining. So I certainly appreciate all you've been saying.

It has been a difficult year in your sector, with the federal cutbacks, not only in the number of foreign students, but also in the number of foreign student-eligible programs. It has been a double whammy.

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

Mr. Brian Sanderson: Would you agree that that really has been the precipitating factor that has sent us into this difficult time for the college sector?

Mr. Peter Devlin: That has certainly been part of the funding challenges. The other significant part is just stagnant provincial funding—but yes, international students have made up the deficit for the past several years in the provincial underfunding, I would agree.

And Georgian College is a wonderful college.

Mr. Brian Sanderson: Yes, as is Fanshawe.

I went to Western, but I rode by Fanshawe every day, on my way out to Fanshawe Lake.

I guess what we're really confronted with here is working with you to try to reconfigure and re-establish the business plan for colleges across Ontario.

Mr. Peter Devlin: Exactly that. We would have been a college that had about 6,000 more international students than we have currently. We have lost that revenue, yet we're trying to provide a level of service for all—

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 this afternoon.

I'm going to start with MRCSSI. Thank you for being at this presentation today.

As you know, I've been a big supporter of MRCSSI ever since I was elected and learned about the culturally integrative model and its effectiveness in working with mainstream agencies that weren't able to connect with families from different cultures—the success you had with the CAS in getting kids out of protection and back with their families.

Can you elaborate a bit on the importance of providing multi-year funding for organizations like MRCSSI that use culturally integrated or culturally responsive approaches?

Mr. Elyas Farooqi: Thank you very much, MPP Peggy, for that question, and thank you for being such a staunch supporter and ally in the work that we do.

When we talk about a culturally integrative model, we're not just talking about culturally specific programs layered on top of existing services; we're talking about integrating culture, family and community realities into how systems assess risk, engage people and coordinate response.

I think the model really works on building trust, continuity and coordination across the system. That requires stable, multi-year funding, because trust and safety don't operate on project timelines and cost avoidance; it only happens when the capacity is sustained. I know folks will say training alone doesn't change systems, how they respond in real time. Culturally integrative work really requires ongoing implementation, coordination and a trusted presence.

Stable funding reduces churn. It reduces duplication of services and any crisis response cost, which, to me, is fiscally more responsible than repeatedly building short-term capacity or short-term projects as well. So it's really important that we're focusing on funding organizations that could deliver this type of response—not just in terms of impact, but in terms of cost as well.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you for that answer.

I think that we see that in the requests from the police, the school system and the hospital to work with MRCSSI, because of the uniqueness of the culturally integrative program.

I want to now turn to Fanshawe and commend Fanshawe for everything you've been able to accomplish for this community, this region, the province, when you are operating with a funding system that provides only 44% of the national average for Ontario colleges. We know that you've been able to do this because you've had those international student revenues to subsidize the delivery of domestic education. But when you talk about losing \$5,200 per domestic student if you don't get increased funding sources—you can't make those numbers work; something's got to give.

It sounds to me like there are going to be a lot of domestic students who won't be able to access college education at one of our 24 colleges or those 200 campuses, without some drastic changes across the college sector.

We've already seen campuses close. We've seen programs being lost.

Can you talk about what's on the table if the government doesn't come up with a funding solution?

1450

Mr. Peter Devlin: Yes, it's critical in the college sector right now. I've talked about fewer graduates, fewer programs, fewer opportunities.

A lot of the programs that are critical to Ontario's future are ones that are high-cost to deliver.

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

Mr. Peter Devlin: You look at any of the health care-related programs—the labs are expensive.

You look at skilled trades—Ontario colleges deliver over 80% of the skilled trades graduates in this province—those are expensive labs to operate.

Funding is essential to bring colleges to the level of just breaking even, with their domestic students. It is central, again, to how we progress as a province.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: With the funding that's being requested today, and by Colleges Ontario—where will that bring Ontario college funding, in terms of the national average? Will it bring us to the middle? Will it bring us to second-lowest? How will it improve?

Mr. Peter Devlin: I only use that as a comparative.

What we're asking for is just to be able to deliver our programs—

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

We'll go to MPP Shamji.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Peter, I'll start with you.

First, I'd like to begin by acknowledging the important work that educational institutions—notably, colleges—do in setting us up for a bright future.

It's not lost upon me that our Deputy Premier is, in fact, a graduate of your institution. If it's possible for her—imagine that the next Deputy Premier or Premier may be in your student body right now. We need to set that person up for success.

You've spoken very broadly about the challenges across Ontario in the college system.

Could you speak a little bit more specifically about what the deficit in funding is for your institution and some of the very difficult decisions you've been forced to make?

Mr. Peter Devlin: It has been difficult.

This year our deficit started at \$38 million, and we have brought it down now to \$26 million; in the two next out-years, the deficit is in the neighbourhood of \$70 million. Fanshawe has eliminated 300 full-time positions, and we are continuing with downsizing efforts. We have permanently eliminated 40 programs. And there are a multitude of intake suspensions that we have initiated for this academic year because there aren't sufficient numbers of students to pay the bills.

There are also student service supports that are and will become even more limited. I talk about mental health support, and recreation and club activities to support students' growth, to support the development of people skills along with their technical skills.

Our labs will stay just the way they are. There will be no investment in labs to keep them current with the needs of local hospitals, the local construction industry, and local advanced manufacturing in the region.

So we will do just what we can with the resources that we are given, but there will be fewer graduates and fewer options for Ontarians.

Mr. Adil Shamji: That sounds pretty catastrophic. It would certainly keep me up at night.

Mr. Peter Devlin: It keeps me up at night, sir.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I have no doubt about that.

I studied in London; I was at Western. I know that the post-secondary institutions in this city also drive the city's economy.

You spoke of job losses, fewer students coming in. As one of the drivers of the local economy, what have you observed may have been some of the ramifications of the very difficult decisions you just described?

Mr. Peter Devlin: I talked about 300 full-time positions that are gone. There is also a host of less-than-full-time positions that no longer exist because of the fewer programs and fewer numbers of sections that are being taught. So it is less resources in the region because of the employees of Fanshawe College—less graduates, and less investment in the important infrastructure that I think Ontarians deserve, to be able to teach young Ontarians.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I'm very, very, very sorry to hear about that.

I wonder if I can turn to the Muslim Resource Centre next—if I could invite you to highlight some of your successes in the last few years, and if you could elaborate

on what your goals are for 2026 and how additional funding could help you to accomplish those things.

Mr. Elyas Farooqi: Thank you very much for that question.

Our success could be measured in different ways. We do a lot of practical outcomes that could demonstrate why stable, community-based capacity matters. We have done quite a bit of work in prevention and early intervention work.

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

Mr. Elyas Farooqi: One partnership I could highlight, specifically, is our work with child welfare. We've had a partnership with them for 17 years. Through this collaborative partnership, we have been able to reduce the number of Muslim children going into care. There was a five-year period that not one Muslim child went into the care of CAS. The cost savings for that, annually—just the conservative value—was a million dollars a year, just for our child protection work that we do.

We work beyond child protection work. As was mentioned, we work on coordination with mental health, gender-based violence agencies, policing, justice—and hate as well. That's just one area of the work.

If we had more capacity, we would be able to reach more folks who are underserved, at-risk communities, and be able to do more work at the early intervention—and early prevention work as well. We see the increase in demand for not just—

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

We'll now go to MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Peter, I will move over to you.

I represent the riding of Haldimand–Norfolk. Of course, the James N. Allan campus is in Simcoe, in Norfolk county.

We've heard in the community and I've heard in the community time and time again that the pursuit of international revenue forced the centralization of programs.

Norfolk county youth feel a bit abandoned, and they don't care whose fault it is—that we have moved away from a community college.

With what you have presented today, I question whether the James N. Allan campus can remain a community college for Norfolk county. Is it at risk of becoming a financially unviable satellite campus?

I will just add that I was sitting at the fall convocation—and I'm born, raised, returned to the area, and I can recognize last names during a ceremony. During that ceremony, I recognized three surnames. I was blown away. Conversations with families following the ceremony proved to me that I was correct—everyone I spoke to was from the greater Toronto area.

I'm desperate to know, if we make these funding investments that you are asking for today, whether or not we will be able to save the Simcoe campus.

Mr. Peter Devlin: Fanshawe is very proud of the fact that we have three regional campuses and a number of other delivery sites. It's critical for the province and for Fanshawe College that we maintain our regional campus-

es. They offer unique and special programs that cater to that region.

You would probably also know that we're very much engaged in the employment and career supports in that region.

We are committed to the region, Bobbi Ann—as we are to the other regional campuses.

Our programs are coordinated so that they can be successful.

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

Mr. Peter Devlin: I was at that graduation ceremony.

The graduation ceremonies at our regional campuses are filled with spirit and pride and families—I'd also note there are probably five times more people than the actual graduates, and you only see that at regional campus graduations.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I will agree that there was a lot of spirit. But there weren't many local students graduating that day. That is my concern.

I'm wondering what rebranding you would have to do. If we could shift to domestic-focused students, what rebranding would Fanshawe College do to attract those kids who feel abandoned?

Mr. Peter Devlin: I think it's the relevancy of the programs in the local industries that are supported by that region—and I am entirely committed to supporting those programs.

1500

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

I thank all the panellists. Thank you for all the time you took to prepare for your presentation and the able way you presented it to us. I'm sure it will be taken into consideration as we report back, at the end of the trip, to tell the minister what he should be looking at for the budget.

ASSOCIATION OF MUNICIPALITIES OF ONTARIO

LONDON CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNER CENTRE

YMCA OF SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): The next panel consists of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the London Cross-Cultural Learner Centre, and the YMCA of Southwestern Ontario.

As I expect you heard during the last presentation, you have seven minutes to make your presentation—I will hopefully say, "One minute," at six minutes, and we go to seven minutes.

We ask that each person identify themselves just after you start speaking so we can get the right name for Hansard.

With that, the first one we're going to hear from is the Association of Municipalities of Ontario.

Ms. Lindsay Jones: Thank you so much, committee, for the opportunity to present today. My name is Lindsay Jones. I'm the executive director of the Association of

Municipalities of Ontario, a non-profit, non-partisan organization that represents the 444 municipal governments of Ontario. Joining me today, virtually, from Niagara Falls is Karen Nesbitt, our director of policy and government relations. We do like to get out and visit the members.

As you know, municipalities deliver front-line services that Ontarians use daily, many of which are essential—from safe drinking water to electricity to emergency services, and increasingly, more health and social services. Municipalities' fiscal capacity to deliver these services affordably and sustainably is reaching a tipping point.

As you and your colleagues consider the views and requests gathered as part of the pre-budget consultation process, AMO encourages you and encourages the province to consider three key budgetary requests.

First, provide municipalities with long-term and predictable infrastructure funding for housing and the economy.

Second, fully fund health and social services that are provincial responsibilities.

And third, bring together municipal and federal partners to address the homelessness crisis with new investments.

These recommendations will sound familiar. They're largely consistent with what municipalities across Ontario asked the government to consider and focus on since 2024—the increasing challenge of how to pay for everything that's asked of municipal governments to support our residents, businesses and communities.

Municipal investments in service and infrastructure drive growth and build the communities that make this province a great place to live and a great destination for people and investments. But the fiscal arrangements that enable municipalities to deliver on their responsibilities are not sustainable, with implications for housing supply and affordability, cost of living, economic competitiveness, public safety, and overall quality of life.

We know that the entire country faces economic headwinds, but the municipal fiscal challenge is structural, long-term and hurting our ability to weather these kinds of shocks or regular business cycles.

For every dollar of tax revenue raised by all three levels of government, the municipal share is 10 cents.

Increasing property taxes is not a sustainable option. Ontario property owners are overburdened, and they continue to pay the second-highest property taxes per capita in Canada, at \$2,104 a head; this is 34% higher than the Canadian median of \$1,569.

Provincial grants to Ontario municipalities, on a per capita basis, are some of the lowest in the country.

British Columbia, for example, faces similar housing and affordability and homeless challenges as Ontario. In that province, the per capita provincial grant is 31% higher than it is in Ontario.

Municipalities across the province have been united in calling on the provincial government to sit down with us to review the provincial and municipal fiscal framework. Almost 200 municipal councils have called for a social and economic prosperity review to jointly look at municipal needs, expenditures, debts and revenues, and work together

to generate solutions. We know we need to do things differently. We can't continue on the way that we are, but we need to work together to figure out how to move forward.

We know there are better, fairer and more affordable ways to pay for what communities need to thrive. But we also know that there are many competing priorities at this particular juncture.

So we have focused in on our three key areas that we think are driving a lot of this structural imbalance.

First, infrastructure funding: Municipalities now own almost \$1 trillion in infrastructure. These are new numbers that have been generated by AMO, taking a look at the 2025 asset management plans that now each municipality in Ontario is required to complete. A rapidly growing population, aging assets and the impacts of climate change are all driving an unprecedented need for infrastructure at a time when building costs have skyrocketed. Construction costs have increased at four times the rate of inflation since the start of the COVID pandemic. Municipalities across Ontario are planning for over \$250 billion in capital investments and expenditures over the next 10 years, with around \$100 billion of that related to growth. Federal and provincial contributions to local infrastructure, which have remained at roughly \$3 billion annually for almost a decade, have absolutely not kept pace with the growing needs or rising costs. This is happening despite the well-documented economic benefits of infrastructure investment. Every dollar spent on municipal infrastructure creates an additional \$6 in economic activity—something that our economy, at this point in time, urgently needs.

That brings me to our second request: fully funding health and social services that are provincial responsibilities. AMO has calculated that municipalities in 2024 spent \$5.4 billion more than they received in provincial funding to deliver services that, everywhere else in Canada, are provincial responsibilities. This includes social housing, long-term care, public health, land ambulance, child care, and social services. Every one of the 5.4 billion dollars that municipalities are spending on health and social services that should be funded by the province is a dollar diverted away from core municipal responsibilities, like police costs, like infrastructure.

Finally, our third request: The province needs to take urgent and significant action to address the homelessness crisis that is impacting the economy—

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

Ms. Lindsay Jones: —and quality of life in every community across Ontario. AMO urges the province to use its convening powers to bring municipal and federal partners together to address the homelessness crisis and lead on new investments. Without them, homelessness in Ontario is projected to double by 2035—an outcome that our communities and our economy simply cannot afford. Last January, AMO undertook a comprehensive study of homelessness in Ontario. This January, we've updated those numbers. One year later, homelessness has increased, from 80,000 people in 2024 to 85,000 people in 2025. Homelessness in rural communities increased by 30% last

year. Homelessness in northern communities increased by 37% last year. The reality is that if we don't act, homelessness is on a trajectory that will have devastating impacts on families, communities and businesses. We need the province to recognize—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. Maybe we can get the rest of it in during the questions. The time is up.

Next, we'll hear from the London Cross-Cultural Learner Centre.

Mr. Valerian Marochko: Thank you for the opportunity to participate. My name is Valerian Marochko. I'm the executive director for the London Cross-Cultural Learner Centre. We are an organization providing support to newcomers through a spectrum of programs, and we are the leading agency in the London area providing help to refugees—government-assisted refugees, but also refugee claimants who arrive in our area.

1510

I'm here to bring to your attention a couple of facts that stem from the comprehensive expenditure review that has been done at the federal level and which will impact newcomers arriving in Ontario. One of them is the fact that the Interim Federal Health Program will have a copay, as it was announced—we're still looking for the details—and the newcomers would have to copay for supplemental services and for medication. We're deeply concerned about the impact that this will create. The Interim Federal Health Program will no longer cover everything that the newcomer needs. Newcomers do not have bank accounts; they do not have money when they arrive. Many of them will avoid taking the medications, and it will eventually result in an increased load to the emergency services. Government-assisted refugees and privately sponsored refugees are not eligible for Ontario coverage for one year—this is what the Interim Federal Health Program is doing—and they will no longer be covered completely. Eventually, it will come to our local hospitals, it will eventually come up to our local health networks and including—they will come to us for help, and we're looking for a solution. I believe that it's necessary to have better consultation—including the Resettlement Assistance Program network in Ontario—about this impact that is coming as of probably May or so, when they will be implementing it. It was announced in the budget. They're still working on the details. It's very important to prevent additional burden on the emergency systems. Ultimately, the province will save money if they will support the copay that is required by the federal government.

Another area I would like to bring your attention to is the fact that the newcomer settlement program—I've been working for this organization for almost 17 years. We are grateful for the Ontario funding for the newcomer settlement program. It helps fill the gaps that the federal funding cannot provide for. For example, the federal funding has eligibility—newcomers have to be permanent residents; they shouldn't be citizens or they shouldn't be refugee claimants to be able to have settlement services.

The province has been funding a position at our centre for 20 years or so, but it never increased its funding. If you look at inflation—we have to pay better salaries because of just the cost of living, and what was maybe \$19 an hour 20 years ago now has to be \$29.

We are actually running a deficit with the program and doing fundraising to be able to support this provincially funded program. It's a program that leverages dozens of volunteers, it leverages the community, and so there are no gaps—because the federal eligibility for funding for refugees is very limited. So we really need to look at the history of funding for the newcomer settlement program and look at an increase that would be reasonable.

We had additional funding—but they were very short. When we had a big inflow of refugee claimants, we received additional funding, but it was limited in time. And that happened the first time—when Trump started his presidency and we had a big inflow of refugee claimants, which never went down, so to speak, in terms of numbers; now we see a little bit of a slowdown.

This program will also help to fund the services, for example, for women who are no longer eligible for federal services. Federal services are available until people become citizens—and now, if you look at the eligibility, time will be reduced, so the federal government will be funding only the first three years or five years. Women prioritize other members of the family, and they don't access the language training; they don't access the settlement services, the community connection services—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): One minute.

Mr. Valerian Marochko: Thank you.

When their turn comes, because other people in the family have been able to benefit from the services, they will no longer be eligible for federal services. They will come to the newcomer settlement program—and we don't have the staffing; we don't have the means to further support that.

Thank you for your attention.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Joseph Racinsky): Thank you very much.

Now we'll hear from the YMCA of Southwestern Ontario.

Ms. Amy Walby: Good afternoon, Mr. Chair, members of the committee. It's great to see some of our local MPPs joining us for this consultation. My name is Amy Walby. I'm senior vice-president of finance for YMCA of Southwestern Ontario. I'm here with my colleague attending virtually, Andrew Canham, vice-president of children's educational services.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today on behalf of YMCA of Southwestern Ontario. With 2,500 employees and supporting more than 240,000 participants, we're among the largest of the 14 YMCA associations in Ontario.

YMCAs are deeply rooted in Ontario's towns, cities and rural regions and have become, collectively, one of the largest not-for-profit organizations in the province, supporting more than 2.1 million Ontarians every year.

We serve infants to seniors, newcomers to long-time residents, low-income families to working parents, and we do so with a simple commitment: No one is ever turned away.

We're a trusted community partner for the province at a time when Ontario faces significant economic, social and workforce pressures.

Today, I am here with three clear recommendations for budget 2026—three areas where strategic provincial investment can deliver strong returns, support families, and strengthen the labour force.

First: Strengthen and sustain Ontario's child care system. Ontario's child care system is one of the most important economic supports for families and for workforce participation, particularly for women. YMCA of Southwestern Ontario has over 100 licensed child care locations, including many in the London, Oxford and Elgin regions. YMCAs in Ontario are, together, the largest not-for-profit provider of child care in the province, operating 77,000 licensed child care spaces. We fully support the goals of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care system, CWELCC, and the affordability it has offered for families. We are asking the province to:

- commit to a long-term CWELCC agreement that gives certainty to operators, municipalities and families;

- refine the funding formula so it reflects the real cost of delivering high-quality programs, including regional cost differences and the impacts of reduced school-age fees;

- expand the child care compensation framework to include early childhood educator assistants, who are essential to program quality and stability;

- increase capital funding so that new child care spaces can be built, and existing ones modernized, in growing and underserved communities;

- enhance inclusion funding to ensure children with diverse needs can fully participate without placing pressure on operators; and

- streamline municipal reporting requirements through a universal province-wide approach that reduces administrative burden and improves consistency, so more dollars are spent on child care, not administration.

The Y is ready to help deliver on Ontario's goals for CWELCC. With stable funding and appropriate system design, we can support families, expand access and strengthen the early years workforce that Ontario's economy depends on.

Second: Strengthen youth employment pathways. Ontario's future workforce depends on the success of today's young people, yet youth unemployment remains more than twice the provincial average. In our communities, our YMCA staff see rising disconnection, anxiety and hopelessness among young people who feel the labour market is out of reach. YMCAs in Ontario provide employment training, pre-employment supports and counselling for tens of thousands of young people every year. We are also one of Ontario's largest youth employers, offering first-job opportunities in recreation, aquatics, leadership, camps and child care. We recommend that the province:

- establish a dedicated youth stream within Ontario's employment services system, reflecting the unique needs and starting points of young people;

- invest in strong pre-employment supports, from financial literacy to soft-skills training to mentoring, so youth gain confidence and workplace readiness;

- provide stable, multi-year funding that allows service providers to build sustained employer partnerships and retain skilled staff; and

- support wraparound services such as paid work exposure, mentorship, and employer incentives to help youth facing systemic barriers.

With targeted investment and partnership, we can help a generation of young people become Ontario's future labour force.

1520

Third: Invest in community recreation infrastructure. Every Ontarian deserves access to safe, modern and inclusive recreation spaces. These facilities are more than gyms or pools; they're centres of community supporting public health, social cohesion, and local economic development. But many facilities across Ontario are aging, inaccessible, or just too small for rapidly growing populations. Construction costs, as has been noted today, have risen significantly. And demand is far greater than available supply in some communities. We recommend the province:

- establish predictable, annualized capital investment in recreation infrastructure, including through the Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund;

- ensure not-for-profits are eligible to apply directly for provincial infrastructure programs;

- create or expand funding streams for renewal and modernization, not only new builds;

- allow funding stacking between provincial and federal programs to improve project viability; and

- encourage municipal non-profit partnerships that leverage charitable and local contributions to maximize public value and minimize duplication of facilities and services.

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

Ms. Amy Walby: Ontario faces real challenges: workforce shortages, affordability pressures, aging infrastructure, and rising demand for community supports.

The YMCA stands ready to partner with the province to strengthen child care, support youth on their path to meaningful employment, and renew and expand the community infrastructure that keeps Ontario healthy, connected and resilient.

On behalf of YMCA of Southwestern Ontario and Ys across the province, thank you.

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

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: My questions are to Lindsay from AMO. Thanks so much for being here.

As you can imagine, I'm extremely worried about the rise in homelessness. I read the original report from AMO—I believe it was about a year ago—outlining the trajectory that we're on. I was pretty shocked to see that

we're at 85,000 people in 2025—and we're hitting that economic recession that your report warned about, where if we hit this economic recession, homelessness numbers are going to go up. We have noticed this in the many stops that we've made during our pre-budget consultations, from Brockville to Kingston to Pembroke to here. We're hearing so many people tell us about the high cost of homelessness to communities—libraries saying they've become day shelters; businesses saying that they're losing tourism dollars and customers because they're having to navigate someone who has a mental health crisis in the middle of business hours; emergency rooms; it goes on and on and on.

My question is this: What can the province do better? Clearly, something is not working. What can the province do better to work with municipalities to provide permanent solutions to fix homelessness?

Ms. Lindsay Jones: Thank you so much for the question.

It's true that homelessness continues to be basically the number one issue that we hear from our members about, in terms of what their constituents are asking for and are raising with them. We've definitely tried to be solution-focused because we understand how many different priorities are facing the government these days. But the fact of the matter is that the homelessness situation has gotten completely out of control, and there's a real need for concerted political will and actual collaboration and coordination to be able to move forward.

I've just come from our Rural Ontario Municipal Association conference in Ontario, where these questions were put to ministers from the floor. Minister Flack has committed to recalibrating the relationship and the approach between the province and municipalities when it comes to homelessness. We are optimistic that we'll be able to work together, both to figure out how to make sure the dollars that are getting invested—and there are a lot, and we want to give credit to the province for putting in investments in HART hubs over the past year—are going to best use; that we're looking at the systems like child welfare, like the justice system, to ask how those dollars and how those systems can be recalibrated to address the problem.

But then, the simple fact is that we know what the solution is: It is investments in permanent, long-term housing; in supportive housing like Dunn House. The announcement yesterday with the province, the federal government and the city of Toronto to expand that highly successful model—those are the kinds of permanent investments that we need at scale, across the province, in a coordinated way.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I also see a lot of value in identifying some of the reasons why people become homeless in the first place—coming out of hospitals, the child and youth welfare system, the correctional facilities; being evicted because they can't afford the rent.

I'm very pleased with the work that AMO is doing on this issue. I read your reports very closely. Thank you so much.

My second and final question is around the need to invest in infrastructure to upgrade aging assets, get us ready for climate change and extreme weather. These are big, big numbers. Who's going to pay for it? Just looking at this issue of around \$100 billion being needed to invest in infrastructure, to pay for growth—very important. But what I'm hearing from my residents is that the property tax base is only going to take so many increases before they say, "Enough." So if the money is not going to come from the property tax base—

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: —where should it come from? What are AMO's recommendations?

Ms. Lindsay Jones: Well, I know that our social and economic prosperity review idea is sometimes a bit abstract, but the idea is that we need to, as a province and municipalities, start at the same place when it comes to even understanding what the challenge is. There's so much talking past each other when it comes to the role that debt plays in paying for infrastructure, the potential of new and different models like municipal services corporations, or different approaches to local distribution companies. There is a need to do things differently, but we need to agree first on what the challenges are and what the reality is that we face.

We also need to start collectively asking the question of, why it is so expensive to build now and what we can do to bring costs down—

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

We will now go to MPP Fairclough.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you to all three speakers for coming today to speak with us.

I want to continue on the theme of homelessness and the work that AMO has done. Thank you again for producing the reports—I was really surprised to see that it has risen another 5,000 over the course of the last year. You've talked a little bit about what you see as some of the solutions.

There has been no question that a lot of this has been downloaded from the province, including some of the health services that are needed.

Can you talk a little bit more specifically about the solutions that the AMO membership is looking for in rural and northern communities, given the increases that we're seeing there?

Ms. Lindsay Jones: A lot of the challenges in rural communities have to do with the really broad geographic service areas and the relatively small tax base. Again, this is where you really see the challenge of relying on the property tax base to fund social services, because you get geographic disconnects between income levels and needs. That's really what is showing up in these rural and northern communities. There's a need for the same type of investments in supportive social housing—there's also, though, a need for more specific, rural-targeted types of responses, definitely, that look to some of the broader factors and root causes of the challenge.

Income security and affordability, we hear a lot about—it manifests in rural communities, a lot in the seniors' population, who are not able to afford to stay in the homes they have been in for decades.

We know that transportation is a huge challenge, as well, in terms of being able to access services.

And in the north, there is a particular need for Indigenous, culturally appropriate housing services.

1530

A lot of investments have been made, so we are hopeful that it's just a matter of time before those investments actually hit the ground and come to fruition. With the HART hub model in particular, I think there have been quite a few challenges with rollout in a way that has been very challenging. We're optimistic that all of these different capital investments—but also operating investments in the type of support services that are needed—will play out. But, really, it's about scale and commitment and collaboration and truly committing to work together.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you.

I'm going to come back, in the next session, on the early child care, but I'm going to hand it to my colleague MPP Cerjanec.

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

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Chair, how much time is left?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): You've got 2.2 minutes.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Great.

AMO, thank you very much for your presentation.

One of the biggest issues that I hear in my riding is property taxes—and then that dovetails into, like you said, capital infrastructure and other needs in the community, like community recreational programming. Does AMO have a preference of what that rebalancing looks like in the province?

Ms. Lindsay Jones: I think we are open to discussion. There are many ways of doing this. We've talked about potentially uploading some of the costs that were downloaded onto municipalities—things like social housing. Again, the report that we did—the steep, steep increase in the number of municipal dollars that are going into social housing is really remarkable.

We've talked about uploading roads and bridges, in particular, in rural Ontario. That's where 17% of the population is responsible for funding these very expensive 31% of bridges and roads in a way that is not sustainable and creates significant pressures.

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

Ms. Lindsay Jones: We've talked about increasing transfers—more stable, more predictable, with different kinds of requirements on the infrastructure side of things.

There has been discussion of revenue tools. Our focus has definitely been more on, can we please not make any more restrictions to the revenue tools that we have, like development charges, until we figure out what the best way forward is?

We've done quite a bit of work on municipal services corporations, particularly and specifically for small and medium-sized municipalities that don't have access to the

same kind of borrowing capacity at attractive rates that larger municipalities do.

These are all the range of solutions that can be examined together, where different priorities and trade-offs can be balanced, and where we can all figure out what belongs where—

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

MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you for your presentations this afternoon.

Lindsay, I'll continue with you.

I just came from ROMA. Each time I attend AMO or ROMA, I grow more frustrated because, personally, I see a fundamental provincial policy contradiction. Municipalities are being threatened with financial penalties if they don't hit aggressive housing targets, and many mayors and councillors, when encouraged to push back, are too fearful. But the current fiscal model makes every new door a net financial loss for the existing taxpayer.

One mayor recently said to me, "Do you know what, Bobbi Ann? I'm drowning in infrastructure debt just to facilitate growth."

So I'm thinking that we have to stop with the one-time grants. It reeks of desperation, and they just wait and wait and wait and beg for it to be repeated.

I'm wondering if we should be moving to more of a growth-linked tax share and how that would work in Ontario. If we don't want to move to something like that, at what point do municipalities simply have to say no to new growth to protect their current residents from insolvency?

Ms. Lindsay Jones: Thank you so much for the question. These are absolutely the challenges that our members face.

With respect to your question about a growth-linked tax share, we've definitely advocated for a long-term, predictable infrastructure transfer, but that has an escalator that relates to GDP growth. To try to address that issue of the fact that the municipal revenue does not grow with economic growth, it is important to put into context the current both provincial but also federal dollars that are going into municipal infrastructure. At no other time in history has there been such an imbalance.

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

Ms. Lindsay Jones: The federal government is absolutely a part of this equation as well.

Last year, AMO had done some work around the economic benefit of investing in social housing infrastructure at this particular point in time and the number of jobs that would be created. We proposed an additional \$5-billion investment over a five-year period. We estimated that it would create 17,000 jobs, including 5,000 in the construction sector. These are exactly the kind of responses to the economic situation that we currently need.

It's the scope and scale of the infrastructure challenge that is definitely crushing municipalities, but it is then needing to reframe the question—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. Now is that time.

MPP Rosenberg:

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you to all of the presenters today.

I'm going to direct my questions to Lindsay.

I want to thank you for all the advocacy that you guys do through AMO, and your partners, through FONOM and ROMA.

I like that you pointed out that it's not one fix for everybody; it is different in the north. I'm from the north. The other day, we were out and Dave pointed out that Jessica's riding has 7,500 people per square kilometre; I have 0.6. So there are different challenges out there, for sure.

Being an ex-mayor, I know how important the OMPF funding is. And that increase in OMPF funding—I know it will be very helpful for some municipalities. How do you think this will impact some of the members, with that no-strings-for-funding, as it continues to roll out?

Ms. Lindsay Jones: Thank you so much for the question.

Yes, the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund is one of the really critical funding instruments that small and northern and rural municipalities rely on. The doubling of that funding over the past two years from the Ontario government has made an incredible difference to so many northern communities. They're able to take that funding and use it for any purpose—capital or operating—to be able to respond to the specific circumstances that they're in. We know a lot of that funding is going towards infrastructure and, in particular, responding to aging assets. We know that a lot of the funding as well is going towards increasing policing costs. There was a very significant increase in OPP bills last year, and the municipalities absolutely appreciated as well the additional one-year funding that was given to help them respond to that.

Those are the kinds of instruments that are the most efficient way of transferring dollars to municipalities that are flexible, that are permanent, that recognize the different circumstances and situations—it also then recognized that not all municipalities need to have access to the same funding. If municipalities have these larger tax bases and are better able to address and absorb some of these costs, then they don't need the provincial government to step in. We're hoping to be able to see more of that in the future.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: We've also seen another stream go out in the water-enabling grant. I know for several northern communities—and I know communities here too—how much that has helped with aging infrastructure. We have lots of it, and I know it's a big cost for small communities. Have most of your members taken advantage of this program? It will also increase housing, which supports our hospitals, our schools, and keeps people in the small communities.

1540

Ms. Lindsay Jones: Yes. The investments that the government has made in the Housing-Enabling Water Systems Fund, HEWSF—I think you're at \$4 billion now

over the past couple of years. Those have definitely been game-changers for municipalities that are looking to grow. We know that the program is significantly oversubscribed.

We are working in close partnership with the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to ensure that the federal government steps up to pay their share of these investments. We know that the province—instead of a third, a third, a third—was generous and stepped in to be able to cover a really significant part of the federal portion, and we are absolutely working to make sure that the federal government steps up.

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

Ms. Lindsay Jones: Again, for those folks who were able to attend ROMA—I think we heard a lot about the potential for growth and housing growth in the north and in small communities. We're working with Minister Flack to be able to hopefully develop a carve-out from the Building Faster Fund, to be able to respond specifically to the needs of small, rural and northern communities. They have different capabilities in terms of being able to successfully fill out those grant proposals, and we are optimistic that we can work with the government to put all municipalities on equal footing when it comes to being able to access funding.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: I think we're moving in the right direction, for sure.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll now go to MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to our presenters here as well as virtually today.

I want to begin my comments with Lindsay from AMO.

I want to thank AMO for the report and following up on the report from last year. It's really a disturbing number—that 50% more people have become homeless since 2021. I want to thank you for really pointing out chronic homelessness—people who have been without a home for at least six months. It's obviously something that the province should revisit when it comes to the municipal funding framework, when only 10% of every tax dollar collected actually goes to municipalities, considering the amount of downloading that has happened onto municipalities, without the commensurate supports.

AMO also pointed out in years past how the removal of development charges removed \$6 billion from municipal coffers. Unfortunately, here in London, we've seen taxes increase exponentially as a result of this. Giving money to the development industry was supposed to solve the housing crisis, and yet money was given, with the removal of those charges, really without strings attached.

I want to thank you for your asks of \$11 billion over 10 years to focus on those investments, as well as the \$2 billion over eight years to increase the capacity of support services. I want to thank you for addressing this head-on.

Amy from YMCA, I want to thank you.

For all other committee members—London is the home of Ontario's first YMCA and the third in Canada.

You mentioned the provision of care and how there are administrative obstacles that have been placed in terms of reporting. I want to know if you could speak towards the

reporting requirements from the province—whether it's the different portals, the number of reports—and how that can lead to a reduplication of efforts and can be a waste of time.

Ms. Amy Walby: Certainly. Thanks for the question.

I think we are in a transition and development period when it comes to all of us learning what the CWELCC framework needs to be and how to make sure that providers and funders are accountable under it. I think there is a lot of intent in the guidelines, to make sure that the province's money—and there's a lot of it being spent on child care—is being spent wisely. We do understand that there are a lot of mechanisms for audit, compliance audits, a lot of reporting, a lot of reconciling. These are important things. I think it's the lack of uniform guidance and the fact that the whole system, the framework, goes through our municipal funding partners—which does make sense in so many ways, to have that more community-focused funder. But it means that every municipality that we deal with has interpreted things a little bit differently, in many cases. Where there is nothing standard from the province, municipalities have had to invent it on their own, based on their own needs.

Our Y is a very large Y. We deal with seven municipal funders, and so often we find ourselves having to do seven different things in multiple different ways. The admin burden is extreme—it might shock you—and we're all trying to deal with that right now.

Thank you so much for raising it. I think if there's more clarity and more universal regulation and guidelines from the province, we would appreciate it, and I actually think our municipal funders probably would too—just more guidance.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Most definitely—consistency and leadership in that regard.

I'd like to pass over my time to MPP Sattler.

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

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to follow along my colleague and ask another question of the Y related to child care.

Thank you so much for reinforcing access to child care as a critical economic driver for Ontario's success.

You talked a little bit about including ECE assistants in the compensation framework. We know that you can't have a child care system without a child care workforce.

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

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Can you talk a little bit more about some of the workforce issues related to ensuring that we have stable child care workers to deliver the child care we need?

Ms. Amy Walby: I'm going to pass that one over to our VP of child care. Andrew?

Mr. Andrew Canham: Thank you very much for the question, MPP Sattler.

One of the challenges that we have in child care, of course, is recruitment and retention of ECEs and childhood educators. The CWELCC framework provides us with guidance and ceilings in which we can compensate our ECEs in the funding. Therefore, we are constantly in

the challenge of trying to recruit and retain some of our ECEs—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): That's the time for that question.

We'll go on to—

Interjection.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Okay. We've heard you can go on with your answer, from MPP Fairclough. She's going to allow you to finish the question.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I'll just pose a slightly different question.

Again, thank you to all of you for your presentations.

Valerian, I just want to say, I don't have any immediate questions, but your asks were quite clear on what you're looking for.

I want to dig in a little bit more on the request that you made related to the child care program. There are a few of us who sit on public accounts, where we've had a very close look at the Auditor General's report on the use of mostly federal funding that's being transferred through this program and, really, we found ourselves in a situation where we used that money in a much shorter time than we expected to, and then that kind of put families on high alert.

You made a comment about refining the funding formula. I think there's a lot of thought being given to this program right now, given that report. What kind of refinements to the formula would you like to see?

Ms. Amy Walby: There have been attempts to take regional differences into account in the funding formula that, when we put them into practice, I think are creating inequities between different providers in different regions. If that could be looked at more carefully, I think providers would appreciate that, as would municipalities, I'm sure.

We're trying to reduce school-age fees in addition to the fees for children zero to five, so it's probably, perhaps, paying more attention to the six-to-12 age group and making sure that providers are making decisions that don't overly penalize that group—and, perhaps, simplifying and really making sure that inflationary factors are brought into play consistently and in a way that we can know that they will be and be able to plan ahead.

1550

One of our comments was a long-term agreement—it's very difficult to plan and make decisions when you don't know what your funding is going to be. In this case, we knew that there would be funding and a framework for 2026, but we actually didn't even know what the updated numbers were going to be until after our budget had already been approved by our board. It's just the timeliness, I think, and the long-term vision—we need to be able to know to be able to do things properly.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you.

I'll turn it to my colleague MPP Bowman.

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you for your presentations today.

I would like to continue with the child care topic, Amy, so I'll turn my question to you.

The government certainly talks a lot about red tape reduction. We've heard today from a few not-for-profits about the challenges that they face in having to apply constantly for their operating funding and reapply every year. I think, Valerian, you talked about that as well. This need to actually streamline processes within the not-for-profit sector—that could actually free up a lot of time, as you said, and money and resources to provide direct care, direct services, to the people who need it.

Certainly, in my riding of Don Valley West, I hear from both families and providers who have been struggling with some of the inefficiencies in the system.

I wonder if you could talk about the potential benefit, in terms of the size of the prize, so to speak, if the government were able to reduce some of that red tape around—again, whether it's applying for money or the multiple audits that you are subject to.

Ms. Amy Walby: I think one of the benefits is actually in terms of encouraging providers to want to participate in CWELCC and want to sign up and apply for any new centres that come up. There have been times with our Y where, if there is a new centre being developed, we have to question carefully whether we can take it on because of the burden that it will bring to us—of one more centre.

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

Ms. Amy Walby: In terms of encouraging providers to stay committed to CWELCC and continue to grow and try to grow the number of spaces—the wait-list for us is, I think, 5,000 children, so anything we can do to reduce administration and be able to grow and add more children in spaces, I think, would be the clear benefit.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you.

Valerian, do you want to add anything around what reducing some of that administrative burden would do for your organization?

Mr. Valerian Marochko: Yes. If the program has been there for over 20 years, what's the point in reapplying every three years—now, it's five years—just to get the funding again and go through the process? It's very little, just for one person.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll go to the independent. MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I'll go back to the YMCA.

Given that YCMA is one of Ontario's largest non-profit child care providers and has a seat at the table with municipal planners, I just want to express to you some of the frustrations that I have felt in my riding. There's this mindset in the community that our municipal service managers hold significant power over CWELCC expansion through direct growth plans. We have a huge need for child care spaces in Haldimand–Norfolk, and yet those service providers are not expanding spaces.

I'm wondering, as a major partner, does the YMCA have access to other municipalities' direct growth plans, and do you believe that the current allocation of spaces matches the actual community wait-lists?

Ms. Amy Walby: I have to pass that over to Andrew, because I'm not exactly familiar with how it works on a municipal level. Andrew?

Mr. Andrew Canham: Thank you very much for the question.

We have an opportunity, and we hear from the various municipalities when they do have expansion dollars available, and they will reach out with RFPs for the building of new sites, the creation of new sites. It very much does depend on hearing directly from the municipality. Beyond that, we have no direct access, of course, to those funds for a direct growth plan.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Could there be a possibility of where we're pitting neighbour against neighbour with respect to CWELCC funding? I just think that it's odd that certain providers or operators are being denied when the child care spaces are needed. Is there a formula used or metrics used that show which neighbourhoods are priority neighbourhoods and how the monies are allocated from municipality to municipality? Is there a standard approach, or does it change from one region to the other?

Ms. Amy Walby: You're asking us about the mechanics of municipal funding for child care, and I don't know if we're actually privy to that.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: What are your metrics that YMCA uses to determine where the priority neighbourhoods exist?

Ms. Amy Walby: We wait for our municipal funding partners to say, "We're opening new spaces in a particular region." They open it up for applications. We look carefully at it. If it is a region where we think we can staff it, we look at the monetary specifics of the site, and if we think we can even break even, we will apply.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Could we eliminate that at the municipality?

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

MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Lindsay, I'm going to come to you on something. Ontario Creates has a funding program that does some fantastic work promoting the film industry in Ontario. In particular, it's an opportunity for us to showcase some of our great municipalities that we have across the province.

I'm on a mission to bring back The Littlest Hobo, and I'm wondering, would you support the reboot of The Littlest Hobo to promote our different municipalities across Ontario?

Ms. Lindsay Jones: Thank you for the question.

While I would need to make sure that I had the right direction from my board, I can imagine that there would be significant support for this idea, so I'm very happy to take that back.

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

I'll pass it on to my colleague.

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

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you to all the presenters, and thank you for being here. Thank you for bringing your voice.

My question is to Amy. I'm a big fan of the YMCA. In Markham, we have close to 450,000 people. We have a wonderful YMCA. It provides services to lot of people in

all walks of life, especially the marginalized, vulnerable people in our cities and the community. Thank you for all the great work you do.

You may be aware of the 2024 Ontario budget. We introduced a new \$200-million Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund to support and upgrade the facilities like yours, the YMCAs. Are you supportive of this fund and do you foresee this fund as helping the organization and the communities in the area?

Ms. Amy Walby: Yes, we're very supportive of the Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund; YMCAs across Ontario are. My particular Y has not accessed any money from the fund. We are actually in receipt of Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program money—we received quite a lot of that, and that is taking us many years to execute. So we have not applied for that.

I will say, generally speaking, when the funds come out, there's great excitement because there's no end of need, as I was talking about. And you can imagine the infrastructure needs. The more the funds are directed at perhaps the less exciting but very necessary types of capital maintenance, like major capital maintenance repairs for our facilities—very much appreciated. The more that funds are not asking for all projects to be shovel-ready—because that can be a real problem. If the timeline for applying is really tight and all projects have to be shovel-ready—many YMCAs are all smaller, and they don't have a ready stable of shovel-ready projects. They need time to start designs and plans and that kind of thing. If there's a longer timeline of application and these funds go on for years in rolling sequences, I think that will work a lot better for organizations like Ys.

1600

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you for that answer.

I will ask you an open-ended question. I know we are going through the pre-budget consultation process. What are the main challenges that YMCAs are facing these days? What are your big costs, big challenges you are facing?

Ms. Amy Walby: Child care is such a huge part of our business now. There's really lots of demand and a lot of opportunity to do good in our communities, so we are finding that our child care operations are growing. And then, I think it's the wage costs and staffing issues that we've experienced in child care, which—I will say the CWELCC framework has responded to a lot of those, where they concern registered early childhood educators; it is the other staff members, the assistants, who are not really part of the funding formula right now, not really acknowledged in the funding, and they're a really important part of how we operate child care. So I would say that is important to us.

Most Ys have a lot of heavy capital infrastructure, and there is no ready donor source. Our membership fees don't cover—

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

Ms. Amy Walby: —those types of very large capital maintenance items. So that is a big concern.

I think, generally speaking, throughout our programs, it's short program cycles. Short contracts make it very hard to plan and make it very hard to properly serve our participants. So the longer-term our contracts can be—that would be for youth, for our employment services, all of these services that we provide—the better we'll be at delivering what we need to for our participants.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: What is your operating budget?

Ms. Amy Walby: For 2025, about \$93 million.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you.

Thank you, Chair. I think that's almost time.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We've got 11 seconds.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you for being here.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We've just got enough time to say thank you and goodbye.

That concludes the time for this question and this panel. We want to thank the panel for all the work you went through to prepare for this and to so ably present it. We hope that we can use a lot of that information as we prepare our report and advise the Minister of Finance on what we should be doing with our budget. Thank you very much for being here.

OLD EAST VILLAGE BIA
ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' FEDERATION
OF ONTARIO
FEDERATION OF ONTARIO
PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): The next panel is Old East Village BIA, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, and Federation of Ontario Public Libraries.

You will have seven minutes to make your presentation. I will let you know at six minutes' margin or point that you've got one minute, and then at seven minutes, it will be over.

We do ask each participant to identify themselves as they start their presentation, to make sure we get the right name on Hansard.

With that, we're going to start with Old East Village BIA.

Mr. Kevin Morrison: Good afternoon, everybody. It's great to be here. Ernie might remember me; we go way back.

I just looked up a photo of us in 2018. I remember taking that photo, and you said, "Is this going to come back to haunt me some day?"

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): This is the day.

Mr. Kevin Morrison: This is the day.

Just so you know a bit about my background: I'm Kevin Morrison, and I'm the executive director for the Old East Village BIA. I come from a social service background, from over 40 years ago. I had a number of businesses, and then I got silly like a lot of you sitting here at the table today and got into politics and became the mayor of Goderich, even though I was from west of London.

Ernie and I go way back because of the Monte McNaughton days—we campaigned on the streets.

It's great to see so many of you. On a personal note, I want to thank you for what you do every day; it's not easy. I have no desire whatsoever to get back into politics, even though I'm involved with politics every day.

A couple of years ago, I retired—worst two weeks of my life. I was approached by the Old East Village BIA because I was known during my business and political career as “the fixer,” and we have real struggles in the Old East Village.

You hear about these struggles throughout the province. We have the highest concentration of social services within our district. We have 17 social service providers within 700 metres. Terence and I have had talks many times, and the struggles are real, and they're not going away. The problem I have is how we're not dealing with it. Nobody talks about the street crisis as much as they talk about affordable housing. We have homelessness, we have addictions, and we have mental health issues, and there's a total difference. The homelessness is a lot easier to deal with than those who have mental health issues or have addictions. The focus seems to be on affordable housing and not supportive housing. And those who are involved with social services—many of them here in this city are in over their heads. They can't handle what they're dealing with; they're not qualified to, and they don't have the individuals who know how to deal with some of the ones they're dealing with. We have shelters, every day, that are turning away people because of their behaviour, because of their addictions and because of mental health issues. We have a real crisis on our streets.

In Old East Village, I've been fighting for two years, and finally, we're starting to get somewhere. The province and the feds—you provide funding for these services, and it's appreciated, but there's no accountability. You're not doing the funding where it's based on results—it's a band-aid solution. We need to revisit what we're doing, because what we're doing is not working.

I know a few of you around the table here; I still have great connections at Queen's Park. I'm just asking, can we not work together to get things done? The municipality blames the province or the feds, and then the province—we need to come together, people; we really do. When I take a look at the mandate of our government right now—do you know what? We can do this, but we all have to come together to make a difference, because our businesses are starving; they're closing. Just this past week, we had another stabbing; we had a murder. People are defecating on our streets. You can't eat at a restaurant because of it. We need help, and that's why I'm here today.

You'll notice I don't have a formal presentation, because I've done this many times before with other committees, and nothing seems to be heard.

I'm just asking, please, would you start to listen? And reach out. I'm more than happy to talk to you one on one. Please, we need help.

I'm not going to talk about the Ontario BIA—I know that they're struggling as well—because I'm not on their board.

I'm just saying, on behalf of those of us in London, please help us where you can. We need to come up with solutions, because this is not working.

Thanks.

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

We'll now go to the next presentation: Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario.

Mr. David Mastin: My name is David Mastin, and I am the president of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today on behalf of more than 84,000 ETFO members working in Ontario's public elementary schools.

In addition to today's presentation, ETFO will be submitting a written brief to the committee for its consideration.

Educators remain deeply committed to their students and communities, but they are working in a system under significant strain—one shaped by chronic underfunding, worsening learning and working conditions, and policy decisions that are eroding safety, stability and trust in public education.

We often hear that budgets are about choices. Today, I want to be clear: Investing in public education must be one of those choices.

Staffing challenges in Ontario are often framed as a shortage of teachers, but that framing misses the root of the problem. Ontario has tens of thousands of certified teachers who are not currently working in the public system. Educators are leaving or choosing not to return because working conditions have become unbearable. This is not about commitment. It's about burnout, violence, unmanaged class sizes, and insufficient supports for students with complex needs. Short-term measures, such as increasing reliance on uncertified individuals or accelerating pathways into classrooms, do not address these realities. They do not improve learning conditions, and they do not retain educators.

The solution is clear: Invest in healthier schools and workplaces—schools that are staffed properly, adequately resourced, and designed to meet students' needs.

1610

Class size is central to both student success and educator retention. Large, overcrowded classrooms limit what educators can do. They reduce opportunities for individual attention, strain relationships, and contribute to higher stress, burnout, and rising incidents of violence. Unlike the early grades, there are currently no class size caps for grades 4 to 8, resulting in some of the largest class sizes in the K-to-12 system. Kindergarten classrooms are also under strain, with increasing numbers of oversized classes and split grades, many without a designated early childhood educator.

ETFO is calling for a class size cap of 24 students in grades 4 to 8, a cap of 26 students in kindergarten, and a

commitment that every kindergarten classroom is staffed by a teacher and a designated early childhood educator.

Year after year, ETFO members identify violence as their number one health and safety concern. Recent survey data shows that 77% of members experienced or witnessed violence in a single year, 42% were physically or psychologically harmed, and the majority report that violence has increased and become more severe. Violence in schools is not inevitable. It is the predictable outcome of underfunding, understaffing, and unmet student needs.

In 2025, ETFO published a report titled *Promises Unfulfilled: Addressing the Special Education Crisis in Ontario*. This report documents the consequences of years of chronic underfunding. Students are waiting months or years for assessments, and access to specialized educators and professional supports continues to decline. We have seen special education programs being reduced or eliminated in school boards across the province, as they continue to face financial pressures resulting not from mismanagement—as the government will have us believe—but from years of successive cuts to public education.

I want to be crystal clear on this issue: Ontario's integrated model for education can work, but only if it's fully funded and it's based on student needs. Integration without necessary supports is simply abandonment. Ontario must do better.

ETFO is deeply concerned about the implications of Bill 33 and the growing number of boards under supervision. In these school boards, all decision-making authority is concentrated in a single appointed supervisor who is accountable only to the minister, not to local communities. This concentration of power represents a profound shift in how public education is governed in our province. It undermines democratic accountability and weakens public trust in public education.

The government has indicated that it's not done yet and that its plan includes the elimination of elected school board trustees; I urge the members of this committee to use their voices to get the government to reconsider. This approach silences family and community voices. It weakens democratic participation, and it will worsen student outcomes.

With the passage of Bill 33, the province now has expanded authority to require school boards to implement school resource officer programs. ETFO remains concerned and urges the government to ensure any implementation respects local context, includes meaningful community consultation, and prioritizes student well-being.

The working conditions of educators are the learning conditions of students. Investment in public education must be central to the 2026 budget.

I'd like to thank you for your time. I would be pleased to answer any questions.

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

We'll now hear from the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries.

Mr. Michael Ciccone: Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's consultation. My name is Michael

Ciccone. I'm the CEO for the London Public Library, and I'm proud to work alongside passionate library staff who have a positive, productive impact on millions of Ontarians every day.

On a typical day in 2025, the London Public Library lent 16,500 items, had close to 7,000 visits, provided 700 computer sessions, connected to 2,800 wireless users, welcomed 90 new cardholders, and answered 1,400 user queries. Again, that is just one day. Many Londoners consider us an essential service. Each year, the city of London polls residents to rate city-funded services, and the library has topped that list, I'm proud to say, for the last three years. In 2025, we had a 95% satisfaction rating. I'm sure most of Ontario's public libraries enjoy the same success.

Today I'm going to speak to three specific areas of need for Ontario's public libraries that we look to the province to support.

I'm going to be repeating, I think, some statistics that have already been shared today: According to the January 2026 AMO report, known homelessness increased by almost 8% in Ontario in 2025, and since 2021, it has increased by approximately 49%. The numbers are staggering. Entire communities have been forced to manage this issue.

Unlike businesses and other service organizations, public libraries have a mandate to open our doors to all in the community. When gaps are created by an overstretched social safety net, we see the impact first-hand in our libraries. Librarians are doing work they were never meant to do—assisting people in crisis, responding to overdoses, and trying to connect patrons in need. But we are doing what we've always done. We listen, we care, and we try to provide a direction.

At London Public Library, we spend over a million dollars a year to address these challenges—this does not include having a CMHA transitional case manager embedded in our Central library, just a few hundred feet from where we sit right now, through a grant from the London Community Foundation. Money allocated to security, surveillance, theft recovery, repair from vandalism, and staff time and stress—the strain on staff is remarkable, and it's measurable—would be better served if reallocated to support other important offerings. We have no choice but to ensure we can continue providing our current valued services to the community; in doing so, we are required to ensure the safety of our users and our staff.

We're not asking for medals. We're not asking for more training or new mandates.

We're asking for—echoing some of the sentiments already shared—governments to work together to make the investment and build partnerships so that people can get the help they need.

We are lending our voice to urge the government of Ontario to work with its municipal and federal partners to build a robust strategy to address mental health, addiction and homelessness in communities across the province.

Now I'd like to shift attention to a topic that we seem to discuss annually. In addition to supporting stronger social systems for the broader community, Ontario public

libraries maintain the need for increased provincial operating funds to support public libraries, to deliver shared priorities and community needs. Unlike most sectors in Ontario, public libraries have received no increase in provincial operating funding for over 30 years. During that time, the value of the province's investment in public libraries has decreased by over 60%. While the majority of public library budgets are municipally supported, the provincial portion of the funding is critical for us.

Ontario's public libraries are proposing an additional annual investment of \$25 million in provincial operating funds to specifically address critical areas of shared community and provincial priority, including supporting job training and skills development; providing services and resources to assist with higher-need members of the community, such as seniors, newcomers and others; and supporting early literacy and K-12 success.

Another topic that is starting to be raised annually: We believe that there is a golden opportunity for the Ontario government to create an Ontario digital public library, to ensure critical e-learning support and fair access to modern digital resources for all public libraries in Ontario.

In Ontario, government has already recognized the crucial importance of public libraries through significant recent investments in broadband infrastructure, connectivity, and First Nations public libraries. Building on that critical foundation, the next step is to empower Ontarians with the online resources they need to succeed, no matter where they live in the province. Digital resources offer vital services such as career training, language learning, tutoring, health information, and support for residents in need.

Through an annual investment of approximately \$15 million, every Ontarian will have access to a common set of high-quality e-learning and digital resources directly through their local public library, which can be accessed in branch, in transit—wherever you'd like—or from your home.

Providing these critical supports is needed for us to continue working together to deliver important government services, relevant resources and economic development opportunities in the communities where people live.

Thank you very much. I welcome the opportunity to answer any questions.

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

That concludes the presentations. We now will start the first round of questioning with the third party. MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Kevin, David and Michael, for your presentations—all very interesting.

Kevin, I actually was surprised to hear your comments today. I certainly welcome them, and I think you made a great point, but I was surprised because—I'm curious to hear your thoughts also on small businesses and the challenges they're facing.

Small businesses used to employ about two thirds of private sector jobs in this province; it's down to about 60%. Many of them are closing their doors, facing eco-

nomical challenges. They all say that what would really help them the most is not a grant or a loan; it's a tax cut.

We have the highest small business tax rate in the country, tied with Quebec. We've proposed a 50% tax cut. The government hasn't supported that. Do you think that's a worthwhile initiative, and would you like to see that in the upcoming budget?

1620

Mr. Kevin Morrison: Thank you for the question.

Do you know what? There's a number of different initiatives that can take place.

My partner and I have had businesses over the last 45 years, and I'll tell you, doing business in Ontario is not easy; it never really has been, but it's getting worse now. With the unique challenges that we have even more so now, we're not only dealing with municipalities, but we're also dealing with the provincial government and the federal government. A lot of the struggles are coming from the times that we're in. We know, federally, the problems we have because of trade.

People are reluctant. They're afraid. They're not investing in their businesses, and those who can don't have the money to invest anyway—those who are interested in it. Certainly, tax incentives would be very helpful.

A lot of the businesses are at the point now where they're looking for handouts instead of a hand up, and I try to encourage our members that that's not the way to do it. That's not the solution.

You have to take responsibility yourself, but it's called "partnerships"—and that's where there's a lack of partnerships between businesses that have actually invested their life savings and their passion, their dreams. They have a dream they can't fulfill anymore because of the ongoing struggles—financial is one struggle, yes, and another, of course, is what we're dealing with, day to day, with the crisis on the streets. Businesses are closing.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you for your comments.

Yes, it's very troubling to see companies like Autoneum here in London closing.

I know that, again, we need tax reform at all levels of our business sector, actually, so certainly that's something that I'm looking for.

I want to turn now to David. I'm going to try to get to each of you quickly here.

David, I certainly hear from teachers who live in my riding of Don Valley West about the experiences that you're talking about—the challenges that they're facing with violence in the classroom, and part of that being related to, again, the number of adults in the room to help support the kids, in particular, who have higher needs; and the fact that teachers are actually leaving the profession earlier than they used to—five years, on average—because it's just so stressful. That's not good for our kids. It's not good for our economy.

I wonder if you could talk about what you hear anecdotally from teachers—about the reason that they are leaving the profession.

Mr. David Mastin: Thank you for the question.

Unfortunately, we don't have much of an avenue to talk to members who have left the profession; once they leave, we don't have contact.

We're working really hard with the Ontario Teachers' Federation right now—which is a collection of all the teacher affiliates within the province of Ontario—to see if we can find a way to connect with members who have left the profession. We need to collect that information. We need to collect that data.

Getting to the anecdotal part of this—we know how challenging working in public elementary schools is right now in the province of Ontario. It stems from the unmet student needs. It stems from students who are struggling. It stems from issues of violence. And these kids are not the problem. These kids are desperate. These kids are desperate to get the assistance they need. The parents are desperate that their children get the help that they need. Schools are an ideal place for the help to be given.

Schools are in every single community—

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

Mr. David Mastin: —all across this province. They are perfectly situated for an investment that would help these students get the help they need, and consequently, it would change the working environment for the teachers who are in those classrooms.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Certainly, the TDSB being under supervision after having to dip into their reserves—and that was really related to COVID and not getting paid back by the government. These are the kinds of things that are hurting our kids and our educators.

I want to turn to Michael.

I love libraries. I grew up going to the library in the Westmount mall here in London. I don't know if that's still there. Do any of you know—you Londoner people still living in London? It was certainly part of my childhood—going to libraries.

I want to make sure we give you time to talk about the impact to libraries of the crisis in homelessness and mental health issues that you're experiencing. I know at my local library in Toronto, that is one of the challenges that they face. So a little bit more on that, with the impacts—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Hold that thought. MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you for your presentations.

I'll likely get to David in the next round, but I'll start with Kevin.

I just want to say that I appreciate your comments with respect to, we're not focused on results—that's very true—and we need to come together.

I'm an independent. I guide myself with the idea that there is no monopoly on a good idea, and we need to work across party lines to actually get results for our communities.

We must break down the silos and have a one-point-of-contact approach, I think, in this province to solve some of the issues that you're seeing in Old East Village.

I will move over to Michael.

I do think it's sad that libraries are no longer the place that I knew as a child. Employees have become case-workers, mental health workers—everything other than a librarian.

As you advocate for the creation of an Ontario digital public library to provide universal e-learning resources, how do you reconcile this digital expansion with the ongoing need for physical infrastructure? Specifically, how will physical branches evolve to remain relevant and justify their existence for the 50% of users who are still coming in to read and have that social connection?

Mr. Michael Ciccone: Well, first, I would say that there's a lot of overlap between those users who use our digital services versus who use our spaces.

Our spaces have become very important to the community because there are not a lot of free public spaces to go to. The term “third space” gets thrown around a lot. I think we have a lot of patrons who come to the library just for that purpose—to be part of a community, to meet their friends there. It has become an intricate part of what we do.

Programming has become an intricate part of what we do—partnering with community organizations to bring programming.

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

Mr. Michael Ciccone: Showcasing technology—we have been doing that since we put our first copy machine in a library; we continue to do so. We always provide technology before it becomes affordable in the household. We've always done that.

So there's still a lot that a library does outside of the collections—and even outside of the digital collections.

I hope that answers your question.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: It does. It's just that I'm concerned that libraries have become a place that is not a library—it's more of a community hub; it's more of a community centre.

Mr. Michael Ciccone: Well, if you went into a library, you would still see plenty of books, so it's still recognizable as a library.

I think we do work on space for people to do the things we've just talked about—meeting space, things like that. We've always done those things—it's just that maybe the physical collection has shrunk a little bit and there's more to fill it with.

And technology has become a big space—especially AI kind of stuff or virtual reality, things like that, that we're showcasing to teenagers and kids.

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

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you to all the presenters for coming out on this snowy afternoon here in London.

Kevin, I'm going to start with you. Going back to what you talked about in your presentation—about housing and housing affordability that we talk about. When I think about housing affordability, it's important to point out that there are two parts to it. Sometimes you mix those up, but there are two separate parts. There's, like you said, the homelessness issue, which is a big issue in the province—no question about it—which involves mental health, ad-

dictions, like you mentioned. And then there's the fact that in my riding of Wellington–Halton Hills, you cannot find a two-bedroom home for less than \$600,000, and young couples like mine, working full-time, both of them, two jobs—you need to save up over \$100,000 to make a down payment. That's housing affordability. We're tackling that by building more homes and making it easier to build homes.

Then there's the other issue, which we're addressing, I think, through the HART hubs. I share your frustration when it comes to money going out the door. Our government is investing record amounts in education and health care, in housing and homelessness, in social services. You talked about ideas and having dialogue. So what are some ideas you have for dealing with the issue? We heard about HART hubs earlier today. HART hubs, I think, are one of those solutions. It's new. Here in London, we heard today that it's already full, oversubscribed. We heard today that they're still waiting to see exactly what kind of positive impacts it has, because it's so new, but they're optimistic.

Anyway, I just hoped you could share some more ideas with us at this committee.

Mr. Kevin Morrison: Absolutely.

First off, with real estate prices the way they are in your riding, I'd consider moving to London.

Anyway, the HART hubs are great. We'll see how it works out. It was delayed by months. We could have used it when the government made the commitment to have it opened, but time will tell as to what happens there. It's really encouraging, and so is the micro-village that is being set up now at the south end of the city. There's a lot of controversy there because of the organization that has been chosen to run it. I have no issues with that whatsoever because, again, as I said in my comments, some of these organizations, the social service providers, really aren't equipped to do what's being expected. As for a waiting list—absolutely, huge waiting list. We're finding that a lot of our most vulnerable are coming to London because of the services that we have. These services aren't provided in other municipalities. But hey, come to London, because in London, you're well cared for.

1630

When it comes to some of the solutions, you made the comment that you've spent a lot of money on social services and providers—and you have. But I'll tell you, coming from a business background, there's a difference between spending money and investing. You're not getting a rate of return on that investment. These agencies—a lot of them are not being held accountable for what they're doing or what they're not doing. I think it's time that, actually, if you're going to continue to invest the money that you are, you ask for those accountabilities, because I think you'd be surprised at some of what you're going to learn.

Psychiatric hospitals were closed years ago. Everyone says, "Bring them back." But where's the money coming from to bring them back?

There's no reason why we can't investigate small treatment centres. Actually, I think small treatment centres

would be more beneficial than these large institutional hospitals.

Living in Goderich, we had a neighbour who was released from a hospital when it was closed. He had 23 hours of supervision in his home, which actually cost more than having him in that hospital that they closed.

I think what we need to do is rethink what we're doing and take a look at all the different options on the table. What I see quite often is, there are these blinders—somebody comes up with an idea, and anything other than that will not work. It's time for the open discussion.

I appreciate this today. I'm actually very encouraged by the discussion we're having here. This is the best I've had in the two years since I've taken on this role—so, very good questions.

I think that's the thing—you need to bring those who are on the front lines and talk to those who are most vulnerable; I do, every day. Some of them are reaching out for help, and the help is not there.

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

Mr. Kevin Morrison: They get turned away from a shelter, and there's nowhere to go, so we need to take a look at that, because they just fall more. A homeless person all of a sudden becomes a drug user, and then all of a sudden we have mental health—we're not assisting that person.

Excellent questions, absolutely.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thanks very much, Kevin.

London is a great place. I've got some relatives who live here. But I'm very privileged to live in Wellington–Halton Hills.

I'll pass it over to MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Michael, I'm going to be a little bit lighthearted, because this was fairly deep here.

You said you had thousands of things being checked out every day. Was any one of them any episode from *The Littlest Hobo*?

Mr. Michael Ciccone: I'm going to admit something: I'm an expat—

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

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to our presenters who have come here today.

I'd like to begin with Old East Village BIA. Kevin, I want to thank you very much for your presentation. The theme of today is fiscal responsibility as well as supportive housing, so I want to thank you for touching on that.

Old East Village is a proud, tight-knit community. People look after one another. And it's really creative.

The committee has heard clearly about the cost-effectiveness of supportive housing and not just affordable housing. There has been much work done in London; Ivey Business School partnered with CRHESI to show that the cost of leaving someone on the streets is \$100,000, whereas fully supporting them in a supportive housing model costs between \$25,000 and \$60,000. It's a cost-benefit—it should be a human thing, but it's also a cost-benefit, to look after people and meet them where they are.

What are you seeing you on the streets, in terms of the impacts on small businesses when the province isn't holding

up its responsibilities when it comes to providing the funding for supportive housing?

Mr. Kevin Morrison: Do you know what? To be fair, it's not just the province. You know yourself that I've had battles with the municipality as well.

Bobbi Ann, you mentioned silos. I'm a big one on bringing down the silos. The city of London has a culture of silos; they have for decades, since I've been here, since 1982.

You're absolutely right; it's actually less expensive if we provide the supportive housing.

I have no idea how a shelter can say, "It's \$1,000 a night for a bed," and all they're doing is providing a cot, a cup of coffee and a bowl of cereal in the morning. That's what I'm talking about when it comes to accountability.

Churches used to step up to the plate but can't do it anymore because they're not equipped to deal with the struggles that we're dealing with on the street. They're putting their own safety at risk. It's terrible.

Terence, you're in the Old East Village all the time, and you see our struggles.

You have a restaurant—let me use that as an example—where you have people coming in, and all of a sudden somebody comes in who's hopped up on something, and they're yelling, they're screaming, they're throwing things around. The police are called, the police come, and now it's creating an even bigger commotion. Those people aren't going to come back to that restaurant because they don't feel safe.

We're being told continuously by a lot of our city politicians that it's just a perception that it's not safe. It's not a perception. I live in the Old East Village. It's not a perception. I go home at night and I'm inside my house because I don't want anybody to know where I live, because of my advocacy. It's not working.

So when you talk about affordability—I think that's really what needs to be looked at. What can we do that is actually going to benefit those who are most vulnerable and benefit the neighbourhood?

I'm told forever that we take a human rights approach to the crisis on the street. What happened to the human rights of our citizens and our business owners and our ratepayers who provide economic drivers to our communities? That's where I have my frustrations.

I've invited MPPs to visit me and take a tour of the Old East Village, and not one has said yes.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you very much, Kevin.

I'd like to move over now to ETFO and David.

Thank you very much for your comments, David, that integration without supports is abandonment.

Here in London, we've seen wait-lists to see a school psychologist—they've gone from 135 days last year to 360 days this year. The most vulnerable are the first ones to fall through the cracks. It does raise the question of what the provincially appointed supervisor is doing in terms of advocacy with their boss, the Minister of Education.

I want to give you the opportunity to speak about the funding formula issues that the province faces. I know they're

claiming that it's new news, but is this new news? Is this something that ETFO has been advocating for for a number of years?

Mr. David Mastin: Thanks for the question.

Absolutely. The funding formula has been flawed for 20-plus years. It is not specific to the needs that are present and real in every one of our classrooms and every one of our school boards. They're averages. They're based on nonsense in, nonsense out, and it just doesn't work.

This government claims record levels of funding—

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

Mr. David Mastin: I go from school to school, from board to board, and I hear the same thing everywhere: This is broken. And the funding formula needs to be changed.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you very much.

Michael, thank you for your comments. You're an eternal optimist—librarians, spending 30 years waiting for a funding increase. It's yet another example of, unfortunately—

Mr. Michael Ciccone: We're not going to give up.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Good for you.

I want to thank librarians, who are on the front lines, who are acting as a de facto social service government office, allowing people to apply for different things that also happen within MPP offices. Thank you for assisting people in crisis. You're doing wonderful work, and you deserve more recognition and support from the government when it comes to operational funding as well as the different things that you want to do, like job training and skills development, and looking after seniors and newcomers. Thank you so much.

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

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thanks to the three of you for your presentations today.

Kevin, I'll just say the impact of homelessness on small businesses is massive. In the town of Ajax—it's a suburban Toronto community—that's something that we see, in Durham region, talking to local businesses. That means less foot traffic in stores. That means reduced revenue. That means threat of closure. I appreciate you coming here today and sharing the perspective from your BIA. When I talk to chambers of commerce, when I talk to BIAs, this is, right now, the number one issue that I end up hearing about. So I thank you for bringing the perspective here today.

Michael, we've heard a lot about libraries around these pre-budget consultations—and librarians are the front lines right now. Frankly, they're dealing with things that they did not sign up to do.

It's quite clear that there needs to be more support, more respect for our librarians and our library system, as we now think to the future, with things like AI. How do we help ensure that the community is up to date in terms of what's going on with technology, and how do we support some of that learning and training there?

1640

David, I do have a question for you, not a statement.

We spoke a lot about the impact facing educators in the classroom. I used to work for a public school board. When I was working there, it was a topic coming up a few years ago now—violence in the classrooms. It's impacting the other kids in the classrooms as well.

My question is, what is the level of support that is needed in our education system right now in order to help get us back on the right track?

Mr. David Mastin: Thanks for the question.

It starts all the way from kindergarten all the way up through the system. We need to have extra bodies in buildings. We need to have the extra supports in buildings.

When you talk to educators, you will find that they have said that over the last five to 10 years, they've seen a reduction in educational assistants, in child and youth workers, in psychologists, in psychometrists. Throughout their brief time—between five and 10 years—they're telling us that they've seen less and less and less of these additional supports. So it's a catastrophe. We need more. The kids need more.

Violence is one of the outcomes of unmet needs. Kids don't know what to do when they're feeling frustrated and they don't have the coping mechanisms.

We talk about individuals and professionals who are doing things they shouldn't have to do in buildings. Our members are teachers. They're educators. They are not child and youth workers. They're not psychologists. They're not psychometrists. They don't have the skills to do this work, but they're being leaned on to do this work. They end up doing the work to the best of their ability, but they're not trained in that way.

We need to do better.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I'll pass it over to MPP Shamji.

Mr. Adil Shamji: My question is for Kevin.

You eloquently captured, actually, one of the sentiments of today; a recurring theme that we've heard about—growing concerns in London and, frankly, across the province about struggles in access to housing, growing homelessness. You expressed the frustration about coming and wanting to express ideas, wanting to see action, and not necessarily seeing that.

One of the government members said that they're addressing the challenges with affordable housing by building more housing. You may or may not be aware that today the CMHC came out with new data saying that while housing starts have increased by 5% across Canada, they've declined by 13% here in Ontario—the worst province in the entire country. You want to see action. You want to see ideas operationalized. And yet, we've got this disconnect, where we have a government saying they're building more houses than ever before, and then, literally in the same breath—we're learning that we're the worst province in the country.

You want us to action ideas. What ideas do we need to be implementing right now?

Mr. Kevin Morrison: I'd like a clear definition as to what "affordable housing" is, because a lot of the individuals I talk to can't afford what is considered to be affordable.

That being said, there are also a lot of individuals out there who are looking for a home that isn't a starter home.

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

Mr. Kevin Morrison: Okay.

It's just that they're looking for something more than a start-up home or a basic home, basic accommodation.

I remember when I first started out, I had a one-bedroom condominium. You grow over the years—I've had the luxury of having four or five different properties now.

When it comes to affordable housing, the incentives that are out there seem to be for the million-dollar homes. When you talk about HST credits and things like that, it's on new homes; it's not on resale homes.

I think we're at the point where society needs to get back to the basics. We need to start somewhere and work our way up, instead of starting up and all of a sudden you can't afford where you are, so you're working your way down.

I really do appreciate your comments because I think we are far behind here in Ontario when it comes to what others are doing out there.

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

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: David, I'll move over to you.

First of all, I want to say that I wholeheartedly agree that the funding formula is outdated and flawed.

I do want to speak to ETFO's advocacy for a fully integrated model. Recent data shows that nearly 46% of our schools face daily shortages of EAs, speech pathologists, OTs, and other professional support staff, because those people are actually moving toward private practice or ambulatory health care.

So if the human capital—the EAs, the OTs, speech pathologists—doesn't exist in the current labour market to provide a full complement, how does ETFO propose we stretch those limited resources without compromising student and teacher safety? We can't continue to stretch. So what is your thought on that? And would ETFO be supportive, in the meantime, while we wait for an updated funding formula, of moving towards specialized hubs or centres of excellence to consolidate those limited supports?

Mr. David Mastin: Thanks for the question.

I can't speak to the limited supports and why there are limited supports in the categories that you've identified.

I can certainly talk about occasional teachers; I can talk about teachers; I can talk about early childhood educators—and our data would suggest that there's not a shortage of them at all. There are plenty of certified members out there who are not working in the system because the system is not one that they want to stay in. The working conditions are not appealing enough for them to stay in that role.

I can't speak with any knowledge to your other points. Federico, who is online with me, might be able to speak to some of those points.

Mr. Federico Carvajal: Thanks, David.

On this, it's not really a labour market issue—it's more the situation that funding has eroded. What we have seen

is the decrease over time, in school boards across the province, of those professional categories of support.

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

Mr. Federico Carvajal: We have seen EAs being reduced; we've seen psychologists being reduced in schools. Obviously, what ends up happening is that that has a compounding effect on the working conditions of those remaining in the system, adding additional pressures, leading to additional burnout, and it starts compounding that exit from those jobs.

Really, it's much more of an issue of funding not being allocated for school boards to be able to hire for those positions, rather than the availability of professionals in those categories.

I hope that helps.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I guess my fear is that they're gone. It doesn't matter, really, where they've gone. They're gone. There is a thinning of resources that I think we need to recognize. We need to figure out how we deal with that while we wait for an updated funding formula.

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

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: I'll turn it over to Michael.

We're living in a very different age than we did a hundred years ago, with libraries.

Looking ahead, what's your vision for the future of libraries in Ontario? How do you see their role in the next decade?

Mr. Michael Ciccone: That's a big question.

I do want to say, first and foremost, that books are still very popular. One of the issues we're facing is that the increase in digital collections is astronomical, but the decrease in interest in physical materials is a very slow-moving slope downward. There's still a lot of interest; specifically, for children's material, because it never really translated very well to the digital form. We still have a lot of books, and we're still circulating a lot of books.

Just going back to what I was saying before—the library has become such an important space.

We just had a renovation of our Sherwood branch in the Sherwood mall in London. The use of it, the visits, went up 30%, as compared to 2024 at the same time, in the last quarter of 2025, and they're holding steady. It's remarkable to see—it's a big teen branch—how many teens are going to that branch. There are computers. We have a gaming room. We have all of these things to allow them the opportunity to be together in these spaces that they wouldn't normally have. We've always had that aspect of it; it has just grown more important.

We have meeting rooms for people to rent or use. We have study rooms for people to use. We still have computers. We still have a wireless network that is no strings attached—we don't ask for anything; they come in and they connect.

We are still one of the few public spaces available to members of the public, and I think people see that value. Really, use has stayed pretty steady over the last five years, I'd say. Ever since the pandemic—things went down, obviously, during the pandemic, but they have continued to rise, and I think you see that across the board.

Certainly, in Toronto, you can look at their statistics and see how remarkable it is—how well-used that system is. You see that all across Ontario and even across the country.

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Mr. Joseph Racinsky: And with technology adapting—what kind of things are you taking on as libraries, and what innovation are you most excited about going forward?

Mr. Michael Ciccone: I don't know if I'm excited about AI, but we're certainly exploring it. I think we do have a responsibility to start—there are a lot of complications with AI. There are copyright aspects of it; there's misinformation, and so on and so forth. We are actually just at the starting point of starting to delve into it to see what we can share with the public.

And then, just all the equipment—I mentioned virtual reality; all of these things that we can showcase at the library that people can come and use.

We have recording studios. Podcasting is so popular now—everybody has one. We have a recording studio that people can come in and rent and use to record their podcast. We're probably going to expand that service going forward, and I think a lot of libraries have already done so.

There's a lot we can do with the space that we have.

We are that community connector, I think, first and foremost.

I think in a recent podcast I just said, "Think of the person in the community you trust the most. We're the equivalent in the community, in terms of service."

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Further questions? You have 1.4 minutes. If not, it's gone.

We'll go to MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: My questions will be focused on David from the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario.

When you were talking about the rise of class sizes in schools, especially in the grade 4 to grade 8 age, alarm bells just went off in my head—it's the key learning years. I actually took a look at the Education Act the other day, and it is shocking that there are no class caps.

We are seeing in the TDSB—it's an area that I represent—ultra-large class sizes, where teachers are just completely overwhelmed. They don't have access to high-quality, relevant textbooks. They are buying their own paper.

One teacher told me a few days ago that they have 12 kids in their class who have IEPs, and there's one educational assistant for the entire school—JK to grade 8. So you know that educational assistant is never coming into that class—or if they do, it will be for 10 minutes to deal with a disruptive student, and then out they go to another crisis.

Anyway, thank you for your work.

I have some specific questions.

I'm very interested in learning outcomes for students. How do we get kids reading, writing, performing well in math, reaching their full potential?

I don't love the EQAO, but I do look at the results. What we saw with the latest results that came out in De-

cember is that kids are not meeting benchmarks. They're just straight up not meeting benchmarks, and the Minister of Education said, "I'm going to pay these consultants \$1,500 a day to take a deep dive and look at the learning curriculum and try to work out why."

I'm thinking this is an opportunity for you to give the Conservatives some free advice on what we can do to improve learning outcomes.

Mr. David Mastin: Well, that's at the heart of everything that we focus on as well. We have 84,000 people in this province who are concerned about that as well. That's why they came into this profession. So it's incredibly important.

You talked about EQAO, and I'll just touch on that for a moment. There are many, many, many ways for us to make sure that the system is accountable. There's a lot of money that goes into public education. We all understand that. There need to be accountability measures. There are ways of doing that without targeting communities; without making communities feel small; without ranking schools; without some of the pressures that are downloaded onto school boards, onto administrators in order to bring the test scores up in a false or a sort of less-than-organic way. So there are lots of things that we could offer on that.

I've actually had a sit-down with Minister Calandra and suggested that I'd like to have a sit-down and talk about EQAO and what we can do to talk about accountability without still having some of those inappropriate tangential pieces that come with EQAO testing.

Grade 4 to 8 classes—you brought that up earlier. The class sizes are too big. The teachers are stretched too thin. The kids are struggling too much. Investments have to be made.

We're focusing on class size right now, but we have about 10 items that we're going to bring to the bargaining table that are focused on making the system better.

This is one thing that I wish people understood: It used to be that when we went to the bargaining table, we would talk about salary; we would talk about prep time; we would talk about benefits; we would talk about things that are basically worker-centred. Now we're finding ourselves talking about student-centred things that should be just taken for granted; they should be embedded in the system. We shouldn't have to fight for a child to have their needs met in a school. That's not what collective bargaining should be—but we've found ourselves in that position, where we have to negotiate, actually, the learning condi-

tions, rather than the working conditions for our members. We know they're tied—but we're more focused on the learning conditions, because these kids are hurting so badly. Our members, who are desperately wanting to improve those lives—they can't, and so they're hitting the bricks.

Ms. Jessica Bell: My second question is really focused on the Minister of Education's, I'd say, unnecessary fixation with school board trustees.

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: In the Toronto District School Board, we now have an unelected supervisor who gets paid \$350,000 a year. Parents have nowhere to go when they've got a complaint or a concern.

What are you hearing from teachers who are operating in school boards that have been taken over? What changes are you seeing?

Mr. David Mastin: We're hearing about rapidly increasing complaints and changes that are happening. This is fairly new, still, so when you make a change at that level, it takes a little while for our members on the ground to really see that. But we're meeting with our local leaders in those takeover school boards once a month, and we're getting updates. The things we're hearing about are just mind-blowing: firing of

teachers; firing of directors; governance decisions that are made by one person who's not accountable to the communities that they're working in, making exorbitant sums of money—almost exceeding the money that the trustees—

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

I want to thank the panel very much for taking the time to prepare and to come and present it to us today. We will take the information forward as we proceed through this program.

Are there any questions or any comments from the committee? If not, that concludes the public hearing for today.

I thank everybody for their participation.

As a reminder, the deadline for written submissions is 6 p.m., Thursday, January 29, 2026.

This committee now stands adjourned until 10 a.m. on Thursday, January 22, 2026, when we will resume public hearings in Niagara Falls.

The committee adjourned at 1658.

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