

Legislative  
Assembly  
of Ontario



Assemblée  
législative  
de l'Ontario

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## Official Report of Debates (Hansard)

F-17

## Journal des débats (Hansard)

F-17

**Standing Committee on  
Finance and Economic Affairs**

Pre-budget consultations

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

Consultations prébudgétaires

1<sup>st</sup> Session  
44<sup>th</sup> Parliament  
Tuesday 27 January 2026

1<sup>re</sup> session  
44<sup>e</sup> législature  
Mardi 27 janvier 2026

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Chair: Hon. Ernie Hardeman  
Clerk: Lesley Flores

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

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## CONTENTS

Tuesday 27 January 2026

Pre-budget consultations / Consultations prébudgétaires .....	F-621
Timmis Academic Family Health Team; Town of Deep River; Métis Nation of Ontario .....	F-621
Ms. Mélanie Ciccone	
Ms. Sue D'Eon	
Ms. France Picotte	
Medical Laboratory Professionals' Association of Ontario; Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, northeastern unit; Kapuskasing Public Library .....	F-629
Ms. Nancy Girard	
Mr. David Rosso	
Ms. Julie Latimer	
Timmis Family Counselling Center; Nature Conservancy of Canada; Unifor Local 89 .....	F-637
Ms. Tania Duguay	
Ms. Dana Kleniewski	
Mr. Alex Dumais	
Progress Place; Ms. Nina Deeb; PTX Metals Inc. ....	F-645
Ms. Criss Habal	
Mr. Greg Ferron	
Ontario Parents for Education Support; Canadian Mental Health Association, Cochrane-Timiskaming; Dominion Dynamics .....	F-653
Ms. Julia Evangelisto	
Mr. Paul Jalbert	
Mr. Eliot Pence	
The PADDLE Program; ATCO Structures; Town of Kapuskasing.....	F-661
Ms. Megan Johnson	
Mr. Steven Graham	
Mr. Dave Plourde	



## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Tuesday 27 January 2026

## ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES FINANCES  
ET DES AFFAIRES ÉCONOMIQUES

Mardi 27 janvier 2026

*The committee met at 1001 in the Centre Régional de Loisirs Culturels inc., Kapuskasing.*

PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS  
CONSULTATIONS PRÉBUDGÉTAIRES

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Kapuskasing. We'll 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're recognized by the Chair before speaking. 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 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. 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 to speak.

Any questions from the committee?

TIMMINS ACADEMIC FAMILY  
HEALTH TEAM  
TOWN OF DEEP RIVER  
MÉTIS NATION OF ONTARIO

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** We will introduce the first panel, which is virtual: Timmins Academic Family Health Team; town of Deep River; Métis Nation of Ontario, region 3.

I do ask each presenter to introduce themselves before they make their presentation, to make sure that we can attribute the comments to the right name.

With that, we can go to Timmins Academic Family Health Team. The floor is yours.

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** My name is Mélanie Ciccone. I'm the executive director of the Timmins Academic Family Health Team, also known as the TAFHT. I'll be sharing our experience of the TAFHT, as well as speaking of some experiences from the Iroquois Falls Family Health Team and the East End Family Health Team.

Today, I'm accompanied by Katherine Harvey, who is the executive director of the East End Family Health Team.

Thank you very much for this opportunity today to come and share some of what we've been going through and some of the challenges as well as some ideas.

The TAFHT is one of the largest family health teams in northeastern Ontario, and we are funded by Ontario Health. The TAFHT, East End Family Health Team, and Iroquois Falls Family Health Team are part of the Cochrane Ontario health team. Within that OHT, there are approximately 26,000 unattached patients. In Timmins, there are 9,000 unattached patients, which means about one in five individuals does not have access to a primary care provider.

The TAFHT works closely with the White Pines Family Health Network, which is an FHN, a group of 29 physicians.

We receive funding for eight nurse practitioners, and the nurse practitioners for Timmins, Iroquois Falls, and East End Family Health Team all work as the most responsible provider, in a similar role to physicians. They have their own roster of patients they're responsible for and provide care from cradle to grave.

Our team is also comprised of administrative staff, as well as 20 allied health professionals: registered nurses, registered practical nurses, social workers, and a psychologist.

We provide care to patients who are rostered or attached to our clinic. We also run an unattached primary care clinic.

The East End Family Health Team and Iroquois Falls Family Health Team provide similar services as the TAFHT.

As you are well aware, the government of Ontario has set the objective of attaching every Ontarian to primary care by 2029. Primary care is the first point of contact

within the health care system. Established family health teams such as Timmins, East End, and Iroquois Falls are well positioned to expand our services to help reach that goal of attachment. By expanding our services, we can provide timely access to care. Patients want to access this team-based care.

We have been successful and are very thankful for the additional investments that have been made in primary care to help expand our teams, and we support these additional investments that will be happening over the years.

The government's vision is quite ambitious—to attach every Ontarian. There are challenges that we're meeting that are currently impacting our ability to be able to deliver these objectives. Some of those challenges involve vacancies. At TAFHT, we currently have seven vacancies out of 36 funded positions; Iroquois Falls has two, and East End has about four.

We struggle with retaining our staff. Our turnover rate for the TAFHT is the highest it has been in three years, at 38.1%; Iroquois Falls Family Health Team is at 15%, over the last three years. And East End just lost two nurse practitioners over the last three months.

Timmins has been able to recruit its first family physician in two years, but our community still requires about a dozen to meet just the current need, to help with the unattached population. We received funding over a year ago for an unattached primary care clinic, and we're still trying to fill two nurse practitioner vacancies. We recently filled another nurse practitioner vacancy after 1.5 years of being unfilled.

Iroquois Falls Family Health Team has one nurse practitioner vacancy; East End has two, as well as 1.8 vacancies for physicians.

We're having trouble recruiting and retaining. Staff are telling us they're leaving for higher-paying jobs or aren't applying to our vacant positions due to the rate of pay. Furthermore, inadequate compensation contributes to feelings of devaluation and reduced professional efficacy.

Through our exit interviews with staff, staff indicate being unsatisfied with the benefit packages that we're offering them.

Also, while it's great that the provinces have interprovincial agreements to enhance the mobility of health care staff, with the goal of recruiting health care staff to Ontario, we have staff who are leaving their positions to work from their homes in Ontario, providing virtual primary care services to patients living in other provinces, because of higher-paying jobs.

**1010**

Due to our difficulties in recruiting physicians, nurse practitioners, as well as allied health staff, we're unable to attach patients, therefore impacting our ability to meet the government's priority of attaching everyone to primary care.

Vacancies and high turnover rates have a huge impact on our team—posting, interviewing, onboarding, training, providing coverage during shortages. When physicians and NPs leave, our already overworked team is trying to provide coverage, and if we're unable to, we need to dis-

charge those patients from our care. Our teams are faced with burnout and decreased staff morale.

Patient care is impacted when our team isn't at full capacity; either services are delayed or we're not able to provide some services. When patients can't access timely care, they end up going to the emergency department—which is an already strained system.

Our wages, which are not competitive, limit our ability to compete in the labour market. We have difficulty hiring qualified and experienced staff.

There are a few solutions that we'd like to bring forward.

In October, the government announced a \$142-million investment over three years. For year one—

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

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** —that resulted in a 2.7% wage adjustment for our staff. That is their first increase since the last adjustment that was made, from 2016 to 2020. For the past five years, they haven't received an increase, although inflation has fluctuated between 2% to 7%.

For us to be able to stabilize the workforce, prevent the collapse of our existing teams and connect patients to primary care, we have three requests: (1) that the government unlock the recruitment and retention funding that is targeted for year 2 and year 3—the remaining \$115 million, right now, in year 1; (2) that the government invest an additional \$430 million over five years to close the structural compensation gap. There remains a 15% to 30% discrepancy in the structural wage gap. This includes adequately compensating our NPs, who are working as—

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time for the presentation. Hopefully, we can get the rest in when we do the rounds of questioning.

We now will hear from the town of Deep River.

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** My name is Sue D'Eon. I'm the mayor of Deep River.

They have my presentation, so I'm going to assume that they're going to show it?

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

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** Okay, great. So I'll just go through the slides with you today.

Deep River is located halfway between Ottawa and North Bay, on the Ottawa River. The population is about 4,200 people. If you watched the Oppenheimer movie, we are the Canadian birthplace of nuclear energy in Canada—all built around the same time as in the US, at Los Alamos. We're known for a lot of things, but mostly for being the home of Canadian Nuclear Laboratories.

This post by Minister Lecce was made on Facebook a couple of days ago: "Energy policy must be rooted in reliability, affordability, and economic sovereignty—not ideological delusion."

My four key take-aways:

(1) I applaud the province of Ontario—Minister Lecce, in particular—for having the wisdom and foresight to invest in and grow nuclear energy in Ontario as baseload power.

(2) I suggest Ontario double down on that investment by adopting Candu nuclear technology for future grid-scale projects and promoting Candu internationally to further capitalize on every dollar.

(3) I suggest leveraging the state-of-the-art facilities and nuclear expertise and the billions of dollars invested by the federal government at Chalk River Laboratories, relying on their deep nuclear science expertise in the Ottawa Valley. Let's not reinvent the wheel.

(4) With regard to budgets, I suggest that Ontario be more strategic with electricity rebates and redirect a portion of the 23.5% Ontario Electricity Rebate to building new grid-scale Ontario nuclear at Deep River and CNL—a first-of-its-kind micro modular reactor.

I put this slide in all my presentations because it's just the facts from our world and data—per kilowatt hour generated, nuclear energy is one of the most proven, cleanest and safest energy generation sources.

Why nuclear? It's low-carbon and highly efficient. It has high reliability and provides excellent baseload capacity, has low operating cost and a small footprint. And nuclear power supports energy security and reduced reliance on fossil fuels. It also represents a huge market opportunity for Ontario.

For any of you who are interested, you can download this little icon, Gridwatch, on your phone and you can see where your power in Ontario is generated at any given hour or minute and break it down as to which reactors are online or which hydro dams are producing the most power. It's kind of cool.

Why Candu? All 20 units of existing power reactors in Ontario are Candu. Candu reactors use natural uranium mined in Canada and processed in Ontario. Alternatives use enriched uranium, which causes more nuclear proliferation concerns. Candu is the only reactor which produces medical isotopes without interrupting electricity generation. A single Candu reactor will support about 50,000 jobs or more in Canada, and each Candu unit sold abroad could create up to 25,000 Canadian jobs and tap into the highly experienced Canadian supply chain of over 200 companies—again, mostly in Ontario. So will Ontario be a buyer and importer, or a builder and an exporter of world-class technology?

In October, our Deep River council passed a motion supporting Candu. I just put a quote of the president of AtkinsRéalis—that Candu is a national treasure and was developed here in Ontario, in Deep River.

Ontario can't have clean energy and nuclear energy without the science support of Canadian nuclear labs. They are a world-class leader in innovative applications, and they do a lot of support for the reactor supply chain.

This is just a picture of some of the recent investments in Chalk River labs, some of the new mass timber buildings that have gone up. In your lower left corner, you'll see the new team of BWXT, Kinetics, Battelle and Amentum that are now part of the GOCO—government-owned, contractor-operated.

Finally, Deep River and CNL are the ideal hosts for Canada's first modular reactor pilot—an autonomous react-

or that produces just enough power and heat for a small, remote town or mining industry.

I'm going to skip to the next slide, please, because I'm worried about time.

Number four: Suggest reworking the application of the Ontario Electricity Rebate to make it progressive to need, then invest the savings to support growth of the nuclear sector, more clean energy, jobs and financial stability. In the lowest-income quintile, people spend 4.6% of their before-tax income on home energy, while the higher-income quintiles spend only 1.2%—

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

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** —blanket policy. We suggest using means testing or a sliding scale.

In conclusion, these are my four points, and I thank you for listening to me and taking the time to hear about nuclear.

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

We now will move to the Métis Nation of Ontario, region 3.

**Ms. France Picotte:** My name is France Picotte. I am the past chair for the Métis Nation of Ontario. I want to take this opportunity to thank the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs for the opportunity to appear before you today.

Before I jump in, I want to acknowledge that in recent years, there has been a resurgence of misinformation about Métis people and Métis rights in Ontario. That misinformation does not reflect the law, the history or decades of joint work between the Métis Nation of Ontario and this province. Our rights have been affirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada, reinforced through rigorous joint research, and relied upon by governments and proponents for years.

What matters today is that Ontario already has a proven consultation partner in the Métis Nation of Ontario, that delivers certainty, clarity and outcomes.

## 1020

Ontario is moving quickly right now to advance major infrastructure, mining and critical mineral projects, particularly in the north. The Métis Nation of Ontario understands that urgency. For more than a decade, our lands, resource and consultation branch has been working on major development files across the province. That work has helped projects move forward by identifying impacts early, providing clear advice to government, and supporting community participation within project timelines. That is exactly how you avoid delays.

With the introduction of the “one project, one process” system, consultation timelines are expected to be tightened even further. That makes early, well-resourced consultation even more important.

What we are asking for is straightforward. We are asking Ontario to invest \$1.5 million per year over five years to formally purchase consultation service delivery through the Métis Nation of Ontario lands, resource and consultation branch, and to finalize a consultation protocol that clearly sets out how the crown engages Métis rights-

bearing communities. This funding supports very specific work. Firstly, we process consultation notifications, then assess potential impacts on Métis rights and coordinate information exchanges with ministries and proponents. We also facilitate community meetings and place clear, on-the-record submissions into the consultation process. When that work is properly resourced, files stay on schedule, issues are addressed early, proponents know what is expected, and Ontario avoids late-stage disruption that slows the project down. Without stable funding, especially as timelines compress, the risk isn't that consultation stops; it's that it becomes strained, which creates uncertainty for everyone involved. This investment protects a system that already works. It supports faster, more predictable project delivery, while ensuring Ontario continues to meet its constitutional obligations in a practical, efficient way.

Métis Nation of Ontario's partnership history with Ontario has resulted in projects being approved, mines being built, and investment moving forward in a predictable way. We've signed IBAs with Springpole Gold in Métis Nation of Ontario's region 1, the Waasigan transmission line with Hydro One in regions 1 and 2, and Iamgold right here in region 3. Recently, the Ministry of Energy and Mines reached out to us on the development of multiple electrical transmission lines projects, including a line between Wawa and Timmins. MNO's region 3 is working on that project and hopes that consultation and negotiations with Hydro One will result in economic benefit for the region, the community and the entire province.

Those are just some of the recent examples to show that we have built systems that work for the crown, for proponents and for communities here in Ontario. And we want to keep doing that.

I want to be clear that investing in Métis consultation capacity is not an added cost to the system; it is a risk-reduction measure, and it is what keeps projects on track. The MNO is not asking Ontario to invent something new. We are asking the province to continue investing in a system that already works.

With stable funding, the MNO lands, resource and consultation branch can continue to deliver timely reviews, coordinate effortlessly with ministries, support citizens' participation and provide proponents with the clarity they need to move forward with confidence.

We also believe there is value in closer collaboration. We would welcome the opportunity to work directly with the province and with the—

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

**Ms. France Picotte:** —level of experience to identify concrete examples where effective consultation has helped projects move faster, as well as any emerging challenges created by compressed timelines and regulatory changes. That kind of feedback loop benefits everyone, and it ensures Ontario's economic objectives and constitutional obligations move forward together.

In closing, Métis Nation of Ontario has shown repeatedly that strong consultation does not slow development;

it enables it. With the right investment, we can continue to be the partner Ontario needs as major projects move forward across the north and across the province.

Thank you for your time today. I would be pleased to answer any questions.

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

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you, everyone, for taking the time to appear before the committee.

I'd like to direct my first round of questioning to Timmins Academic Family Health Team. Although I'm not very familiar with Timmins, I'm very familiar with Iroquois Falls Family Health Team, and your issues are very similar.

At the end, you kind of got rushed, so I'd like you to take the time to explain—first of all, just a short question: How long did it take you to drive here, and do you always feel safe on our highways? And then go into it.

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** It took us just over two hours this morning. There were sections of the road that weren't there. We were between two transports. One transport decided to pass, and there were three—it was quite tight. So, yes, there are ongoing concerns with our highways.

Thank you for allowing me that extra 20 seconds to explain our last idea. The first one was around releasing the money that has been promised in year 2 and year 3—right now, we're in year 1—and some additional compensation for our salaries to become competitive in our market. The third one would be looking at specific incentives to attract health care workers to the northeast.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Although we may disagree with the government on philosophy—the goal of having everyone attached to primary care is a lofty one, but a good one. Will you be able to reach that goal in your region unless some of these changes or similar changes are made?

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** I don't believe that we'll be able to meet that goal within the set timeline. We would need about a dozen physicians, on top of nurse practitioners, to come to our community—and that's not looking at the number of physicians who are going to be retiring in the next five years. To be able to provide that team-based care, you need registered nurses, registered practical nurses, and social workers.

We're having people leave our industry or not come to our industry because they're better paid in other sectors.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** The base would be that people who work in your sector would be comparatively paid to where they can get paid in other areas—is that basically what you're asking for?

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** It is. Right.

For example, a registered nurse at our organization at the top of our scale is making \$40 an hour. I compared it to the collective agreement for the health unit or for Ontario Health atHome. The top of their pay grade is \$51 an hour. That's an \$11-an-hour difference.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** So, actually, you can't blame people for going where they get paid more.

It's a very obvious problem with a fairly simple solution.

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** Yes. The government has committed to growing our teams, which is fantastic, because we do need additional workers to attach more—but we also need that increase to our funding to improve our salaries, to be able to recruit those workers.

1030

**Mr. John Vanthof:** You also mentioned access to other tools. What would other tools be for recruitment?

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** Right now, for example, it's quite competitive to attract a physician to a community. Some municipalities are offering incentives, but we're competing against each other. It would be good to look at, provincially, where our biggest needs are. We have been identified as one of the forward sortation areas, FSAs, that is having the most difficulty with recruitment. If that is the case, what additional incentives can we offer to help attract people to our community?

**Mr. John Vanthof:** You're right that municipalities are—I have several in my riding that are—competing against each other.

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Would you agree that it is an area where the province needs to do more than just talk about stepping in, and step in and try to equalize that?

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** Yes, it would be helpful.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Any other comments in your 30 seconds you have left?

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** No, that's all.

Thank you for giving me that extra time.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you very much for coming.

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

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Thank you very much to all three presenters this morning, and a special thank you for making the two-hour journey here to talk to us about health care and access to services in Timmins.

I'm struck by the numbers that you're giving around the recruitment and what it might take—and also your comment about the impact of Bill 2, which means that now people are moving to provide virtual care to other provinces. It strikes me that this is pretty urgent, actually—that we get a handle on what the best ways are to keep people practising in our own environments.

As you've had discussions with staff who are making those choices—what, beyond salaries, would be important to them, to be sure that you're able to retain them in your family health team?

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** Beyond salaries, I think benefits fall into that category. If we're looking at other organizations—their benefits are at about 30%; we're funded at 22.5%, so that does have an impact.

If we look at other tools—I think professional development is important.

There have been some good investments through OHT with AI scribe, as well as online booking. Those are sometimes one-time funding—so having that commitment for ongoing funding would be reassuring and would help

our providers have the necessary tools to help lessen the administrative burden.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** I went for an early-morning visit to the hospital here in Kapuskasing. I wanted to go and talk to some people there about delivering care and what they've been facing. They had a few comments. One was how important it is to keep the road open here for emergency care and for complicated births, but also, increasingly, being able to regularly get access to specialists for the care—and I'm sure you have this issue with referrals. Also, access to mental health care is a growing need.

I'd be interested in the perspectives from Timmins and from the primary care that you're providing—you're no doubt referring a lot. Do you have any comments on some of those other services and referral pathways in the north?

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** For Timmins, we are the hub for Ontario Telemedicine Network, OTN, services—so people not having to travel to see a specialist, being able to see one virtually.

Mental health visits are our top referrals to specialists. Some individuals do quite well with virtual services, but other people prefer the face-to-face. We are receiving feedback from patients too with certain services like the Ontario Structured Psychotherapy Program—with a preference to be able to see somebody in person.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** As you've been trying to recruit—are these among some of the professionals you're trying to recruit into your own community?

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** For our family health team, we're actually quite lucky—we are fully staffed for our social workers.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** They're not able to recruit here, so that's great that you are.

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** Yes, but it's retaining them which is the difficulty, and also properly recognizing them. Our BSWs—a social worker with their bachelor's, compared to their master's—get paid the same in our environment but come with very different skill sets.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Thank you very much. I appreciate your answers.

I've got another minute?

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

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** My next question is to Mayor D'Eon from the town of Deep River.

Thank you very much for your presentation. It was great to see some of the photos, actually, of the Chalk River labs, and the work that's happening in your community.

My father worked in the nuclear industry for many, many years, so I grew up knowing Candu.

I'm interested to hear more about the current state of your micro modular reactors and what it will take to have that technology available—again, the promise—as we're trying to develop mines etc. in the north. How could they really help us to achieve some of those goals?

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** I'm no expert on micro modular reactors, but I do attend the CNA conferences, and I have looked into the topic.

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

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** As you might be aware, Global First Power was supposed to have built a micro modular reactor at Chalk River, starting a couple of years ago, but Ontario Hydro pulled out of the funding, and NuScale, the micro provider, which was American, was bankrupt.

There were several companies in Canada—a molten-salt one in New Brunswick and another one in New Brunswick. What I understand, from talking to some people, is that they're spread too thin. Money is put all over the place and spread around, and there isn't enough to advance one to construction at this time—especially if it's a Canadian.

What the experts at CNL have told me is that there's probably one in the States that is in the same boat—that they want to pursue one that's sort of based on—

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

We now will go to MPP Dowie.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** I want to thank all three presenters for being here.

I'll share my time with my colleagues.

Ms. Picotte, I was hoping to better understand the process for the consultation that you embark on with governments, the resource industries. I just want to get a better understanding as to what the process is from your side and how, say, the provincial support being requested will help to improve that.

**Ms. France Picotte:** Well, we get notices from proponents or government. They come into the offices; they go through the lands and resources—and they are separated in whatever region it is. For our region, it comes here.

We have a committee, also, of all the presidents of the communities in our region that participate. Then, it goes to the citizens. They do their scientific research—our branch does scientific research. They bring the results to the committee, and then they have their suggestion that goes back to either the proponent or the government.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Hopefully, the additional investment would be to add capacity. You only have so many people who have the technical capabilities to understand these files, and you're looking for more technical support. Is that a good understanding?

**Ms. France Picotte:** We're looking for extra capacity because that's always needed, because of the technical aspect. We're also a fairly remote area, so everything is more expensive. It's harder to actually retain our staff and to get the work done that needs to be done, because if there's travel and stuff—which always is—that's always an extra cost. But it's for the technical review especially.

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

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Thank you very much to all our presenters this morning. Thank you for coming to share your expertise and your input. Also, thank you for all you do on a daily basis in your community.

It's wonderful to be up north. I'm from Simcoe—Grey, which is at the bottom of Georgian Bay. At Queen's Park, they tell me I'm from the north. Now we really are up here. So it's great to be here.

How much time do I have?

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** You have 2.2 minutes.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Okay.

1040

I want to talk with you, Mayor D'Eon, just initially, about your comments on the importance of the nuclear sector in your municipality—I would take it it's probably one of your bigger employers.

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** Yes, it's our largest by far. The other one would be Garrison Petawawa.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Your comment about working with the medical uses, the isotopes—what isotopes do they produce, and where do they distribute those to help our medical sector?

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** They have the research on the isotopes. They used to produce all the isotopes, when the NRU was operating, until 2018. Now both plants in Darlington, I believe, and Pickering produce the isotopes.

The isotope they're working on now is actinium, which is a very rare isotope they created through a partnership with a cyclotron company, and they break it down. It's for alpha therapy, so it's targeted to go to the cell of prostate cancer in particular, but it can be bladder cancer. It's considered the rarest drug on earth, and they have a partnership with a pharmaceutical company to bring it to market.

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

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** My husband has had his therapy for a heart analysis, and it's really important.

There are about 44 million medical isotope treatments a year in the world.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** It's fantastic to hear that.

My riding is next to Grey-Bruce, where the Bruce plant is. They do quite a bit of work in the isotope sector, and I know it's a contributor to our medical sector and medical technology innovation.

My next question is for Ms. Picotte. It's wonderful to hear your input today about the consultation process. It's a big, important part of our work in the north—opening up the Ring of Fire.

I'm wondering if your Métis Nation has been engaged by any other of our Indigenous bands for their consultation process, because it sounds like you're ahead of the curve.

**Ms. France Picotte:** We—

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. The answer will have to come in the next round. We're out of time on that question.

MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'd like to return to Mélanie just for one observation, or your opinion.

Retention: We are training a lot of people in health care, or trying to ramp up the training. But holding them in the system is probably as big a challenge as training new people in the system. Would you agree with that?

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** Yes.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you very much.

My next question is to France from the Métis Nation. In this part of the world, we have lots of events, and the Métis Nation and the First Nations are always seen together.

er. You alluded to it at the start of your presentation—there seems to be friction between the leadership of the two nations. Could you elaborate on where that friction is coming from? We don't see it here, but there is obviously friction, because we read about it. So could you elaborate on that?

**Ms. France Picotte:** There's friction at the political level, for sure. On the ground, most Métis and First Nations do get along—I have nieces, cousins—but politically, for some reason, there has been a resurgence of issues. Either First Nations don't believe we exist or—it's a whole bunch of different things. I think it's politically generated, and I think it's all got to do with money. That's my personal opinion—it's money and power, unfortunately. If we would work together instead of being at each other's throats, we would probably get further, because many of our aspirations are the same, many of our beliefs are the same—but we're a different people.

Métis people have been here, especially in this region, for a very, very long time. We trap—I don't know; four generations, three generations back trapline. So we've been here forever. We do exist, but our voice is not as loud as the First Nations voice, politically, and I think that's the issue. When we do work together, we work very well together.

Here in our region, we worked on a cemetery together, but now we can't seem to finish it because of political issues.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you.

My next question is to the mayor of Deep River.

You talked—and we also, actually, in the House asked a question regarding Candu, and we're supporters.

Do you see a risk with using enriched uranium, which we have to import, as opposed to using our own source of uranium through the Candu system?

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** Well, it just seems like if we have control of the supply chain and don't have to enrich it, it's easier both to license and to produce and supply, so it's just a benefit. I don't know that there's a huge risk in having enriched uranium. Certainly, the small modular reactors being built in Darlington right now do use fuel for that purpose, which is enriched. But for grid scale, why reinvent the wheel when you've got a good product?

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Yes, and Deep River is also—at least, in our family and many other families—known as the stop between where we live and Ottawa. It's a really nice spot.

I'm going to go back to health care. Health care is a huge, huge issue across the province, but I think, in northern Ontario—and I'd like you to—

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** What are the unique challenges you face in northern Ontario, in attracting people and holding people?

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** Beyond recruitment and retention?

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Yes, beyond.

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** Specialty services, so being able to access—it's so fortunate that we have OTN, but sometimes things can't be done with OTN. So we are thankful

for the increase that has been done with the northern Ontario travel grant, but that needs to continue to be re-evaluated so people can access timely care.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** We'll go to MPP Fairclough.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** I'm going to direct my next question to Mayor D'Eon.

My name is Lee Fairclough. I'm the MPP for Etobicoke—Lakeshore, but I'm also the Liberal lead for hospitals, mental health, addictions, and homelessness.

I saw the release of the AMO report last week that has shown us that homelessness has risen by another 5,000 people in the last year, and we're seeing rises of over 30% in many communities in the north.

I just want to take this chance, while you're here, to have a conversation with you to understand homelessness in your own community, how that relates to the availability of housing, and the kind of supports that might be needed to support your community.

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** We have a great agency that operates locally: North Renfrew Family Services. They deal with a lot of the challenges around homelessness.

I will tell you that—apart from maybe sometimes in the summer, when somebody may want to camp or something like that, and tenting and stuff like that, which may be because they are unhoused—for the most part, those people are living in the Pembroke area. They gravitate to Pembroke or Ottawa. Those are the two communities that really are struggling with homelessness. So I wouldn't want to take any resources away from those central hubs that are really dealing with the bulk of the problem. They are working hard with the county to develop ways to fix it, through the Mesa program.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** That's great. Thank you very much. I appreciate the comment.

I want to direct a similar question to our colleagues from the primary care team, as well, in Timmins, if you've got any comments to make about the ways that we could support people most effectively, to ensure that people aren't living rough or living homeless in our communities.

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** I would say it's important to continue to re-evaluate the funding available or the amount of money people are getting through Ontario Works or ODSP; making sure that it's a livable wage, that they're able to afford housing; looking at further investments into housing, for geared-to-income, because that's a huge issue within our communities—the rising cost of renting or even purchasing homes; and then also making sure that people who are being put in stable housing have access to the services required to help them, with the skills necessary to stay and be successful with their housing.

1050

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Thanks very much.

My last question is to Ms. Picotte from the Métis Nation of Ontario.

In making this request for the consultation, what would you see as the most pressing issues to ensure we have effective consultation on at the current time, given some of the bills that have recently passed etc.? Where would

you see really putting your efforts in that consultation first?

**Ms. France Picotte:** First and foremost, all the proponents—the government of Ontario already understands that we have different but equal rights to First Nations, so they can't put us aside. I think that's what happens sometimes—I want to say “often,” but I'm saying “sometimes.” The First Nations will say, “You don't have to consult with them.” Well, I'm sorry, but we are a different people; we are an Indigenous people, and you need to consult. We need to be resourced appropriately and to be able to analyze everything that is being sent to us, and to put it in a way so that our citizens, our people, understand and can give an educated response to that. It's much easier to be involved at the start, understand the project and either agree or give the reasons why not, and protect our resources. It's much easier to do it from the start, without any discrimination, without anything holding either the proponents or the government back.

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

**Ms. France Picotte:** So that's what we need. We need that money to be able to analyze that and put it, then, in words—either in French, English or Michif—so that our people can understand it.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** You have 44 seconds.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** I'll keep going, then.

I'd like to use this opportunity to talk about health care in the north. I wonder if you could speak a bit about the plan. I know there are a lot of physicians planning to retire in your community, and your attachment rates are getting at—close to 17,000 or 18,000 people who need to be attached. Again, how does that affect the ability to access care, more generally, for people—if they aren't attached?

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** If they aren't attached, we do run an unattached primary care clinic, but we have two NP vacancies, so our current—

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

MPP Saunderson.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** I ran into the same problem last round.

France, I'm going to go back to you. I don't know if you remember the question. I was just complimenting your work in the consultation process—it is an important process—and I was wondering if you had any advice for us.

I understand from your last answer that you're telling us there's some political friction between your interest groups and some of the other Indigenous interest groups, and I'm wondering if you have any recommendations on how we might bridge those.

**Ms. France Picotte:** Well, that's a good one.

Do I have recommendations? I wish it would go back to what it was before there was that friction. Recommendations? Maybe just keep going—that the government does recognize us, and make sure the proponents know that they have to consult with us. Eventually, we'll have to come together—everybody—and have a talk. I don't know

who is going to facilitate that. Right now, I don't think the climate is there yet, but something like that has got to happen, because we work much better when we work together; everybody is more efficient, and it's easier on the proponents, easier on the government. But maybe I'm dreaming.

So, yes, we need the government's support, to acknowledge that we're there, and you do already—but to make sure that the proponents and the First Nations know it.

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

**Mr. Dave Smith:** I'm going to start with Sue from Deep River.

You mentioned micro modular reactors. I just want to put it in perspective for people. When we talk about nuclear reactors—small modular reactors and micro modular reactors. I think some people think we're talking about something the size of a microwave, when we're talking about a micro modular reactor. A typical reactor is about 360 acres. A small modular reactor is about five and a half to six acres. How big is a micro modular reactor?

**Ms. Sue D'Eon:** Certainly, they can vary in scale, because they go from one megawatt up to 300 megawatts. What you would have for most small communities would be in the range of five or—say, for an industry, we would be looking at a five-megawatt reactor. And the size depends on whether you convert the steam to electricity or you just use it as steam for heat; if you have to have the conversion, then it takes up more space.

I can't tell you exactly, certainly, the one that was at Chalk River—I think they were looking for 20 acres, and that, to me, seems too big for a community that would probably feasibly use it, but they do make smaller ones.

Again, it depends whether you need that electric conversion with it. Some are less than 10—

**Mr. Dave Smith:** It's just for reference.

As I said, a small modular reactor is about three and a half to five acres.

A “micro”—and I use the term loosely, although that's what we refer to it in electricity as—modular reactor would be two 40-foot tractor-trailers. When we're talking about micro, for most people—as I said, they would think it's the size of a microwave or a television; no, it's two tractor-trailers. That's roughly the size of a micro modular reactor.

I'm going to switch over to the health team.

What we're hearing with health teams across Ontario is that it's a mix of professionals—you have physicians, nurse practitioners, nurses, registered practical nurses, all on the health care side, and then there are other professionals you have for other things.

In terms of the health care side, if we were to come up with a model that was the ideal mix—what would you say would be the right mix for doctors, nurse practitioners, and nurses? Should it be—and I'll just throw some hypothetical numbers—25% doctors, 50% nurses, and 25% RPNs? Is there a mix that we should be looking at that way?

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

**Ms. Mélanie Ciccone:** That's a really complex question to answer. I think it also depends on community needs.

Timmins being somewhat of an urban rural centre, we're fortunate to have access to other services within our community; for example, CMHA, a RAAM clinic. But other communities are not as fortunate to have those services.

So, yes, maybe there are some ideas of what the mix would look like. Every team member has different skill sets. Our physicians and nurse practitioners are diagnosing, treating, prescribing, where our allied health are doing other supportive type services—but also looking at what the community needs are, because the family health team might need different services to help balance that out.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Chair, how much time do I have?

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** None. Thank you very much. That concludes the time for that question, and it also concludes the time for this panel.

I want to thank all the panellists for the time they took to prepare and the two hours it took to get here and the challenge on the road. Thank you very much for participating in this. It will be very helpful as we carry on and get to the conclusion of our consultation for the budget.

MEDICAL LABORATORY  
PROFESSIONALS' ASSOCIATION  
OF ONTARIO  
ONTARIO ENGLISH CATHOLIC  
TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION,  
NORTHEASTERN UNIT  
KAPUSKASING PUBLIC LIBRARY

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** The next panel will come forward: Medical Laboratory Professionals' Association of Ontario, district 2; Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association; and Kapuskasing Public Library. If they will come forward—and I think there are two that are virtual and one that is here.

You will have seven minutes to make a presentation. At six minutes, I will say, "One minute"; don't stop, because there is one minute left at that point. You will stop at seven minutes.

**1100**

We also ask everyone who's participating virtually or at the table to identify themselves prior to speaking, to make sure that we can attribute the comments to the right person.

With that, we'll start off with the Medical Laboratory Professionals' Association of Ontario, district 2.

**Ms. Nancy Girard:** Honourable members of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, thank you for taking the time to come to Kapuskasing today to hear about our community's priorities. I hope you had a restful holiday break.

I am Nancy Girard, laboratory and pharmacy manager at Timmins and District Hospital. I also serve on the board

of directors for the Medical Laboratory Professionals' Association of Ontario, or MLPAO for short.

MLPAO advocates on behalf of the medical laboratory profession, including medical laboratory technologists and medical laboratory assistants and technicians. Lab professionals test for thousands of diseases and disorders—including early cancer diagnosis, diabetes, heart disease, genetic markers, and more. These tests are required to provide diagnostics and comprehensive care to Ontarians for publicly funded cancer screenings, surgeries and procedures. Combined, these professionals process and interpret over 280 million lab tests annually in Ontario and are the fourth-largest health care profession after doctors, nurses, and pharmacists.

Since the pandemic, our hospital, public health and community labs continue to experience significant labour shortages.

Across Ontario, 37% of MLTs are approaching retirement in the next few years.

According to a recent survey MLPAO conducted in the fall of 2025, 68% of Ontario labs continue to experience MLT shortages, 44% of our members say MLT staffing shortages have stayed the same or worsened over the last year, and 40% said their MLT staffing shortages are adversely affecting testing turnaround times.

Here in northern Ontario, we have a shortage of approximately 100 MLT positions. I've been in my role for the last four years, and I've had a shortage of MLTs since the beginning.

More medical lab training programs are being brought online by Ontario colleges, and we are so grateful for that, but many labs are unable to take and train students due to the shortages.

In fact, 37% of labs that currently do not take students indicated to MLPAO that they would be able to take students for clinical placement if funding for a trainer was provided. It's common in other health professions. They're called preceptors.

MLPAO is proposing a modest but effective solution in our budget submission. We are asking for a one-time, time-limited investment of \$6 million over three years in the 2026 Ontario budget, to hire about 130 preceptors, train 1,300 students and alleviate labour shortages, especially in rural and northern labs. MLPAO is ready to implement this solution immediately. We have part-time and recently retired MLTs ready to come back to train and support students with hands-on training opportunities. This solution also complements the recent government investments in the Learn and Stay grant and the addition of 700 MLT seats to help MLT recruitment and retention in the north, east and southwest regions of Ontario.

Funding preceptors will help us accept more students to do their full placements here at Timmins and District Hospital. Furthermore, we will be able to support the other hospital laboratories in our cluster by accepting additional students who can only do partial placements at the smaller sites. There's an 82% chance that students will stay at the hospital where they completed their placement.

I thank you for taking the time to hear our proposal. We hope we can count on this government's support for our hard-working medical lab professionals in this year's budget.

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

Our next presenter will be the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association—and I believe it's also virtual.

**Mr. David Rosso:** Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is David Rosso. I'm an English Catholic teacher, currently serving as a release officer for the northeastern unit of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association. I'm here today on behalf of Catholic teachers who work with students from full-day kindergarten through grade 12, as well as adult learners in publicly funded Catholic schools across northeastern Ontario, including Cochrane, Moosonee, New Liskeard, Englehart, Timmins, Kirkland Lake, Iroquois Falls, South Porcupine, Cobalt, and Kapuskasing.

Catholic teachers in the northeast and across Ontario are deeply committed to our students. We chose this profession because we believe in public education and in the life-changing impact it can have.

Every day, teachers work to create a safe, inclusive and engaging learning environment where students can succeed. But dedication is not enough. To truly meet students' needs, teachers must be supported by a government that makes meaningful and sustained investments in education.

When classroom supports are lacking, when mental health services are stretched thin and when learning environments deteriorate, it's the students—especially our most vulnerable—who feel the impact first.

The upcoming 2026 budget is a critical opportunity to act. Investing in public education now is an investment in student success, in our communities, and in Ontario's future.

Over the past eight years, Ontario's public education system has been underfunded by \$6.3 billion—when adjusted for inflation, school boards are receiving less funding per student today than they did in 2018. This is not an abstract number. It's a reality that teachers and students experience every day. Teachers see overcrowded classrooms where individual student needs are harder to meet. We see a growing recruitment and retention crisis, with more classes covered by individuals who are not qualified or certified teachers. We see programs and services disappearing as boards are forced to make difficult cuts to balance their budgets. We also see a rise in incidents of violence in schools and increasing burnout amongst educators. We teach in buildings in visible disrepair, with maintenance backlogs that continue to grow. And, increasingly, we see shortages of the basic classroom supplies—items as fundamental as paper, pencils, and up-to-date textbooks. These are not extras. They are the basics of a functioning education system.

The economic case for investments is clear. According to the Conference Board of Canada, every dollar invested in publicly funded education generates \$1.30 in economic

benefits for Ontario. The reverse is also true—cuts to education carry long-term costs for students, communities, and the provincial economy.

Every student, regardless of background or needs, deserves access to the supports required to learn, grow and thrive. That promise cannot be fulfilled without adequate funding.

Mental health and well-being must be a priority. Teachers are seeing more students struggling with anxiety, trauma and complex behavioural needs. Schools need a comprehensive, properly funded plan that expands access to guidance counsellors, social workers and child and youth workers, so students can receive timely and meaningful supports.

Special education must also be prioritized. Our most vulnerable students cannot continue to be left behind. Real investments are required to ensure students receive the staffing and individualized supports they're entitled to, not just in principle, but in practice.

Class sizes are growing. If classrooms are overcrowded, students get lost. Teachers are forced to divide their attention across more and more needs, making early intervention increasingly difficult. The research is clear: Smaller class sizes lead to better outcomes. Students are more engaged, more motivated and more successful when they receive individualized attention. Investing in smaller classes is about fairness, equity and opportunity.

Everyone in our schools—students, teachers and educational workers—has the right to work in a safe and healthy environment. Yet, Catholic teachers have witnessed a troubling rise in violence and harassment in recent years, with many incidents directed at educators themselves. The rise in violence is linked to chronic underfunding and reduced access to professional supports. With fewer social workers, psychologists and child and youth workers, teachers are left managing increasingly complex situations without adequate resources. Violent incidents are often signals that students are in crisis. When classrooms are disrupted, learning suffers, attendance declines and disengagement increases. Teachers are calling on the government to invest in front-line school-based supports to keep schools safe and responsive.

## 1110

Ontario also faces a \$17-billion school repair backlog. No one should be expected to learn or work in buildings with leaking roofs, poor ventilation or mould. The Financial Accountability Office estimates it will cost \$31.4 billion over 10 years to address this backlog and maintain schools in good repair. Delaying action only increases costs and risks to health and safety.

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

**Mr. David Rosso:** Rather than expanding centralized control through measures like Bill 33, students need real investments in their schools, their supports and their futures. Every student deserves the resources they need to thrive.

Catholic teachers stand ready to contribute our experience, our expertise and commitment to public education.

The 2026 budget is a critical opportunity to demonstrate real leadership and real investments in Ontario's students—an opportunity the province cannot afford to waste.

Thank you. I'd be happy to take any questions.

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

Our next presentation is the Kapuskasing Public Library.

**Ms. Julie Latimer:** Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today. It's very much appreciated. I'm Julie Latimer, the CEO of the Kapuskasing Public Library.

I'd like to first thank the government for the generous investments that have been done in the Internet Connectivity Grant to public libraries. That has allowed First Nations public libraries and more than 30 rural libraries to be able to provide online services for their patrons—services, education and employment opportunities in these communities.

I'd also like to thank the government for the continued support through the Public Library Operating Grant, which is a critical part of the monies that we need to continue to provide library services to the public.

I'm obviously proud to work alongside many other passionate librarians and library staff. We make an impact on millions of Ontarians who rely on local public library services in their communities to work, learn and connect with the community and government services, and to find or train for jobs—and also to study and improve themselves. So we do much more than just lend books—although I will happily give any one of you a recommendation for a good book. We also offer space for students. We offer office-type equipment that, again, will help students and people who are studying to upgrade their skills.

Also, with our particular library, we offer a service called Mango Languages. You can become a member of the library for free, and then you can have this ability to use Mango Languages to learn or upgrade whatever language you want. Here in Kapuskasing, it being a bilingual community—and we have a lot of international students—it gives people a chance to upgrade their skills in the languages that are used in our community. Public libraries, though, for Mango Languages—it's part of the provincial e-resources that we can pay for, for a one-year subscription. But our budgets make it very difficult for us to buy these subscriptions because they cost—and it's an extra bit of funding that we may not have the ability to offer.

So what we're advocating for is a big investment, yearly, by the provincial government to create the Ontario digital public library. This will support e-learning and fair access to modern digital resources for all public libraries and all Ontarians. Building on what you've done with the critical infrastructure for broadband, these digital resources would offer vital services like career training, language learning, tutoring, health information and support for vulnerable residents. Through an annual investment of about \$15 million, every Ontarian would have access to a common set of high-quality, e-learning and digital resour-

ces through their public library, which, again, would be free. I did the math: It would cost approximately 93 cents per Ontarian to have access to all of these digital learning things.

We know that better training and better education leads people to working in good jobs, working longer and contributing to the province's financial health.

We appreciate your support, like I said, through the Public Library Operating Grant, but many libraries are having a hard time making ends meet. In 2023, municipalities paid approximately \$55 per Ontarian for library services in their communities. We know that a lot of that comes from what the province gives to municipalities to function. Even through the government's investment with the Internet connectivity and the increase of the First Nations Salary Supplement, which are vital, we do feel that the government's increase to the Public Library Operating Grant should be more. I'm not going to quote what other libraries or library associations are saying—but it needs to be more. It needs to be increased so that we can keep offering these services to people.

Libraries are also facing, like others, social issues like mental health issues, addictions and homelessness because we are open to the public. Our doors are open; anyone can come into the library. These issues do impact library staff. We're not social workers. We are here to lend books, spark learning, bring people together, but we're not meant to fill the gaps that happen because of an overstretched social safety net. Dealing with these issues also comes at a cost to the library, in terms of hiring security guards, the strain on the employees—so that's less productivity; stress etc.—physical safety, and stresses on patrons who use the library for their services. 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, addictions and homelessness in communities across the province.

The partnership between the Ontario government and local libraries is vital and very much appreciated.

That's all I have. Thank you very much.

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

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

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Thank you to all three presenters. It's a nice mix of conversations for us now.

I want to start with Nancy Girard. Thank you for your presentation from the Medical Laboratory Professionals' Association of Ontario.

I actually remember meeting—I don't know if it was you or your colleague from Kenora who met with me at Queen's Park—

**Ms. Nancy Girard:** Jennifer.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Yes—on this very issue. I just want to say, I really support it. These preceptor programs that are being described here, we've used in other areas—of nursing, ICU etc.—and they really do work, to be able to free up some of the time of some of your more seasoned professionals to help support and educate that next gener-

ation. So I remembered your presentation there, and I thought this was a very progressive idea—for what you're asking for, in \$6 million over the next three years. That could make quite a difference.

I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what it looks like for lab services in your communities, more generally, and why it's so critical that we start to fill in some of these vacancies for you.

**Ms. Nancy Girard:** It's so critical, because with the shortages of staff that I'm seeing here in MLTs, there is an increased number of burnouts. The staff are doing double, triple the work, which can mean increased turnaround times as well for different tests, for different diagnoses. That's the big issue right now. So having the preceptors come in and take some of that workload off the MLTs by training the students would be amazing.

There is an 82% chance that those students will remain in the hospital that they do their placement in, which is absolutely amazing. So the more students that we can say yes to, it means that we're going to have more MLTs actually working as part of our staff at the end of the day, which will decrease turnaround time, which will get those diagnoses out to the patients quicker, which is what we want.

**1120**

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** That's great.

That comment, "If we can train people well here, they will stay," was something I also heard this morning at the local hospital here in Kapuskasing.

I want to go next to David Rosso. Thank you very much for your presentation as well.

The numbers that you've talked about—that the investment now is far less per capita than it was in 2018. I think many around our table here are familiar with that. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the real differences that you're seeing this make in your own classroom with your kids and how that is playing out.

Secondly, I am the Liberal lead for hospitals, mental health, addictions and homelessness. So I want to ask about the access to mental health services for students as well. Just expand on that.

**Mr. David Rosso:** I'll talk about that one first.

The wait-list for students to receive mental health services is incredibly long. Even just for simple services, such as speech, accessing a speech pathologist, we see students who are on the list for so long that eventually they age out. The services just aren't here. And that has been lacking now for many, many years.

To get back to the first part of your question, I've been working in a classroom for nearly 20 years, and I can tell you, the stark difference from when I started 20 years ago to now is incredible. One of the biggest things, I think, that I've noticed the change—quite honestly, it is the lack of supports that teachers have when we see students in crisis. That's the thing that we see more and more of: students in crisis. We're seeing, in our little school board—we're big geographically, but very small with the number of teachers and students. The rates of violence are incredible. We know that violence is being under-reported. We have,

finally, an online reporting tool. It only took, I think, six times before a provincial arbitrator—to get that in place. It's difficult, without the supports.

The other thing I want to point out is the reality that teachers face. I never thought I'd be seeing this in my career, but in my last few years of teaching—I was able to be the co-chair of a joint health and safety committee for our board, and one of the things that we had to do as part of our function was to give out PPE to staff. I'm not talking about masks. I'm literally talking about Kevlar. You have to give Kevlar sleeves, Kevlar hoodies, full face masks to teachers and education workers because of the violence that they're seeing—the biting, the stabbing, the kicking, the punching, the spitting. These are all realities that Ontario teachers see every single day, and unfortunately, we see it multiple times a day.

So we really need the government to step up and invest into, certainly, mental health, but—

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

MPP Racinsky.

**Mr. Joseph Racinsky:** Thank you to all the presenters for coming out to this hearing this morning.

I'm going to direct my questions to Nancy as well.

Just explain to me a bit more about this preceptor model, how it would work, and what other professions are using this model, currently, that we can compare it to.

**Ms. Nancy Girard:** Nursing is actually using this model currently.

We would look at hiring full-time, part-time and casual preceptors. We would look at our retiree pool. For example, I already have one MLT who's thinking of retiring this year, and when this was brought up, she said she would come back to work as a preceptor. So a lot of retirees would be coming back and would be working as preceptors to teach our students.

**Mr. Joseph Racinsky:** In the last 2025 budget, our government was very focused on protecting and strengthening our workforce. We announced, through that budget, \$750 million to support additional STEM programs in our publicly funded colleges and universities over the next, I believe, five years. Do you think that funding will have an impact in your sector?

**Ms. Nancy Girard:** Well, I think right now, definitely, because we have two MLT programs that are opening in the north, at Canadore College and Confederation College. It's absolutely amazing that we have two colleges in the north that will be offering this program, but now we need to accept these students and we need preceptors to train these students. So that's what our ask is all about: getting these preceptors in the hospital, in the lab, to be able to take on more students and to be able to alleviate our labour shortage of MLTs.

**Mr. Joseph Racinsky:** Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

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

**Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin:** Thank you to all of you for being here today.

I will ask a question to Julie from the Kapuskasing Public Library.

Je m'en voudrais de ne pas demander une question en français ici aujourd'hui.

**M<sup>me</sup> Julie Latimer:** C'est bien. J'ai oublié de dire que je pouvais répondre aux questions en français.

**M. Stéphane Sarrazin:** J'ai figuré, si vous étiez en charge de la bibliothèque locale, qu'il vous demande—que vous aviez à servir la communauté francophone. Puis votre communauté ici ressemble beaucoup à la mienne que je représente dans l'est de l'Ontario.

Puis je dois dire qu'on parlait de contenu digital. Je sais que le gouvernement de l'Ontario travaille avec les différentes bibliothèques pour pouvoir offrir du contenu digital à travers. Mais pour pouvoir offrir des services en français, est-ce que c'est encore un plus grand défi pour les bibliothèques qui doivent offrir vraiment un service bilingue? Parce que souvent, ce contenu-là qu'on voit, il est souvent offert plutôt en anglais qu'en français. J'aimerais avoir votre point de vue là-dessus.

**M<sup>me</sup> Julie Latimer:** Oui, vous avez raison que ces services-là et le digital, la plupart c'est en anglais.

Je pense que l'affaire qui est beaucoup pour les francophones c'est le fait que les matériaux coûtent beaucoup plus cher. Mais après ça, j'imagine que, s'il y a assez de demande pour les programmes digitaux en français, éventuellement, ils vont en convertir. Parce que toutes les compagnies qui offrent ces services-là veulent les offrir à le plus de personnes possible. Alors ça serait un autre investissement de leur côté de faire les traductions de ces programmes-là.

**M. Stéphane Sarrazin:** Parce que j'imagine qu'on a vu un gros changement dans la façon que les personnes—moi-même, je me suis rendu que—du contenu où est-ce que c'est audio plutôt que lire un livre? Je ne sais pas si ça fait longtemps que vous êtes avec la bibliothèque de Kapuskasing, mais j'imagine qu'on a vu vraiment les choses tourner par rapport à la façon qu'on délivre la marchandise.

**M<sup>me</sup> Julie Latimer:** Oui. Alors, les services électroniques pour les livres électroniques, les livres audio, on a deux services disponibles : Libby by OverDrive et puis Cantoos Station. Ça s'appelle Cantoos; c'est anglais, mais c'est un service pour les livres audio en français. Mais tout ça, ce sont des affaires que nous, on doit payer le « subscription »—excusez-moi, un abonnement pour ça. Puis ce ne sont pas toutes les bibliothèques qui puissent le payer. Ça coûte de plus en plus cher pour ces services-là. Puis les autres—

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

**M<sup>me</sup> Julie Latimer:** —comme Mango Languages, ils le savent. On les a contactés aussi pour leur dire d'offrir les bases en français et en anglais, pas juste que le programme soit seulement en anglais pour ça.

Alors, les compagnies le savent, qu'au Canada puis en Ontario, que c'est important d'avoir le français autant que l'anglais. Puis les services se font utiliser, ce qui est une vraiment bonne chose.

**M. Stéphane Sarrazin:** Puis j'imagine qu'avec les budgets des municipalités, c'est toujours, à chaque année,

à voir. Parce qu'on entend parler des municipalités qui doivent offrir plus en plus de services. Les gens sont exigeants; ils demandent plus en plus de services, puis ils ne veulent pas augmenter les taxes, donc j'imagine que c'est toujours un défi de présenter votre budget à la municipalité.

**M<sup>me</sup> Julie Latimer:** Oui. Pour longtemps, on ne demandait aucune augmentation. J'ai commencé à la demander, juste un 2 % toutes les années. Ce n'est pas un gros montant, mais ça fait une grosse différence dans les services qu'on peut offrir, les heures, les employés. Alors c'est ça qu'on fait. Ça serait une demande que—

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

MPP Vanthof.

**M. John Vanthof:** Ma première question est pour Julie, mais je parle le français d'Earlton. Je vais continuer en anglais.

Could you expand a bit on the Ontario digital public library? I would just like to say, in small, rural, northern communities like—Kap actually isn't even small—but how big a role the library plays and how big a difference that would make in people's lives.

**M. Julie Latimer:** It won't just make the difference for Kapuskasing—because we're talking about education and health. These are some of the programs that would be available through the digital library. There's stuff with world languages; books for five- to 16-year-olds that address Canadian issues; there's Business Source Premier for businesses; e-book subscriptions; Career Cruising. This would affect everybody, because as we're talking to you about violence in schools—maybe some parents feel their kids are missing, so they'd be able to access these programs for free. There's consumer health; there are DIY products; there's early learning—so this would be as an extra, to where parents, or just people in general, would feel that they can access and use, for free, which is brilliant. There's also Gale Business—so that's for increasing businesses; there are languages; there are newspaper sources for history and whatnot; SageKeeper, which is Indigenous languages; science reference books. These would all be helpful to students who might feel like they're missing out a little bit in classrooms themselves. And teen health and wellness—everyone would benefit from this.

1130

At a small cost of 93 cents per Ontarian, it feels like it's a good investment.

**M. John Vanthof:** And people from lower socio-economic—they would benefit even more, because they wouldn't have access, otherwise, to some of these programs.

**M. Julie Latimer:** That's correct. The other thing is that some of those people from lower socio-economic statuses often use the library for our Internet services. So the library would offer both the space and the technology for people to be able to improve themselves through these programs.

**M. John Vanthof:** I would just like to build on something you said. As we are getting more Internet access in

northern Ontario—but what people are coming to me and saying is, “Oh, great. We might be getting fibre op, but we can’t afford \$120 a month.”

**Ms. Julie Latimer:** That’s exactly right. We have a lot of people who don’t have those types of resources at home, because they have to choose between housing, food etc. So that’s where the library is critical. We offer free WiFi for everybody. You don’t even have to be a library member. We have free WiFi, and that is used a lot. Oh, I should have had the statistics. I think, last year, there were about 60,000 half-hour sessions used on our WiFi. That’s big. And a lot of people do have WiFi at home, but again, they might find the library a safer space to work, to study etc., allowing them to be connected with other members of the community through Internet—what all of that provides.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you.

My next question is for David.

We hear this debate a lot—the funding per student compared to the overall funding in education. The overall funding is going up, but the funding per student is going down. I would like to bring it down to the actual student.

I made a presentation to a grade 5 class last week. The teacher explained to the kids, “Last year, we had two assistants, and this year, in a class of 30, we’re sharing half with one other class—we have one between two classes.”

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** In your professional opinion, due to funding, would that have an outcome on those kids’ success?

**Mr. David Rosso:** There’s no question that that’s going to have a negative impact on their success.

Unfortunately, one of the tools that this provincial government uses to measure success in education is through EQAO. There was no surprise that the minister purposely delayed those results, because it showed that all these cuts we have seen since 2018—and yes, they claim that they’re giving more funding, but the evidence is overwhelming that, with inflation, you’re not, and we see those cuts in the classroom. There is a reason that test scores are constantly going down, even though this government is saying, “We’re getting back to basics,” and “We’re going to improve the scores.” Well, they’ve had, now, eight years in power, and unfortunately, we haven’t seen that. In fact, we’ve seen the opposite.

The other thing, like I was stressing before, is the amount of violence that we’re seeing in our classrooms, because we don’t have those professionals to deal with students who are in crisis—

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

We’ll now go to MPP Fairclough.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** I’m going to start again with Julie Latimer from the public library. Thank you very much for your presentation. It’s great to see you here today, advocating for people to have the ability to learn different languages.

I am a big believer that libraries are often at the core of communities—I grew up in a small town, and it was at the core of ours as well.

I was very struck by your comment about mental health, addictions and homelessness, because of the stretched safety net that should be there for people. Can you talk a little more about your perspective, from the library, on some of those issues, and where you could see some of the areas we could make the biggest difference in by bolstering that social net?

**Ms. Julie Latimer:** I’m going to say that, for our library, we’re fairly lucky. We’ve had very few incidences of that, except for a bit of belligerence on occasion and some alcohol consumption.

Libraries are finding that they’re having to hire security guards. They have to lock their bathrooms to prevent that. They have to teach their employees how to administer naloxone etc.

I can see partnerships between local health care organizations, that they might be able to have one of their staff people come in for a day to help with patrons who need the help—but again, all of these necessitate funding for that. I don’t think that the training should fall onto librarians, because we’re here for knowledge and that kind of thing, and we’re not social workers. So it requires investments and partnerships between organizations that will help support with that—other social organizations like the housing authorities, or possibly some government funding agencies for taxes and those types of things, to help bring people up to date with what they need to do, and then be able to—

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Access programs.

**Ms. Julie Latimer:** Exactly. That’s where I’m seeing that.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** That’s great. Thank you very much.

For my next question, I’m going to go back to David Rosso.

I loved your statistic that you quoted about the investment in education and what the economic return would be.

I, too, tend to be a believer that the role of provincial governments is to invest in health care, education, post-secondary education, with 60% to 70% of the budget—it’s because of the promise of how that not just benefits people individually, but also their ability to contribute to the economy.

I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about that, because you said—as we see it go in reverse, what do we think the longer-term impacts could be for young people, and young people graduating from high school as well?

**Mr. David Rosso:** The more cuts that we have in the education sector, the less success that we see in our students.

We see our graduation rates are falling a little bit behind from what they were in previous years, and that’s a direct result of the cuts.

Again, this really hits hardest with our students who are most vulnerable, our students who have an identification. Unfortunately, we have many students in our system who probably do have an educational identification, whether they are MID or they have some type of developmental delay, but we don’t have the funding to get these students tested. It’s always a sad reality when we get down to

choosing which students are going to get these psycho-educational assessments and we have to leave out a whole list of students. We can only pick, maybe, two or three—because that's all the funding that the boards have to get these assessments done. Yes, certainly the parents could do it, but, again, some of these assessments are upwards of \$3,000 a student. It's quite expensive.

The less funding that we get into education, we see that these results for these students, their outcomes, unfortunately, are going down; they're not going up.

We really need a government that is going to step up to the plate here and really put in the investments that are needed in order to change things, to turn around the atmosphere that we're in right now, because I can tell you right now, it's not a good place.

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

**Mr. David Rosso:** I would say, certainly, we are in a crisis of education.

We need some real, meaningful discussion like this. We really appreciate the opportunity to come and speak today.

But at the end of the day, what it really boils down to is, we need a provincial government that wants to put the investment in students. Unfortunately, what we're seeing right now—it's not there.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** You have 30 seconds.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** I'm good.

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

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** I want to thank all the presenters for being here.

My question is for Julie from the Kapuskasing Public Library.

Around this committee table, we've often heard about the Ontario digital library; I was aware it was a commitment by the previous government.

Ultimately, as a 12-year-long library board member, I know our metrics that we have back in Essex county for digital resources. Certainly, I am one who consumes a lot of digital resources and understands the cost versus the printed materials is more significant. And it's subscription-based—it's not just one time; it's multiple times.

**1140**

Right now, I know we have the Ontario Library Service consortium that collaborates with small services on that bulk purchase for digital resources, and I understand the collection levels are maybe not desirable.

So I just want to understand the difference between the Ontario digital library system being proposed by the services and the consortium that already exists. Is it an uploading of costs, strictly, or is there a different model that you're looking to go through?

**Ms. Julie Latimer:** I'm going to say that I'm not sure if the OLS wants the government to pay also for Libby, for the e-books and audiobooks—I think it's more that they want for these other programs that can be available. That's what they want—this thing which will allow people to increase their education, their businesses, all of these things separately from that. I think that's what they're asking for.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Through you, Chair, a follow-up: Right now, we have some e-learning opportunities through TVOntario which support the education system, primarily. Would that be separate and distinct from that? It would be aimed at a more general audience versus a student and adult learning audience?

**Ms. Julie Latimer:** It's for everyone who wants it. It's for students in pre-kindergarten up to secondary, post-secondary, and then for just general people who want to improve their chances, either for education or for work.

That would be the biggest thing—that, yes, there are things here, and then there's programming on TVO and whatnot, but this would be centralized for all of these things so that you don't have to go and try to find what you're looking for. It will all be centralized with the Ontario digital public library, which will be much easier to find because it's in one spot.

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

**Mr. Dave Smith:** David, I'm going to come to you.

I used to work for the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board a long, long time ago.

One of the things that I've seen across Ontario, as a trend, and I'd like to get your take on this, is—and I'll refer to it as "scope creep" at the board office level.

When I worked at KPR, we had about 39,000 students. Today, they have about 35,000 students. They had a director of education, three superintendents of education, a superintendent of business. Today, with 4,000 less students, they have a director of education, associate director of education, eight superintendents and three people at a chief level—chief technology officer and so on.

I understand that there are shifts in focus—I'll refer to it as that—in how some boards do things.

Are you seeing that at your board as well—where there is a much larger board office administrative staff at a senior level and less of the money then getting down to the classroom level? And I'll expand on that in a minute, after your answer.

**Mr. David Rosso:** To keep this kind of brief, I can tell you—again, 20 years now with the board. When I first started, there was a director and one superintendent. At present, now, we have a director, we have two superintendents of education and a superintendent of business. Those positions were never there 20 years ago. They just popped up maybe in the last—approximately about 10 to 15 years, probably a bit less than that. So, yes, certainly, I've seen in my career an influx of employees at the board office, and I would say, certainly, there is a decrease in what we're seeing in the classroom today. So, yes, absolutely.

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

**Mr. Dave Smith:** We only have a minute left, so I'm probably not going to get to the question part of this.

One of the things that I think has happened is that a lot of school boards have great intentions on stuff, and when something is brought forward from the ministry as an initiative on it, they decide they need to have somebody who is heading that up or leading it to demonstrate to the community that this is something good. My concern is that

as we continue down that path, the money actually isn't flowing to the classroom, then, to get those great initiatives done. Am I off base on that thought?

**Mr. David Rosso:** No, not at all. I think those investments certainly are better spent in the classroom, as opposed to the board office—

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

We'll now go to MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** My first question will go to Nancy.

I think you've made a very clear case for the preceptor program and for the labour challenges you're facing.

I think one of the—and I'd like you to expand on this—issues with lab people is that they're not seen, so people don't identify them as part of the health care system.

What happens if we don't face the challenge that you've identified, that you've given a clear fix and definite, clear, planned short-term solution for? What happens if we keep losing lab techs?

**Ms. Nancy Girard:** In the MLPAO, one of our strategic directions is advocacy. You've seen us a lot more out there, talking about the med lab profession. We go to high schools and we do presentations about the med lab profession to try to get more people aware of what we do. We are the unsung heroes. And 70% of diagnoses are based on lab tests—70%. That is huge.

If this shortage continues and we can't fill that gap, what's going to happen is that turnaround times—it's going to take that much longer to get a result to your physician, for you to get a diagnosis, for you to start treatment. That's the big thing.

In these three years of funding for preceptors that we're asking for, we'll be able to close that gap. We're going to be able to train a lot of MLTs to be able to get those test results in your physicians' hands as soon as possible, because we won't be working short-staffed and we won't be doing two to three roles at the same time. The thing is that those students are going to be getting the best of the best of training.

A lot of our MLTs feel like they are getting pulled in different directions, and they feel like they could do more for the MLT students if they had a little bit more time.

This preceptor program is a success in the nursing profession, and it would be an amazing success here, too—to be able to get us to a place where we are stable with MLTs.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you very much for making a very solid case.

I'd like to go back to David and, actually, back to MPP Smith's question. I don't think any of us like to see bureaucratic creep. That's what I'll call it.

The government has also, in some boards, removed or is talking about removing class size caps.

Can you tell us what damage or what, in your professional opinion, having even bigger—in grades 4 to 8 or whatever classes they're talking about. We're talking—they're focusing on an issue that's an issue. But removing class size caps: How big an issue is that?

**Mr. David Rosso:** If you remove those class size caps, that would be an absolute disaster when it comes to education in Ontario.

The fact is, with the hard cap in primary and then the average cap in our junior-intermediate grades—especially here in the north, where we have some communities such as Cochrane, for example, that have smaller class sizes, but we have larger class sizes in Timmins. It goes by an average in those junior and intermediate grades, so we have classes in some of our intermediate grades that are well above 30 students.

We know that the more students we have in our classrooms, the less services that a teacher can provide.

The research is clear, and it has been peer-reviewed dozens of times, that smaller class sizes lead to better results.

So this notion of eliminating cap sizes and increasing students in classrooms would just be—and I hate to say it again—an absolute disaster to our education system.

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you.

My last, to Julie—I asked this before. You're from Kapuskasing, so you haven't driven far. But do you hear a lot of concerns about the roads?

**Mme Julie Latimer:** Certainement. Parce que deux voies, ce n'est pas assez. Il n'y a pas assez de « passing lanes ». Il n'y en a pas assez. Puis il y a trop de camions. There are too many semis that drive in this area.

There needs to be more training, longer training for truck drivers.

You might want to make snow tires mandatory in Ontario.

And yes, it impacts all of us, all of the time.

My husband and I are actually afraid. We feel like we're stuck in Kapuskasing. We're afraid to go even to Hearst, to Timmins, because we—

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

We thank you all very much for taking the time to prepare and so ably present your views to us, and we will take them into consideration as we prepare our report. Thank you very much for coming.

With that, the committee now stands recessed until 1 o'clock.

*The committee recessed from 1151 to 1300.*

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

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

rounds of three minutes for the independent member of the committee.

I will provide a verbal reminder to notify you when you have one minute left for your presentation or allotted speaking time.

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

Any questions? No questions.

TIMMINS FAMILY  
COUNSELLING CENTER  
NATURE CONSERVANCY OF CANADA  
UNIFOR LOCAL 89

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** We will now move to our first panel: Timmins Family Counselling Center, Nature Conservancy of Canada, and Unifor Local 89. As they're coming forward—I believe Timmins Family Counselling Center and Nature Conservancy of Canada are virtual.

We also ask everybody making their presentation to introduce yourself as you start, to make sure we can get the right name on the presentations as made.

With that, we will go to Timmins Family Counselling Center.

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** My name is Tania Duguay. I am the executive director at the Timmins Family Counselling Center. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

Timmins Family Counselling Center is a non-profit agency. We provide professional counselling services to individuals and families across Timmins and the surrounding region. Our organization plays a vital role and a unique role in the mental health system. We fill critical gaps in care, often serving the most vulnerable people and anyone who wants help. In our community, people turn to us when they don't know where else to go.

We serve individuals facing mental health concerns; couples and families navigating conflicts; people experiencing, or at risk of, gender-based violence; people who need help and do not fit into the publicly funded services, which I call boxes, which usually have very long wait-lists. We also help youth dealing with stress, anxiety and challenges related to identity, and men who want to be better partners and fathers and develop healthy coping skills. We help people navigate mental health challenges, relationships, stress, trauma, and the complex pressures of day-to-day life, and we do this efficiently, locally and at scale.

Family service agencies like ours are part of Ontario's core community infrastructure. Today, the challenges that we are facing are the rising demands, the complexity of issues, and also the funding that has barely changed in a lot of years. This puts at risk a vital layer of early intervention and prevention that keeps people stable and reduces pressure on far more costly systems, like the hospitals, the

emergency departments, the courts, police, child welfare agencies.

Just to give you a little bit of how this looks like—consider a young family in our community. Both parents are working hard to support their children. One parent works out of town, two weeks in, two weeks out—as you know, we're a mining industry—while the other is struggling just juggling their full-time job, the children, the after-school activities. It's day-to-day pressure that never seems to end. Over time, they start feeling tired, overwhelmed, isolated, stressed and stretched out beyond their limits. They have lack of motivation, energy. Then it starts to show physically—they're emotionally strained. As the parents grow more distant from one another, small disagreements turn into big arguments. The tension at home becomes very unbearable. Then it starts affecting the children. They're doing less good in school, and then they start to struggle to focus and anxiety starts to rise. And as we began as stress in the parents' relationship—it's now affecting the well-being of the entire family.

At the Timmins Family Counselling Center, we offer couples counselling. We help parents reconnect, communicate, rebuild the balance in their daily lives. We guide them into developing healthy coping strategies to rebuild their partnership, to create stability for their children's needs. As the parents regain their footing, the entire household stabilizes. The children begin to feel secure again, and their school performance improves. The family moves from crisis to resilience.

When families stabilize early, they avoid far more costly outcomes, without the support. A situation like this often escalates, leading to mental health-related emergency department visits, school intervention, involvement with child welfare and even the justice system. When we can intervene early, then all of this can be prevented.

We already have some of the solutions. What I am presenting here is to stabilize the committee-based counselling agencies like ours. A small investment protects a network of preventive, upstream services that already reduces pressure on hospitals, policing, the justice system, and child welfare. I've seen, in other communities, agencies like ours routinely prevent homelessness, stabilize families and prevent domestic violence from escalating—all of which carry significant and avoided costs.

The second thing that I'm going to throw out there—I'm probably reaching for the stars—is to expand mental health care access, to an OHIP-funded psychotherapy pilot; to recognize that mental health is an essential part of the Ontario health care system, and to consider an OHIP-funded psychotherapy pilot in northern Ontario. This pilot offers a strategic and fiscally responsible way to expand access to care to everyone—men, women, children and youth—and to reduce the cost of mental health-related emergency department visits and the supportive workforce. Having access to psychotherapy through self-referral or community referral and bypassing the significant physician shortage in the north—people will receive help earlier, before crisis. This early intervention will ultimately reduce pressure on hospitals, emergency depart-

ments, the justice system and child welfare, ensuring people get timely support rather than deteriorating while they wait.

Investing in community psychotherapy and opening access to early intervention of mental health isn't an expense; it is a cost—

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

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** —and an essential part of building a productive resilience in Ontario.

Thank you.

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

We will now go to the Nature Conservancy of Canada.

**Ms. Dana Kleniewski:** Thank you very much for the kind invitation to participate in the standing committee's pre-budget consultations. My name is Dana Kleniewski. I am the regional vice-president for the Nature Conservancy of Canada in Ontario. I'm pleased to be here today to talk a little about the important work that NCC does across this great province, including some of the significant work that we've done hand in hand with the government of Ontario, as well as our 2026 budget ask.

Founded in Ontario in 1962, NCC has brought people together to conserve and restore more than 20 million hectares from coast to coast to coast—that's an area three times the size of the province of New Brunswick. As an environmental charity, we work in partnership with communities, Indigenous nations, governments at all levels, industry and businesses and private donors.

In the last five years alone, NCC has raised more than \$1.3 billion for conservation from private and public sources, delivering exceptional value for taxpayers.

NCC has a robust Indigenous engagement strategy focused on economic participation and long-term partnership. Partnerships with Indigenous communities and First Nations support land stewardship, community access and cultural connection while building capacity in the growing natural asset and conservation finance sectors.

I'd now like to talk about some of our impacts in Ontario, specifically.

NCC properties provide Ontarians with affordable access to nature for activities such as hiking, fishing and hunting. They support local tourism and infrastructure and contribute to economic growth.

In Ontario alone, we've protected lands greater than three times the size of the city of London, Ontario.

**1310**

NCC has generated over \$168 million in investment in Ontario over the last five years.

We connect people to nature. More than 95% of Ontarians live within 100 kilometres of an NCC property. We maintain 250 kilometres of public trails province-wide.

We invest in Ontario's local economies—for example, hiring over 500 contractors in the last five years, particularly in rural Ontario.

We could not have done this alone. Over the last few years, we worked closely with the Ford government to achieve new wins for conservation in Ontario.

We appreciate your government's leadership on conservation through the Greenlands Conservation Partnership program and the Wetlands Conservation Partner Program. Working together through programs like these, we've created new parks and trails, protected unique natural areas, restored wetlands in communities such as Niagara and Brighton, and protected species at risk across Ontario.

Our Greenlands Conservation Partnership program is a great example of the proven success of working together. As part of this partnership, NCC has completed over 50 private land securement projects, and NCC has delivered the largest private land conservation project in Canadian history: the boreal wildlands site near Hearst.

Using our extensive network of private donors and foundations, on average, NCC brings \$3 of private donations to the table for every \$1 of investment by the government of Ontario. This is excellent value for money for the Ontario taxpayer.

We're very proud of our partnership with your government in taking action against invasive phragmites. This aggressive, non-native plant is a growing threat that damages local infrastructure, agriculture and community well-being, costing Ontario over \$113 million annually. With our collective action, though, we are removing the plant so that important wetlands can function properly. We're tackling it in drainage ditches to restore water flow, and we're reclaiming shorelines from the plant so that Ontarians can once again enjoy these special places.

Building on this important work across the province, NCC is excited to be leading a new project, an exciting opportunity to conserve and protect significant boreal forest lands here in northern Ontario—an area 1.3 times larger than the city of Toronto. The taiga forest and peatlands project is located about 60 kilometres south of Kapuskasing. This project protects landscapes that support infrastructure reliability, economic activity and community safety, offering excellent value for taxpayers through leveraged private and partner capital. But action is needed now to secure this property. Acquiring taiga in early 2026 is essential to safeguarding these natural systems for the long term. This project extends beyond conservation. It protects Ontario's local infrastructure investments, strengthens regional economies, supports Indigenous engagement, and builds long-term economic and climate resilience.

As the province advances major infrastructure projects, NCC believes investing in natural infrastructure is a cost-effective strategy to protect the resilience of public assets and reduce long-term repair, maintenance and emergency response costs. Early provincial support creates timing opportunities for government announcements that showcase infrastructure resilience, regional economic benefits and strong value for taxpayers.

With this in mind, and building on our past successes, NCC is seeking \$6 million through budget 2026, towards a total project cost of \$63 million.

I mentioned earlier that, on average, NCC brings \$3 of private funding for every \$1 of funding from the provincial

government. For the taiga forest and peatlands project, NCC will be bringing \$7 of private funding to the table—

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

**Ms. Dana Kleniewski:** —for every \$1 of provincial investment.

Protected and conserved landscapes underpin northern Ontario's tourism economy by supporting hunting, fishing, outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism, while strengthening Ontario's reputation as a sustainable destination.

This project will deliver direct economic benefits in northern Ontario, through local forestry and restoration contracts, tree planting, monitoring and maintenance work, and full-time land management staffing.

NCC has a long track record of delivering large-scale land conservation projects in partnership with governments, Indigenous nations, industry, private donors and landowners.

Members of this committee, I believe that the work that NCC does for all of us to protect Ontario's special places is essential.

Therefore, on behalf of NCC, I would request the support of the members of this committee for our budget 2026 ask of \$6 million for the—

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

We will now go to Unifor Local 89.

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** Thank you for the opportunity to present today. My name is Alex Dumais. I am president of Unifor Local 89, and I will be presenting on behalf of Unifor—our members in both the paper and sawmills, and workers and citizens of our communities.

Slide number 2: A quick reminder about the products that we are going to be using—20 years from now, do we still think we will be using hygiene products like paper towels, toilet paper, biofuel, making lumber with construction?

Slide number 3: It's clearly yes—we will be using these products moving forward. Northern Ontario is known for having some of the best fibre and lumber quality in the world, and we possess a vast, renewable source which we need to take advantage of and protect. With demand for these products increasing, the question is: Do we want to be importing these goods and paying a premium with zero economic benefit or do we want to build a profitable and sustainable industry?

Slide 4: We are clearly an integrated sector. When you look, the proximity of the mills to each other is very important to how we operate, and removing one part of the supply chain has a big influence. We use the entirety of the tree when we make our product. We make our lumber, we use the bark to burn for steam, and we use the chips to make pulp. However, we need to pivot from the dying newsprint industry to a sustainable product to continue the use of this runoff. Not using this runoff, as the recent Kap Paper layoff showed, creates immediate curtailments and near-closures for all the sawmills in the region. If Kap Paper is not here to create pulp, the three sawmills cannot

afford to ship the chips long distances and will be forced to close.

Slide number 5: As we all know, the tariffs are very crazy right now. The 35% plus the 10% from section 232 brings us up to a 45% premium on selling products. This has led to 2,000 to 3,000 forestry jobs that we've already lost and an ongoing wave of closures and curtailments coming with that.

Slide 6: As we can see, it's an integrated sector, which means it's not just the direct job losses that we're going to have. We may lose 300 to 400 direct jobs if the mill closes here—but there will be a lot of lost spinoff jobs. The spinoff jobs that will be lost include and aren't limited to all of the bushworkers and machine operators. With no large employer in the region to take these workers on, this would lead to a reduction in population and a crash of the housing market, which would in turn affect all local businesses in the region, including hospitals, schools, grocery stores etc. We have seen this effect in the areas where mills have closed.

Slide 7: The government has been supporting us to keep us running for the last little while. We are grateful for the government assistance up to this point. However, a sustainable, long-term plan needs to be implemented; otherwise, the decimation of this industry will continue and will grow. We feel the government needs not only to aid in research, development and funding, but to also hold the companies to timelines for these projects, monitor closely the appropriation of these funds, as well as provide direct oversight from government officials to ensure the projects are moving forward timely and with proper intentions.

If we skip to slide 9, we will see that each mill is different. There's not a one-size-fits-all. A few examples of what would be needed at our mills would include the sawmill in Kapuskasing needing a new dry kiln—this would stop us from triple-handling the product and save time to dry and deliver the product. I am aware that the forestry budget does not impact infrastructure directly. However, improvements to Highway 11 to aid in the safe and timely delivery of product is crucial. We have had insane amounts of closures and fatalities this year alone, which stalls our delivery and costs us customers. The cogen project review is another important question, as hydro is one of the largest costs for our mills. An example is, our paper machine gets dispatched down once we hit a certain price or once the hydro costs outweigh the production costs, which is frequent. This means we don't process pulp, the chips pile up, and the sawmills are forced down in turn. We have no details as to why this plan was killed by the government after years of discussion and planning. There are discussions for new lines and products which will be very helpful to keep us running, such as an MDF or an OSB mill. Those are great plans, but we need government contracts attached to them, with builders in line to build homes all through Ontario. This would solve two major problems for the government in one fell swoop. Moving forward, the newsprint needs to be switched to either packaging paper or a food-service-bag-type of product, and it could be a massive boost to the mill. We are

equipped to do this, and we did have long trial periods until the projects were inexplicably cancelled and we returned to the failing newspaper.

**1320**

Slide 10: We can see that we need to transform the entire sector. Our industry requires a long-term strategy. It cannot be left to the whims of the CEOs and boards of these companies to decide our future.

Slide 11: We can see some immediate help that needs to take place: assistance for displaced workers by making EI easier to access and obtain, since most of these areas where the job losses occur have no industry for the workers to jump into directly. We need monetary assistance to help get through the research and development stages, until these new projects are up and running and sustainable. And we need a new trade deal with the US, or continue to find international trade partners like China to avoid these killer tariffs.

The development of a national industrial strategy for the forestry sector, coordinated between the federal and provincial governments, developed in conjunction with forestry workers and their unions, forestry communities, Indigenous peoples, forestry companies and their associations, academics and industry experts—this strategy would look to increase domestic demand.

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

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** We also need to invest in research and development to promote and develop new forestry products and processes—and government supports in developing new international markets for Canadian wood products.

In closing, we have a three-step plan to create sustainability for this incredible reusable resource: immediate funding to help the transition period; a change of product to make the existing paper mill sustainable; and the trade deal to end the 45% tariffs. In the intermediate—a plan for research and development of MDF and OSB plants, and possibly a cogen project and the long-term overseas contracts, to offer a wider market to sell product to in the future, and guarantees to use our Canadian-made building materials to solve the housing crisis.

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

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

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

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Tania, I'm going to start with you, and I hope that you will play along with me a bit here. I have been on a mission to get my childhood TV show *The Littlest Hobo* brought back into Ontario, and I'm hoping that you're going to agree with me that having good, family, wholesome TV shows like that is good for people's mental health.

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** I'm sorry, but I have no clue what that TV show is.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** So what you're saying is I'm too old to—

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** I was watching maybe more French TV shows when I was a kid, than English.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** In all seriousness, one of the things that we're seeing in northern Ontario that is different than in southern Ontario, is that with the vast distances that people have to travel, it's much more difficult for a lot of the mental health services to actually be delivered to people. We have regions where someone may have to travel a couple of hundred kilometres to actually get to a centre where they can access some of those services, so it becomes much more difficult, then, to have that early intervention and get someone some help before they get into crisis situations.

Are there other things that we can do, then, to assist and get mental health supports out to people without forcing them to travel back into a larger centre?

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** It depends on what you're asking, so for—I'm thinking of a Jubilee or residential treatment. I'm sure, yes, that they would have to travel further. But if we're looking at just intervention or early intervention counselling, we can do this just here in Timmins. I know, as well, Kapuskasing has *Reflexion* now. It was Kap counselling. We can offer these services here locally, but the demand and supply is not matching. If we're having too much demand but not enough workers or the funding is not there to be able to give those services, now the wait-list gets higher. And we know that mental health is very costly to the emergency department. When they end up being at the emergency department, it's more expensive than if we can do early intervention and get them right away, before it gets to that crisis.

So we're here; we have the solution. We could offer those services. We just need that extra support to make sure that it's sustainable.

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

I'm going to shift over to Unifor.

One of the interesting things with the US market right now is that the tariffs on the Canadian wood product are significantly higher than they are on the Russian wood product, and the Americans are actually bringing in wood from the Soviet Union right now rather than wood from their next-door neighbour, whether that be from BC, Ontario or Quebec.

If we were to look at other international markets to get some of those wood products out, where would you suggest that we start looking? Who would be the best foreign entities for us to jump into first?

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** I'd be honest with you and say that's probably above my pay grade as a local president—to give you that answer. That is something—our research and development probably has the answers, and then I could get to you fairly quickly, if you wanted them.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** What kind of capital costs would it be for us to convert one of the sawmills here so that they could do MDF or OSB?

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** They're in discussions right now, I believe—Kap Paper, with the government. The issue is, it is an extreme—because it's a whole building. We're not just revamping the machine. That's not possible—to take

the paper machine into MDF or OSB. It's an entire new building with an entire new line. That's why we suggested that maybe that old machine can be revamped to do a different product while we also create the MDF. I know those numbers are extensive. We're not privy to the numbers when the company tells us—they just kind of tell us they're in discussion with the government around creating this building. I do believe they're getting some traction, but I don't have those exact numbers, as to what that cost would be.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** We're using an acronym here, so I'm going to throw this out, and hopefully you'll agree with me on it. Most people don't know what we're talking about when we're talking about MBF and OSB. OSB is that classic chipboard—

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

**Mr. Dave Smith:** —that people would see. And MDF stands for "medium-density fibre." Am I correct?

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** Exactly, yes. MDF is more your baseboards and stuff like that, the trims around the doors, so it's all leading back to the housing, where we could use that product for—as we all know, we have a housing crisis, so if we could use these materials, that's where we think there's that double-edged sword. We can kill two birds with one stone by creating these products.

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you to all three of the presenters.

I'll start with Alex. Thank you for that presentation.

Right now, with the American tariffs—that has thrown the industry into turmoil, but the paper part of the industry has had problems for a while. I lost a mill in Iroquois Falls. What do you think the biggest roadblock has been? I know the workers in the communities have been pushing—but what has been the biggest roadblock to actually transforming the industry?

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** Personal opinion: I think we kind of missed the boat. If you look overseas, they jumped onto switching from newsprint to different products like MDF, OSB. They did this 15 or 20 years ago, when we could see the decline of newsprint happening. I feel like we kind of missed the boat on that and said, "We're going to hold firm and continue to let the industry fall apart." We've seen newsprint going down—it's obvious; everything is on the Internet and on your phone nowadays. So the need for newsprint has always been in decline. I know we just lost another line in Thunder Bay just a couple of days ago. It's kind of "last man standing" at this point for newsprint, which is why we're suggesting—we've had these trials before, where we need to make a new product, whether it's packaging paper—so if you're getting all your Amazon packages and they like to stuff that paper in, well, we can create that paper. We just need to have the deal in place where we can continue to work on that.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Yes.

And just for a comment to MPP Smith: Every summer—my family is in the Netherlands, and I've built a few things with what we call fir, like BC fir, and it comes from

Russia. So I think there's a market in Europe right now, because they're not too happy with the Russians either.

1330

We do have, I think, one of the best fibre baskets in the country, perhaps in the world. It used to be that fibre was connected to the community instead of to the major companies. Do you think that would make a difference?

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** Personally, it's easy for me to say as a Unifor person, but we found the most success we had was when we were owned by the workers. That's when the mills were more profitable, which is why we suggested we don't really know what's going on behind the scenes, financially, when the investments are coming in and the money is being spent—whereas before, when the workers had a say, it was definitely the workers and the communities who were putting these plans in coordination with the companies to make sure that we were trying to move forward viably.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm not against multinational corporations, but the board of a multinational corporation makes decisions for the profitability of their shareholders; not necessarily for the long-term survival of the communities that they operate in. I think that has been pretty obvious where that is happening.

One interesting thing that a lot of people don't know: I come from Englehart, so waferboard—there are no tariffs on OSB. OSB is flying across the border.

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** I do know some of the guys from there, and they're talking about how successful they are right now. Now they're implementing new spendings and new strategies, and things are going very well for them. It's tough when we meet; they rub it in our face that they're doing so well while we're all struggling, but we're happy for them. That's why we're trying to move towards a product like that, where we can see the future is brighter.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** The official opposition would agree that government of all levels needs to be more involved in how the province's and the country's resources are used or not used.

I think we're seeing the damage caused by that—when the major decisions that are made regarding our fibre resources are being made by international corporations. I think that's a big issue.

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** For my next question, I'm going to go back to the Timmins Family Counselling Center.

I think a lot of people don't realize how big a proportion of families here—that one family member is gone, let's say, for three weeks—three weeks in, two weeks out, three weeks in—and how hard that is for a family to cope with that.

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** It is. It's the reality of the north here, where lots of people work in the mines. They work two weeks in, two weeks out, and one of the partners has to pick up the slack. That creates a lot of stress, and you can see a lot of the families break up on that part. So being able to offer those services—

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

We will now go to MPP Fairclough.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Thank you for your presentations today.

I am going to start my questions with you, Tania.

I'm a member of the Liberal caucus, and some of the areas that I am the lead for are hospitals, mental health, addictions and homelessness.

You mentioned two asks that I heard today. One was, you'd like to stabilize the funding that you're getting for the organization. I looked to see some of the funds that you've received before, but I wondered if you had an amount in mind that you'd be requesting today to stabilize the funding.

My second question is about the psychotherapy pilot, but I'll come back to that.

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** I didn't really have an amount in my mind, but if you're asking me for it now, I can certainly give you one.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** It would be good to provide, I think, yes. You can follow up too.

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** Well, I would say, for us, it would be \$100,000. That way, we can secure another therapist full-time.

We've had four therapists—one just left, and I'm not going to be replacing her, as the funding is not there. If I replace her, I'll be in a deficit. I don't want to do that, so now that means it's going to be causing a wait-list.

For that cost of just having another therapist—because we do have HOOPP now, so being able to sustain that salary would be very helpful.

So if you're asking me—that would be, probably, what would be helpful to sustain an extra therapist and not going into deficit.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** On the OHIP-funded psychotherapy—there is the Ontario Structured Psychotherapy Program that is available. Are you looking for something different and something more in the north? Can you talk a bit more about it?

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** I know psychotherapy is there, but there are a lot of limits, and people have to fit into that box to have access to the Ontario psychotherapy.

What I would like is having people who can have access to service under OHIP without having a physician referral—because we know we have a shortage of physicians, so now we're just going to bog down the physician. To be able to just come to therapy if you need it and bill it through OHIP—that would open it up to everybody.

I know we're talking a lot about giving services to the men. We do have the Men's Counselling Link that just kind of happened, which is great; we're part of this initiative. They're talking also, eventually, hopefully having men's health—to put that piece there, that importance there.

That would open up everybody to just have access and not wait until crisis, not wait until they end up being in emerg or they're on a long wait-list—so that as soon as they start feeling that they need a bit more support or help, they can reach out without having that extra cost.

Our cost is \$155 for a session of therapy, if you don't fall into the ministry boxes—and what I mean by "ministry boxes" are the VAW, MCCSS, sexual abuse. If you don't fall in there and you need support for grief, anxiety, depression, then you have to pay for that service. We're lucky; we have some donations that help cover those pieces. And we do have the sliding scale, because we won't refuse anybody who needs help—anybody who will come and reach out, we'll open the door to and we'll figure it out, because we find it's very important to have access to that.

So, yes, it is opening it up. It's there—it's just, we don't want a physician. We don't have a physician, but the family health team has it—if you're part of a family health team. That means those people have access to counselling. If you're not part of a family health team, then you don't have access unless you go to the hospital or you go to CMHA; you pay for services, you go to a private practice; if you have benefits, you can use your benefits—it's limits.

We just want to open it up. I know I'm reaching for the stars, but I feel this is the solution—

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** I don't think it's too big a reach.

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** —just opening it up to whoever needs that service.

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

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Thanks very much. Maybe I'll come back to you in my next session.

I'll go to you, Dana.

I really appreciate the picture that you painted about the lands that you're working to protect and the value for money for the taxpayer investment versus the private investment.

I did wonder if you had any comments about the direction, provincially, right now around conservation more generally. We're seeing big changes with the conservation authority. Did you have any comments on that?

**Ms. Dana Kleniewski:** NCC certainly supports reforms that improve efficiency, accountability and value for taxpayers, as you heard through my comments earlier. And our experience shows that conservation works best when it's grounded in strong local partnerships and community knowledge.

NCC has partnered with conservation authorities for more than 60 years, ever since we were founded—

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

We will now go to MPP Dowie.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Thanks to all the presenters today.

Dana, I'll keep you on the seat. Thank you so much for being here. It's great to see you.

We're up here in Kapuskasing, and I want to thank the NCC for all of its great work in protecting and adding to our protected places, systems—federal, provincial, and through your own holdings as well. I know that you have truly been an innovator in securing new lands, protecting biodiversities and really being nimble in a way that governments cannot be.

I'm wondering if you might be able to share with us, in light of your ask, the tools or designations that you've been able to use to procure lands, get around the lag that happens with government bureaucracies—not getting into the public acquisition process, but rather just getting the job done, protecting that biodiversity forever, and avoiding some of the delays that we find are built into the public acquisition system.

1340

**Ms. Dana Kleniewski:** Thanks for the question.

Yes, as an organization, all of our work is founded in this concept of direct action. We can go and do these things swiftly.

We're experts in fee simple land acquisition. That's one of our best-known tools. We also work with private landowners on something called conservation easements, whereby they enter into agreements with us on certain restrictions on the land which preserve biodiversity in the long term.

Increasingly, we're brought to the table to come up with new solutions—working with private landowners to have lands recognized under a new category of conservation called "other effective conservation measures," which recognizes the good work of private landowners to see conservation happen on their lands. We are really keen to come to the table with all sorts of partners—industry, business, private landowners and communities—to find solutions that work for that particular case.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** I'm wondering if you might have some recommendations for us, as the government, to unlock additional progress. You mentioned the funding and the programs that are already active, but are there policy changes that you believe would help to promote the work that you do?

**Ms. Dana Kleniewski:** Keeping conservation top of mind for industry, businesses, private landowners—making them aware of conservation as an option for their private lands. There's a lot that everybody can do by coming together through collaboration with both the provincial government and also the federal government. Certainly, we're seeing keen interest in projects of national interest, and major infrastructure, energy and money projects happening right across the country and here in Ontario.

We want to make sure that the pace of conservation keeps up with the pace of development, for the benefit of Ontarians.

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

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** How much time do I have?

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

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Thank you very much.

I want to thank all the presenters for taking time to come and share your thoughts and expertise with us today and for the great work you do in your day-to-day jobs.

Tania, I'm going to start with you. It's good to see you again. I saw you at this event last year, and then you came down and spoke at the IPV hearings. Your testimony was extremely helpful.

As you know, the government has declared IPV "endemic" as opposed to "epidemic," showing that it's not a temporary blip; that this is a structural blip and there are some seriously underlying causes that we need to address.

Your comments about the family stresses and the cycle that leads to putting a family at risk of IPV—I'm wondering if you could just talk a little more about what you see in your practice, the outside external factors that can lead to a situation where IPV arises.

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** Wow. Well, I think that is just any stress—any stress that's on a family, that's on a person can build up and then it can blow up.

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

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** The stress, the anxiety, the depression—I think it's also the trauma of childhood.

Sometimes in childhood, the men went through some trauma and it was just not resolved. Now they have not learned healthy coping skills, and then it builds up.

So it's giving that support to be able to address these different issues—I don't think it's just one issue that's going to bring an end to IPV. It's not just about the power and control wheel. It's about not being able to communicate properly; it's not being able to cope with stress or anxiety or the pressure of the day-to-day; going out of town and coming back, trying to fit back into the family that kept doing their day-to-day routine while you were gone. There are a lot of those different factors, and being able to—

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

MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** My first question is going to go to Dana.

You mentioned phragmites and that you had done work with phragmites and with the government.

I remember, when I was first elected in 2011 or 2012, the Minister of Natural Resources at the time mentioned phragmites and how the government was monitoring the situation.

I can tell you, I drive up and down Highway 11 a lot, and phragmites are now on Lake Temagami. No one seems to be doing anything but monitoring the—I don't know. I'm monitoring the situation. I just wonder if you think that, actually, we are making a concerted effort to control them across the province. I know it's a tough question, but you brought them up. Is this a battle we're going to win at the pace we're doing it now?

**Ms. Dana Kleniewski:** Actually, we're really encouraged by the progress that we're seeing on the phragmites front.

The government has invested in a three-year partnership with the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the Invasive Species Centre—\$11 million over three years, which is having a real and tangible impact in communities. We're getting money out into those communities; partnering with municipalities and other land users as well to coordinate the response, because that's really important. We can't just have one part of society working on this issue; it really does need to be an integrated approach, to

make sure it's being resolved in roadways, on farms, in our internationally significant wetlands, and that is coming together. We're seeing really fantastic, tangible results.

Monitoring is a big part of the program, to make sure that we're tracking the vector and the progress of this plant—but then also getting out onto the ground with volunteers, community groups, contractors, and tackling it in our ditches, in our roadways and certainly in those wetlands that we all depend on.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm really happy that there are successes in parts of the province, but there has been no effort on the Highway 11 corridor.

**Ms. Dana Kleniewski:** It sounds like we should get up there.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** So that tells me that if there's no effort where everyone can see them, then I'm not sure how much effort there is where people can't see them.

I would like to go back to Alex.

One thing I think a lot of people don't realize about Kap is that we almost lost the mill once before, and the government got involved and the workers got involved, right?

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** That is correct.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** That's right. Everybody complains about all the things Bob Rae did. But Bob Rae did help with that.

If the government is going to get involved, should there be ties to worker stability, to community stability, or do they just hand money to big companies and say, "Please fix it"?

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** I think that was one of our major issues that we were speaking to. It's great that the government wants to say, "Here's \$38 million. Keep running. Here's the next amount of money." But if we don't have something tied specifically to the project and the timelines on these projects, and to how many jobs these are actually going to create and sustain in our areas, then we just don't know where the money is going. I think in the last year and a half or two years, we've received \$98 million, let's say, but we don't see where that is going to help us in the future. We see the money draining away and that we're still broke and that we're still always begging for more money. What is happening? So the government needs, in our opinion, to be more involved with the oversight of what's happening, and keeping them to direct plans and timelines as to how this money is being spent.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Yes, because by putting these timelines—it's not that the workers don't want the companies to succeed. You succeed when they succeed.

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** Exactly. So it's not that we don't want the money. That's clearly not what we're asking for. It's just that we want to see the structure—as to how this isn't just, "We don't know where it's going. We don't see any development in our plant. We don't see any investment being done."

We see a lot of discussion around—

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

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** We talked for years around the co-gen plant, and it was, "Okay, it's moving forward, it's

moving forward, it's moving forward"—then it's dead. Well, what happened to all that money we were supposed to be spending on that project? The project never got off the ground—it was all just discussion. We didn't see any improvement for our plant.

So we're concerned about that moving forward—that these plans do move on a timeline and that there are exact job numbers attached to this for this region.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Also, if a plan stopped, if you knew why, you could maybe help overcome that road-block.

**1350**

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** Yes, and we've had that issue, where we try to be as involved as we can, as a union, to try to help the employer, because, as you said, when the employer succeeds, we succeed. We have a lot of resources in Unifor that we can use to help. We have a lot of doors open.

We all see our president, Lana Payne, I'm sure, all over the news in discussions and on the forestry councils.

We'd like to be more involved in all these discussions with our companies, rather than just being left in the dark to say—

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

MPP Fairclough.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** I'll come back to you, Alex.

I actually really appreciate the urgency in your voice today as you're talking about what you'd like to see for this community, what you'd like to see for the workers, and the outcomes that we should be working towards. You mentioned the loan that has been given here to the mill to support that work.

I did just wonder if you can detail a little bit more how you're seeing the tariffs really starting to impact those local decisions, but also the community more broadly. I talked to somebody this morning who told me there used to be three grocery stores here; there's only one now. Can you talk a little bit about that effect for the community and why this is so important? The government has a \$4-billion fund that they're sitting on to help us through this. Why is it so important that we act now?

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** It's very important. We're completely built on the forestry industry, when you come down this corridor. Shutting one mill here shuts down Cochrane, shuts down Hearst, shuts down everything, and then everybody disappears.

I'm sure you guys all drove up through Highway 11. You can see the abandoned towns, the abandoned houses. These are people who live here who—it's done; they foreclose on their mortgage and they move, and their house is worth nothing.

So it's not just that we lose the jobs. There is no other industry in our area. We are all built on this forestry industry. So when these go down in these communities, everybody is affected threefold: You lose your job, you lose your house, and you have to move. Everything is a disaster—as I said, the hospitals, the schools, the grocery stores. Everyone gets affected by the population inadver-

tently being affected by—"We just can't stay here; there is no job for us to be here at," or being out of town, as was discussed, going out three weeks at a time and coming back. That's three weeks of somebody not actually being in this town, buying groceries in this town. It's a very systematic problem for us.

We're not a big city where there are 100 million jobs you can go jump in on. This is it. The forestry industry goes down, everybody who owns a truck, everybody who owns machinery in the bush—everybody is out of jobs now. And everybody has loans and things like that on their equipment. So it just affects everybody all throughout.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Yes.

My own background is health care, so I'll just lean in on that for a second. I think this point too—that you need people to be here in this community to care for people, to care for those who have retired from this industry and have stayed in the community and are going to need that care for the long term. So I think you're making a very important point about how critical this is to the local economy.

Thank you for being here and all of the suggestions that you've made today.

**Mr. Alex Dumais:** Thank you for having me.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Do I still have a bit more time?

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** You have 2.3 minutes.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Great.

Dana, can I come back to you? We got a little bit cut off on the question about the conservation—again, just your thoughts more generally on some of the policy direction we should be pursuing.

**Ms. Dana Kleniewski:** As I recall, I was saying NCC has worked with conservation authorities for the 60 years that we've been in existence.

Really, from our experience, however the conservation authorities are organized, we will continue to work with them positively and constructively toward solutions that really benefit nature and people alike.

As modernization moves forward, our priority is making sure that local capacity and proven partnerships are preserved so that conservation continues to support infrastructure protection, economic growth and community resilience—again, all coming back to that point that nature really underpins our prosperity and our well-being here in the province. It's critically important that we take care of it when we can.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** You have 1.2 minutes.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Okay.

I want to come back to you, Tania, on the intimate partner violence. There has been a lot of discussion about that in the Legislature. Certainly, I'm keen to see an action plan in motion for how we can support this sector more generally.

Again, if you wanted to dream big, as you were saying earlier—

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

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** —what's one thing that we could do to get moving on that issue and addressing the underlying factors of intimate partner violence?

**Ms. Tania Duguay:** Give access to men to counselling. That's it. Open it up.

I know the Men's Counselling Link is awesome. It's one counselling and a follow-up—and then the rest, they have to pay again. They don't have the money. It's all under donation.

So open it up, and when we do, that means reaching for help is okay. We're destroying the stigma—that men don't ask for help, that they're strong. We're destroying the stigma by saying, "Help is there. You can reach out. Just reach out." Just open it up, and don't put the boxes—it's there.

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

We thank all the panellists for the great job of preparing for being here and ably delivering your message. We appreciate that, and hopefully it will be of great assistance as we finish this project.

We'll now go to the next panel.

**The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Lesley Flores):** If we could recess until 2 o'clock—because one of them hasn't arrived yet.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Okay. We have to wait four minutes.

Recess for four minutes.

*The committee recessed from 1356 to 1400.*

PROGRESS PLACE

MS. NINA DEEB

PTX METALS INC.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** The committee will come back to order.

Our next panel is Progress Place, Nina Deeb, and PTX Metals Inc.

As with all the other panels, you'll have seven minutes to make your presentation. I will let you know when you've reached six minutes.

And we do ask each panellist to make sure to introduce yourself as you start your presentation.

With that, we will now start with Progress Place.

**Ms. Criss Habal:** Good afternoon, members of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. My name is Criss Habal, and I'm the executive director of Progress Place. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the Ontario government's 2026 pre-budget consultations.

Investing in Progress Place means strategically directing resources where they achieve the greatest results both for recovery and for the health system as a whole. At Progress Place, we have been dedicated to fostering mental wellness and recovery for over 40 years, helping Ontarians live fulfilling and independent lives.

We are here today to advocate for increased investment in proven community-based mental health solutions that not only transform lives but also deliver significant cost savings to our health care system. The need has never been more urgent. Ontario is grappling with an escalating demand for mental health services. People living with severe and persistent mental illnesses are increasingly without adequate support, ending up in overcrowded emergency departments, experiencing homelessness or enduring profound isolation. The stark reality is that mental illness and substance use create a system burden 1.5 times higher than all cancers combined yet receive only a fraction of the overall health care funding. This is a disparity we must address.

Progress Place offers two critical evidence-based solutions that are already delivering measurable results across Ontario: our internationally recognized Clubhouse model and our innovative Warm Line service.

Our Clubhouse model is a comprehensive community-based approach. It integrates mental health support with crucial elements like housing stability, employment opportunities and community connection. Members and staff work side by side, creating a supportive environment where individuals regain their confidence, skills and independence. That impact is profound. Just one year after joining, members experience an 85% reduction in hospital visits. A forthcoming economic evaluation with the University of Toronto shows a 78% reduction in total days spent in hospital over two years, resulting in estimated health savings of \$87,677 per new member. In 2024 alone, our members earned \$1.9 million through our employment programs, and 142 individuals secured stable and affordable housing. This model isn't just effective; it's a global success story replicated at 360 sites across 33 countries, with governments in New York, Texas and Norway significantly investing in its expansion.

Complementing this, our Warm Line provides vital, confidential, non-crisis peer support staffed entirely by trained peers with lived experience. It operates evenings, weekends and holidays, precisely when most mental health services are closed. It's a lifeline for individuals experiencing loneliness, isolation or distress. In 2024-25, our Warm Line responded to over 20,000 calls, online chats and text messages. Critically, program evaluation reveals that 98% of users would have gone to the emergency department if the Warm Line did not exist. This represents approximately \$7.1 million in avoided ED costs each year. For a program funded at only \$374,000, this is an incredible return on investment.

These are not just feel-good programs. They are strategic investments that yield significant returns, both human and fiscal. We believe they are precisely the type of cost-effective, community-driven solutions Ontario needs.

Therefore, we present two key recommendations for your consideration in the 2026 budget.

(1) Invest \$1.5 million to establish a second Clubhouse in the greater Toronto area. This will enable thousands more Ontarians with complex mental health challenges to access these life-changing supports closer to home and, crucially, keep them out of hospital rooms. Our current

Toronto Clubhouse already saves the health care system nearly \$23.5 million annually through reduced emergency and in-patient costs. Scaling this model will deliver immediate, tangible results.

(2) Invest \$374,000 to expand the cost-saving Warm Line across Ontario. The modest investment will allow us to extend hours, reach rural and remote communities, and strengthen our digital infrastructure to meet rising demand, further amplifying the \$7.1 million in ED cost avoidance it already generates annually.

These recommendations align directly with the government's priorities in Your Health: A Plan for Connected and Convenient Care. They will deliver the right care in the right place and reduce pressure on our hospitals, address health inequities, and expand crucial mental health supports.

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

**Ms. Criss Habal:** They also leverage the \$303-million commitment made in the fall economic statement to stabilize and strengthen community-based mental health and addictions providers.

Investing in Progress Place means strategically allocating resources where they will have the greatest impact, reducing system pressures, improving recovery outcomes and building stronger, healthier communities across Ontario.

We commend the work the government has done to address our province's mental health crisis and urge you to consider these evidence-based, cost-effective and community-driven solutions that deliver profound positive change for Ontarians.

Thank you for your time and attention. I welcome any questions you may have.

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

Our next presentation will be Nina Deeb—I believe it's also virtual.

**Ms. Nina Deeb:** Good afternoon, Chair and committee members. My name is Nina Deeb. I've been a full-time real estate broker in Ontario for 30 years.

I would like to commend the Ontario government on their vision to reshore our investments in Ontario, the expansion of Kitchener GO transit services, the HART hubs and the addition of 400 detox treatment and withdrawal management beds, and directing RECO to pay 100% of the outstanding payments to registrants in the iPro case.

**Revenue:** Some of Ontario's wealthiest corporations and insurance entities are not paying taxes. When wealthy corporations don't pay taxes, everyone else is made to pay more. We need tax reform to include these wealthy entities.

All the delegated authorities at MPAC must be abolished. MPAC hasn't performed a province-wide tax assessment in 10 years.

The Ontario Place lease with Therme must be cancelled. We will lose billions of dollars on this lease. Within the lease, there are clauses regarding permits to take 50,000 litres a day from Lake Ontario. Canada's water is threatened.

Waterloo region was assigned municipal housing targets of 70,000 new homes by 2031. We need provincial support for this. In order to meet these targets, the region must lift the development freeze it has on new applications due to water capacity constraints.

The residential, commercial and institutional sectors are the most responsible consumers of water. These sectors return approximately 90% of the water that is withdrawn. It is the thermal power generation sector that withdraws approximately 70% of water in Canada.

You can refer to appendix 4, "Water Use in Canada," 2025, which I attached to my submission.

According to the government of Canada's 2025 paper on water use in Canada, the residential sector only accounts for about 5% of Ontario's water withdrawals. Since the residential sector returns 90% of withdrawn volume, it is responsible for a fraction of a percentage of net water consumption.

**1410**

Waterloo region is a leader in low peak time water use. Water preservation and grey water recycling has been encouraged with supplements and incentives for 30 years. Rather than freeze residential development applications, it would be advisable for the province to refrain from issuing any permits to take water in Waterloo region until more is known on the water capacity. One permit to take water consumes what a residential population of 2,100 consumes in a day.

Amending Ontario's water delivery and management system to a corporate privatized structure will make water approximately 40% more expensive.

**Debt burden reduction strategy:** Ontario requires a plan to reduce the balance of Ontario's debt. Ontario's debt has risen from \$338 billion in 2018 to \$500 billion. Current interest rates are low. Should interest rates rise to the higher levels of 1990, the annual interest costs on Ontario's current debt will be \$54 billion. Ontario should be reducing the debt while interest rates are low.

The idea to reshore our investments will create more jobs in Ontario.

We have some of the highest-quality trees in the world. We can structure existing programs for innovation, research and development of our resources and sectors. We already have the programs and funding in place.

On housing progress, please see the attached appendix 1. This is a list of the housing bills since 2018. You can see there are 12 bills listed here—in "Housing Legislation"—where the government frequently does not consult, avoids public hearings and conflates accounting and consulting firms with the real estate experts of Ontario. While other provinces are making advancements on housing, Ontario has been left behind. The government should rely on real estate sector experts in regard to housing.

Requests for consideration:

(1) I request \$125 million over five years to increase Waterloo region's water capacity. I've attached an appendix with a plan to increase Waterloo region's capacity, appendix 2. With this, I'm requesting \$125 million over five years from both levels of government. This will

reassure investors in Waterloo region that we are still open for business and we do want to build housing.

(2) Create a recurring, annual \$15-million "aging out of care" program to assist and support the 580 youth who are aging out of care in Ontario every year. These are children of the crown. This will ensure that the crown is not directly contributing to the record level of homelessness. The province can reinstate the previous rent subsidies and supports to age 21 for youth in care.

(3) Double ODSP and Ontario Works shelter rates, because there's no shelter anywhere in Ontario for what the rates currently are.

(4) Raise the threshold of clawbacks on Ontario Works incomes from \$200 to \$1,000. I don't think this threshold has moved since I used to be a store manager at Tim Hortons, and I'm pretty sure that threshold was \$200 then. That was 30 years ago, so that should be increased.

(5) Invest into a province-wide digital library to benefit every person in Ontario. I've been to Kapuskasing before, and they are fortunate enough to have a library, but there are many rural areas that don't have libraries.

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

**Ms. Nina Deeb:** Libraries play a key role—it's my favourite institution in Ontario. I grew up next door to a library. You either have time or money, and when you're young, you don't have any money. When you're a child, you have no income, usually, so the library is where you're going to be getting your education from. I can tell you, without a shadow of a doubt for myself, there were probably about a hundred students at my school who were in that library all the time, who read well over a thousand books—they must have. We don't have money for these books when we're children.

A digital library would definitely be the best thing that we can do for our education system, for two reasons: People who can't afford the education can pick it up on their own if they choose to—and also for our youth, so that they can have a good start in life and absorb as much knowledge as they can when they have the time to do so. Once you're working and running, you just don't have the same time—

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

We'll go on to the next presenter, and that's PTX Metals Inc.

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** Good afternoon, Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Greg Ferron. I'm the president and CEO of PTX Metals. I appreciate the committee holding these hearings in northern Ontario, where mining happens.

I also just want to quickly acknowledge a number of the important topics today, from social services to housing.

The mining industry generates tremendous economic development opportunities across northern Ontario, as you are aware. We create good-paying jobs, training opportunities for Ontario workers. We create entrepreneurs in a variety of businesses to service mining projects, such as engineering, for example. We also bring hope that young people can stay here in the north, where they can grow up,

have a career, afford a home and build a family. There are a lot of multi-generational mining families in the north, as you're familiar. My plan is to develop projects to keep that going for the next several generations.

I spent my career building mining projects in this province. Before joining PTX, I was the president and CEO of NexGold—some of you may know it as Treasury Metals—where I advanced the Goliath gold project in northwestern Ontario to a construction decision, which is located up near Dryden. I've worked through Ontario's permitting system—including the completion of exploration drilling as well as the Goliath environmental assessment. I've sat at the table with many First Nation and Indigenous leaders. I've dealt with the real cost of timelines, logistical challenges and operating in the north. In addition, I've also worked in finance, investment, both at Scotiabank and at TMX Group—you'd be familiar with it as the parent company of the Toronto Stock Exchange and TSX Venture, where I was the head of the global resources.

Like many in mining, my experience is a made-in-Ontario story, so I'm here today to share a few practical experiences from the field.

PTX, just so you know, is a Canadian-owned-and-operated exploration company. We're listed in Canada, and we're focused on critical and precious metal projects in northern Ontario. Very much like NexGold, our job is to build these resources, do the engineering and then let the larger producers develop these projects into production.

We own two gold projects in the Timmins area, just beside Iamgold's Côté mine, but our flagship project is a W2 project. It's a copper-nickel-platinum group elements project located at the gateway of the Ring of Fire in northern Ontario. In fact, this was actually the first project discovered in the region by Canada's top mining company, Inco. It's close to infrastructure. There are many other projects in the region, including access to winter roads, and it's a location that can be realistically advanced in the near term. It's just outside Pickle Lake, to put it in perspective, and that's very important.

Governments at both the provincial and federal levels have been clear about the desire to develop the Ring of Fire. PTX is one of those companies that can help turn that ambition into reality, but by doing so, there are a few fundamental things we need to get right.

First, Ontario has made progress in recognizing the importance of mining in the province, but on the ground, permitting systems still create unnecessary friction, particularly for exploration development companies. Many exploration permits operate for a three-year timeline. In practice, this window isn't realistic, given the expected requirements of mining companies today. The consultation requirements, the environmental studies, the seasonal access constraints and logistics in remote regions all add time. That leads to multiple filing delays, increased administrative burden and confusion with First Nations communities. I can tell you first-hand, when I meet with these communities, how they complain about the amount of

paperwork they need to do to approve these permits. It complicates the project management for government, and it increases costs without improving outcomes. A more predictable, streamlined approach to permitting these projects would allow companies to focus on exploration rather than repetitive paperwork. In addition, it would make Ontario more competitive in mining without lowering standards.

1420

The second thing I want to address is the Indigenous consultation and capacity. PTX takes this seriously. I personally have a hands-on role, working in the communities and directly with the communities. We engage early, often, meaningfully, and in good faith. But the reality of exploration in northern Ontario is that consultation is expensive. We have to fly into the remote communities multiple times a year, supporting these meetings with advisers, paying for multiple studies, such as a traditional knowledge study, which are all necessary, of course, to build good constructive relationships—but also, doing all this work, we also reduce the government burden, lowering your costs. Yet, the funding programs that exist today for this type of consultation are largely designed for the First Nation governments. In practice, many of these communities continue to ask us, the mining companies, to cover these costs because the funds are either insufficient or they're inaccessible. This creates tension and delays when there don't necessarily need to be. What I'm asking for today for the province to consider is a broader approach to some of the existing funds you have—to expand them to include consultation for both First Nations as well as the mining companies.

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

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** The third thing I want to talk about is just the access to our project. We need to do additional exploration drilling and engineering to develop what we believe is one of the largest, most valuable mining projects in Ontario. The costs are quite high where we are working. For example, helicopter access, short periods of exploration because of the lack of infrastructure—this drives up the costs. So we're asking today for support for the studies that would examine the options to build on an existing road between two First Nations, allowing us to access our project—like a logging road, for example, or you could look at more of an all-seasons road down the road. These studies would need to be done in partnership with First Nations but would also bring tremendous benefits to them both socially and economically.

In closing, I just want to reinforce—

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

We'll now go to the question rounds. We'll start with the government. MPP Racinsky.

**Mr. Joseph Racinsky:** Thank you to all the presenters for coming out this afternoon—I really appreciate it—and for sharing your perspectives.

Nina, it's good to see you again. I'm going to start with you briefly here, but I'm going to try to hit everybody in my five minutes.

Thank you for pointing out the expansion of the Kitchener line's GO service. I think that's fantastic news for my area in Halton Hills, with the two stations along there. I'm really pleased to see that moving forward.

In your presentation, you made about \$1 billion of requests altogether, but you talked about reducing not only the deficit but the debt as a whole. How would you suggest we go about doing that?

**Ms. Nina Deeb:** There are many ways we can do that, but the first step is to have a plan. If we have a plan to reduce the debt so much per year—if you put it to paper, you usually have a better chance of achieving it. So the first step is to have a plan.

**Mr. Joseph Racinsky:** Luckily, we do have a plan. I think we're on a path to balance by—2027-28 is the current plan.

That's great, and that's helpful. Thank you, Nina.

Cristina, I'll turn it over to you.

I'm not sure if I heard this right. You made two monetary requests. Was the first \$1.3 billion—is that correct?

*Interjection.*

**Mr. Joseph Racinsky:** It was million.

**Ms. Criss Habal:** Million, yes.

**Mr. Joseph Racinsky:** Okay.

That \$1.3 million is for one additional Clubhouse in the GTA. Is that correct?

**Ms. Criss Habal:** That's correct.

**Mr. Joseph Racinsky:** I wanted to make sure I got that right. Thank you.

Then the \$374,000 was to expand the Warm Line? Is that correct?

**Ms. Criss Habal:** That's correct.

**Mr. Joseph Racinsky:** Can you talk more about that Warm Line program and what that accomplishes?

**Ms. Criss Habal:** It has been in existence for 35 years.

During the pandemic, we received federal money that allowed us to expand nationally across the country. Fortunately, the pandemic ended. Unfortunately, the federal government pulled the expansion funding, and then we were forced to reduce our hours and service lines as well.

So the lines are constantly ringing off the hook—the texts, the emails. It's also employing people with lived experience, who I didn't acknowledge in my presentation. So it's putting people to work, and it's supporting people all across Ontario. That's the focus now. Traditionally, the line was available for the GTA, but when we expanded nationally, there was so much uptake across the country. We're trying to sustain some of the support across Ontario that had to be reduced back to our \$110,000 budget for that program. With the requested \$374,000, that would allow us to double the 20,000 support calls.

When we do an annual survey, we do hear from people that if the Warm Line was not available in the evenings, weekends and holidays—that sometimes they don't know where to turn, and it quite often does reduce a hospital visit.

**Mr. Joseph Racinsky:** Thank you for sharing that additional context, Criss.

Greg, I'll allow you to finish your presentation, if you would like. Just take a couple of seconds to emphasize what you were hoping to emphasize.

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** Thank you very much. I just had two final points. One was to reinforce, for those not that familiar with the mining sector, just how important it is today to say defence manufacturing, AI data centres—all of these things are increasing demand for power, infrastructure and materials, and that's compounding, while at the same time, the supplies globally are decreasing. So it's a very good opportunity financially.

And then I just wanted to reinforce that PTX is an Ontario-based company. All the management is based here, and all the capital we raise is invested here. And the future really depends on getting these projects built in Ontario.

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

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** Again, some of the other foreign companies that are operating these projects offshore—and we're based here in Ontario.

That was the end of the final remarks.

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

We might get cut off here—but last year, our government started the “one project, one process” framework, with the idea of reducing the project timelines by 50%. We had the longest timeline in the G7 to get a mine: up to 15 years. What kind of impact would that have for your business?

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** Well, that's certainly very positive. That's more for the projects that are at that construction decision—like my former employer, where they're about to build the mine. The stage I'm talking about is a bit earlier, where we're getting the drilling and engineering ready to determine if we have a mine. So it won't have a huge impact on that stage. It's sort of pre-construction decision, and you've got—

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. He was right; you're going to have to finish with that one.

MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you to all the presenters on very varied issues.

I'm going to go to Greg first.

I'm the MPP for Timiskaming—Cochrane. Kirkland Lake, Cobalt—we are very familiar with mining and proud of the mining regulations we have in Ontario. We've gone a long way from Cobalt, to where we are now. And you mentioned that—we have strengthened regulations.

We don't often hear from the pre-development—you're pre-development, right?

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** That's correct.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I hear lots of times from prospectors.

Pre-development isn't where the big money—so once you've got the reserve there, and the majors have the money to do consultation, right?

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** Yes, exactly.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** And it's harder for you.

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** Yes, exactly. We don't have cash flow; we rely on investment, through the stock market, mainly. Our goal is to get these projects ready for the majors to go build them. So we get all that permitting and the relationship-building with the communities, we get that resource drilled off, we confirm the economics and the recoveries. Then, essentially, these larger companies would often acquire these. We're essentially doing a lot of the work for these bigger companies externally, instead of doing it in-house.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** So if you determine an area is feasible to go look, you do the survey of which First Nations are—how does that process start? Do you go to the government? Do you go to the First Nations? Who do you go to first?

1430

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** This project benefits from some historical work by two really good past producers, Inco and FNX. We're updating all that information, and we're expanding the size of the project to make sure it's economic.

When we apply for a permit to do this drilling, for example, the government of Ontario, the mines and energy division, tells us what communities we're required to work with, and then I try to get them involved in employment, in training. There's a number of them from Webequie, for example, working with us in the field now. We try to buy their supplies as well. But then there's still a lengthy process for consulting with them—getting agreements in place; training; traditional knowledge studies, for example; advisers they want to hire. That comes on us to get that done.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** So are you looking for a funding mechanism for that?

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** There are two things we're looking for today.

There is an existing fund where the First Nations can apply to get consultation fees, but it isn't large enough. We think the industry should be able to also take funds from that existing fund, for us to cover the cost. It also reduces the work for the government, takes that burden off them. We're the ones who are working with the communities in the field, so we should be doing it.

I also want to investigate the cost to convert that existing road into a logging road, which would link two First Nations together. It would be good for them socially, but it also would reduce my costs by about 60% if we could drive to the project—less helicopter, less fuel—and we could get this project developed quicker and then, hopefully, in the hands of a larger Canadian producer.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** And the two First Nations would be in agreement with this road?

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** Well, that's what the funding today is for. Two parts—the consultation, the traditional knowledge they want to get done, but also we would have to sit down with an engineer firm, understand the cost, the time to get it done, and then obviously get their consent and support for it.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Part of the problem—I'm just going from personal experience, as an MPP. Some "pre-development" companies aren't as good at consultation as others, and that also runs into problems.

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Everyone gets tainted with the same brush. Have you run into that?

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** I think today it's really taken seriously by all exploration companies. I can tell you, we take it very seriously.

We have some very good experts who work with us. Like I said, with Goliath—I take the same approach. We were building a mine. In this case, we're just looking for exploration.

I'd say the one thing that's a bit of a challenge is it's quite different in each region of Ontario, how the First Nations want to—the time and their involvement or knowledge. Some of them are very knowledgeable on mining—like Timmins or Sudbury—and some of them in the north are less knowledgeable, so it just takes more education, more relationship-building.

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

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Thank you for your presentations today.

My name is Lee Fairclough. I am a newly elected MPP in Etobicoke—Lakeshore. I'm finding as I come on these budget consultations that I'm learning a lot about our province.

I want to start with you, Greg.

I'm really intrigued by your request today around the consultations and requesting some of the funds to support it. If you reflect on your previous projects, do you have examples that were very successful in the way that you could achieve that consultation? Is something different now—that you're feeling that you need to be requesting the dollars to support this from the government?

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** That's a good question.

I can speak about the last project, which was in Dryden. I'd say the sophistication and knowledge about mining in that region, compared to somewhere like Red Lake or Sudbury, was lower. It definitely took two to three years of just relationship-building with the council, the elders, getting knowledge about the communities and presenting in the communities. As you can imagine, within these communities there are often different levels of knowledge or different interest levels—some are for, some are against. So I think patience was the way that we finally got the mining permit done. I know the government was very comfortable with all the other environmental mine designs that we had done, the engineering firms had done. But the one thing they really wanted to be comfortable with was that the First Nations were supportive and engaged and updated. I think that was the success from that one—just taking our time, not rushing it. It took probably two to three years to get that environmental assessment done.

In this region, they see that there's significant economic potential in the Ring of Fire, so I think they're quite interested in that. There's not a lot of other industry. So, again, I'm taking the same approach. We don't rush the

consultation. We take it very seriously. We work hard to get the meetings, and when we do get the meetings, we're very respectful. For example, we do have a good relationship with Webequie. They're a lot more engaged. We sponsor their women's curling. We make sure that leadership events are sponsored by us, and we buy a lot of services from the community—food, hotels, drilling services. I think that gets back to the other communities—that we're very good to work with and we're patient. I think that's the only way to work with these communities.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Thanks for that.

I'll go next to Progress Place. Thank you very much for your presentation as well.

I'm interested to learn a little bit more about the services that you're providing.

Secondly, some of the numbers that you have quoted about the potential hospital avoidance, I think, are pretty significant.

Can you talk to me a little bit about the nature of the services that are allowing for that avoidance of visits to hospitals?

**Ms. Criss Habal:** Thank you for the question.

We've done a lot of research with TMU and U of T, and we have papers that have acknowledged the cost savings.

I've worked here at the Clubhouse at Progress Place for over 40 years, in many different roles. I would think that the model in itself is very unique. It really addresses people where they're at, and it's very open-ended. People can come as often as they want. They work on their goals. It's very person-centred. And we work very hard at building this sense of community.

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

**Ms. Criss Habal:** In terms of statistics, we have a lot of documentation and research articles that back the numbers that I provided.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Are there clinical interventions that are provided at your organization?

**Ms. Criss Habal:** We're all social workers, so we're not doctors or nurses. However, we work very closely with hospitals and doctors and any medical institutions. We're able, quite often, to even defer—because we see people so often and we're open seven days a week, we're able to intervene. We get to know people very well and quite often can—

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

We now will go to MPP Saunderson.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** I want to thank the panel for being here today and sharing your thoughts on the upcoming budget and for the work you do in our communities.

Greg, I'm going to focus on you to start with.

My riding of Simcoe—Grey has Honda in it. It also has MacLean Engineering and a number of services and suppliers that rely on minerals and materials that come from the ground.

Of course, we have, in the Ring of Fire, a huge opportunity to create a very complete circular economy within Ontario itself.

The process that you're talking about is the early exploration, I gather—so, really, the “one project, one process” doesn't capture you.

**1440**

We understand that it's about 15 years to get a mine into production, and we're trying to reduce that dramatically, to get it down to about seven and a half or less, as they do in Australia and New Zealand, so we can be competitive internationally.

What portion of that 15 years does the early assessment, the process that you're involved in, take up? Is it in part of that 15 years, or is it in addition to that 15 years?

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** That's a great question, actually.

What I find with these mining projects is, if it's a green-field discovery, meaning it never had exploration before, that probably wouldn't be included in that 15-year period. In the case of something like this, where there has been a significant amount of money and time invested by past operators—because they were quite good, the Canadian companies, of always having a pipeline of companies—we probably could be included in that 15-year period.

In our case, it's quite a unique opportunity, because you've also got Eagle's Nest, and then you've got capacity at Sudbury, and you do have infrastructure reasonably nearby, like rail lines.

What the Ring of Fire needs to do is, it needs to develop a concentrator to produce the local ore. There are really two big projects: W2 and Eagle's Nest. That would be about a five-year period to probably get those two projects, including ours, up and running, and that concentrator built. Because the projects had a lot of historical work, I think we would be included in that 15-year, even though we haven't yet done—so our next big step would be resource-feasibility-type work, and then we get into the mine permitting.

Hopefully, that answers your question.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** It does a little.

I think I took from your earlier comments that you were talking about the level of sophistication, familiarity and comfort with the mining sector in the area that's going to be hosting the mine. So the three areas that you've just referenced—how would you rate their familiarity with the sector?

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** Sorry—the familiarity of who?

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Just the sophistication of the populations you're dealing with. You've been saying it depends whether it's new to the area or it's something they've experienced before.

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** Yes, that's a good question.

It really varies in Ontario. That's why I think the Ring of Fire is quite unique—because it isn't really that remote. You do have two big mining towns like Pickle Lake and Thunder Bay, for example—or even Cochrane isn't that far, really. So there's a lot of sophistication—universities, mining engineering services; so much of those economies make money off mining. Even when I look at what we're paying in the field just doing drilling, just renting Ski-Dos; helicopters or fuel—there's a lot of knowledge in the region for that type of services is my point. So the Ring

of Fire can adapt quite quickly to providing those services. I would say, within the First Nations communities, the knowledge is low in that region, but outside, in the cities—in Pickle Lake and Thunder Bay, for example—the knowledge is very high on mining. The comparison would be that the knowledge of banking on Bay Street is obviously very high compared to other parts of Canada. The knowledge of mining in these regions is equally as high.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** When you were talking, you gave one example of—I think it took three years for the process to go through and the consultation to get to a point that you were comfortable with.

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

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** We want to see that we make this process as quick as possible, but we also want to see it be collaborative with the community.

We heard earlier today from the Métis Nation of Ontario about their role in the consultation process.

It's an important topic, and those relationships are going to be necessary to see the project through successfully.

That's a long-winded question. I don't know if you have a lot of time.

I'm wondering if there's a way that you think the pre- or early assessment process could be incorporated in the one-permit process—or there could be a similar process established for that, to try to streamline it, but to make sure that we're going through all the proper steps.

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** Yes, it could definitely be a streamlining, because I think it would benefit—you have to look at it like two areas. You've got the exploration and then the builders. So you could have one streamlined system. I think it would remove a lot of the delays and paperwork, if it was integrated—because as you move through, from resource to construction decision, then the communities would be involved early in the process.

A lot of the work we're doing right now is very similar to what we're doing to build a mine, although—

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

MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I have one more question for Greg.

That's a really good analogy. Bay Street knows a lot more than many parts of Toronto about financing—and mining, it's the same thing.

In my part of the world, Alamos Gold announced that their fourth-quarter income was down because of storms and road closures.

You're a big player in the Ring of Fire. The Ring of Fire ends up on Highway 11/17. I know I'm putting you on the spot, but is that highway system sufficient to actually support the Ring of Fire?

**Mr. Greg Ferron:** Well, right now, at least from where I sit, I'm just trying to get the internal resource developed.

That's probably a better question for the guys who want to develop Eagle's Nest.

The winter roads that run down to Pickle Lake, to the road you're referring to—it's a very short distance to Webequie and to W2. As you know, they have received

funding to investigate—creating those all-seasons roads. That, to me, would be the smartest way into the Ring of Fire, because it's a much shorter distance—you're getting to an existing highway; you can still get down to the rail line. I don't know, though, if the existing roads could support mining trucks. That would have to be investigated.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thanks a lot.

I would like to go to Cristina from Progress Place.

I think I understand the model for the places in Toronto. You talk to the people frequently.

Could you explain the Warm Line more? If someone here contacts the Warm Line, what would be their next step? I'm having a hard time with that.

**Ms. Criss Habal:** Quite often, people are calling because they are isolated; they're lonely. They might not have anyone to talk to. Just having someone who has lived experience and can relate to what they're sharing is often sufficient to get someone through the evening, the holiday, the weekend.

In terms of resources, we're very fortunate, because we work with adults—so a lot of times, we're training people to ask, "What has worked before? What resources do you have?" When people are anxious, in a bit of disarray, they forget to utilize their strengths and their abilities to move forward. Having someone who is calm and able to speak with them, remind them of the resources they currently use, and ask them, "What steps can we confirm that you will take on Monday"—or whatever; the next day—"to be able to get further supports?" is usually sufficient, to be honest.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I appreciate that.

I still have a hard time having—and I'm not criticizing at all; I want to understand this.

I spend six months a year in Toronto and six months a year where I live in northern Ontario, and the atmosphere, the surroundings in Toronto, are totally different.

If your person on the hotline is going to ask, "Where are you going to go on Monday to access services?"—in many cases, there is nothing to access. So I'm just having a hard time—I'm not saying it's not a good idea.

In your experience, how does it relate to other parts of the country?

**Ms. Criss Habal:** Most people would have ability to access a family doctor—or we are available every day of the year, so people can call back the next day if they're needing additional support. It depends on, I guess—

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

**Ms. Criss Habal:** —is it a real referral that is needed or is it just ongoing support? We are open every day of the year.

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

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** I'm going to come back to you as well, Cristina.

I should mention that I'm the Liberal caucus lead for hospitals, mental health, addictions and homelessness, so I'm interested in what you're seeing at Progress Place.

1450

We know that one in four Canadians are impacted by mental illness or mental health concerns, and we know that

addressing that early for young people, especially, before the age of 40, can make a huge difference to their outcomes.

In terms of the number of people who are accessing Progress Place—have you seen an increase in those numbers?

Secondly, what are you seeing around some of the underlying causes of some of the mental health challenges that people are experiencing?

**Ms. Criss Habal:** Well, on a positive note, because I've been in the system for so long, I can say that young adults aren't as institutionalized as they once were. I think that's a credit to better medications; not labelling or diagnosing people as soon as they have their first episode. Stigma has also played a big role. Families understand better; they're more involved. So that's the positive.

Quite often, people's lives are interrupted, and it could be—with the pandemic, everything really changed. A lot of people, I feel, experienced all kinds of anxiety, depression.

And whether it's clinically diagnosed, I'm not sure—but anyone who feels that they need that support, I believe, deserves it. If it avoids the chronic persistence of a long-term mental illness, then that's even better. If you're able to teach people the tools to be able to move forward in life early, then that's even better—in terms of being stuck in the system, so to speak.

I'm not sure if I've answered your whole question.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** You have.

Just from a pure quantitative perspective, have you served more people at Progress Place, say, this year than last year, than the year before? Are you seeing the numbers continuously rise? What are the numbers of people you would see in your main programming each year?

**Ms. Criss Habal:** The numbers always are increasing by probably 200 to 300 every year.

We don't have wait-lists, and part of that is because we are open seven days a week, from 8 in the morning until 7 at night, and people can come and go when they want.

We really pull on the talents of other peers to support peers as well—not just that the staff do it. That's a huge support as well. It also empowers people to give back and learn how to be a good—it teaches people connection, the importance of supporting one another and looking out for one another, and it really adds. That is a huge component of building community within our environment.

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

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** I'll just ask about the Warm Line as well. I've been very familiar with 988 and some of the other services. You're clearly saying that it's not a crisis line per se. What would be the numbers that would be calling for that line currently—just given the ask that you've made today?

**Ms. Criss Habal:** Well, 20,000 last year, but that was because we got an additional \$100,000 in January. Typically, our budget is only \$110,000, so with that amount, we usually do 10,000 calls. With the added \$100,000, we were able to pull off 20,000, with the additional amounts of calls, emails and texts.

We're asking, really, to double everything because, like I said, the phones and the emails and texts are off the hook.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Yes. A need for connection is there.

**Ms. Criss Habal:** We feel that we could do 40,000, I guess is what I'm saying.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** That's great.

Thanks very much for your presentation today.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes that question, and it concludes this panel.

Thank you to all the panellists for a great job of preparing and being here to help us with our consultations. We look forward to using all that to write our report. Thank you very much for being here.

We'll be back in five minutes.

*The committee recessed from 1455 to 1503.*

ONTARIO PARENTS FOR  
EDUCATION SUPPORT  
CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH  
ASSOCIATION, COCHRANE-  
TIMISKAMING  
DOMINION DYNAMICS

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** We'll call the committee back to order.

Our next panel is Ontario Parents for Education Support; Canadian Mental Health Association, Cochrane-Timiskaming; and Dominion Dynamics—the first and third are virtual.

I just want to make note here that the presentation is seven minutes, and at six minutes I will say, "One minute." Don't stop, because you'll still have one minute. When I say thank you, stop, because it's over. That's for everyone.

With that, we will start with Ontario Parents for Education Support.

**Ms. Julia Evangelisto:** My name is Julia Evangelisto. I am here as a parent of children with disability and as co-founder of Ontario Parents for Education Support. We are a non-partisan, grassroots parent organization representing families across the province. Our children rely on special education services to meet their basic right to learn.

Today, we are asking this committee to increase investment in public education, with a targeted focus on the special education budget.

Our children cannot succeed in school without deliberate, adequately staffed support. Success is measured by whether our children can attend a full day of school, have meaningful participation and consistent support from qualified staff. Right now, provincial education policy is failing to create those conditions.

Inclusion without staffing, without smaller class sizes and without specialized instruction and mental health support is not inclusion; it is neglect.

Inclusion is meant to ensure that children with disabilities have real access to learning and dignity alongside their peers. That only happens when classrooms have low staff-to-student ratios that reflect student need and special-

ized supports are present, including educational assistants, behavioural specialists and other professionals, who help ensure students' needs and disabilities are meaningfully considered into their education.

A 2025 report from Community Living Ontario found that approximately 20% of students with disabilities are attending school on a modified or shortened day, not because it benefits the child, but because there are not enough qualified staff available.

A parent from Waterloo shared, "My son's school shortened his day to just three hours because there was not enough EA support for the full day. This happened without our consent, and we were told it is out of their hands. This has contributed to a mental health crisis for our son."

From a parent's perspective, these numbers are alarming, because behind every statistic is a child losing their education.

A 2025 report from the Ontario Public School Boards' Association found that boards across Ontario spend about \$582 million more on special education than they receive from the ministry, helping explain why families are told that the staffing and support their children need aren't available.

Under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, there is a clear duty to accommodate persons with disabilities so they can access public education on an equal basis.

When staffing and conditions fall short, children are left without the support they need—an outcome parents experience as neglect.

There has been a lot of talk lately about student violence. As more students with complex support needs are integrated into regular classrooms without a corresponding increase in qualified staff presence, situations escalate that could have been prevented.

Reports from People for Education and Community Living Ontario show that classrooms are increasingly being evacuated, staff and students are being injured, and mental health and behavioural supports are insufficient to respond, leaving schools in constant crisis mode rather than focused on learning.

A parent from Guelph shared, "My son's EA time was cut drastically. He's in grade 6 and still can't read and write. As his learning needs went unmet, he began disrupting the class and even hurt other students. He wasn't acting out; he was overwhelmed and unable to access his learning."

These are not acts of intentional harm, but children responding to environments that did not take their needs into account. When these moments are labelled as "violence," blame lands on the children instead of the policy decisions that created the conditions they were placed in.

I want to speak briefly about two children, Max and Landyn.

Max was a seven-year-old child with disabilities from Hamilton. His school day was reduced to a modified half-day, because the necessary staffing was not available for the full day. His family raised concerns about safety and access, but the staffing required to allow him to attend a full day was never restored at the time of his death.

Landyn was a 16-year-old student with disabilities who was left unsupervised and found unresponsive in a sensory room at his Trenton high school. His family had raised clear concerns about supervision and safety in advance, but those concerns were never resolved in time.

Their families were asking for qualified staff, appropriate supervision and conditions that would allow their children to be safe and supported at school.

When warnings are raised again and again without action, this is not a breakdown between families and schools, or schools and boards; it is a failure of government policy to respond to clearly identified needs, leaving children without the support they require to keep them safe.

Honouring Max and Landyn means listening to parents before harm occurs.

When children have access to qualified staff, small class sizes, and mental health and special education support services, they are more likely to complete school, develop independence, and move into meaningful employment and community life. This investment also matters for the adults working in schools—reducing staff injuries, medical leaves and burnout, while creating safer, effective and inclusive learning conditions for all students.

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

**Ms. Julia Evangelisto:** Early investment reduces crisis responses, exclusions, emergency interventions, and long-term resilience on social and health systems. It is a responsible and cost-effective use of public funds. And the responsibility for those conditions rests at the ministry level.

**1510**

Parents are asking for three clear actions. First, increase investment in special education supports, including educational assistants and specialized classes that meet children's needs when those needs are identified, not years later. Second, increase budget capacity for smaller classes and establish low staff-to-student ratios for all students, so children with complex needs can learn and participate in environments that work for them, and so that every child benefits from [inaudible]. Third, make dedicated budget commitments to mental health supports for all students and make early—

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time. We apologize for having to do that. Hopefully you can get the rest in in the question period.

Our next presenter is Canadian Mental Health Association, Cochrane-Timiskaming. The floor is yours.

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee. My name is Paul Jalbert. I'm the executive director with CMHA, the Canadian Mental Health Association, Cochrane-Timiskaming branch.

CMHA Cochrane-Timiskaming provides mental health and addiction services in the Cochrane and Timiskaming districts, with service sites in Timmins, Cochrane, New Liskeard, Kirkland Lake, Iroquois Falls, and Matheson.

I'll start off today by thanking the provincial government for showing their commitment to community mental health and addiction care by providing our sector with a 4% base budget increase last year. This increase will help

our sector manage rising day-to-day operating costs, including inflation and essential wage adjustments, which will also help us retain the dedicated staff we have the good fortune of working with.

With that, we must also acknowledge that we continue to face headwinds, particularly here in the north, and without sustainable and predictable investments we will miss our opportunity to reap the greatest return on our investments.

The enduring issue facing government is how to ensure economic productivity in a fiscally constrained environment. This is one place where our needs as a community mental health and addiction service provider intersect with the province's reality and with the community's objective of diminishing health disparities here in the north.

As a publicly funded service provider, we have a vested interest in seeing two things happen: maximize productivity growth, as it is the only sustainable way to fund public services in the long term; and maximize the return on investment for the investment made in our sector.

Starting with the first: We know that northern Ontario is a materially important economic region in Ontario, contributing an estimated \$34.6 billion in annual GDP—that's approximately 4% of the provincial total—while accounting for about 5% of Ontario's population. Substance-related harms in northern Ontario intersect with the region's economic structure. Analyses of opioid-related deaths show that compared to the rest of Ontario, higher proportions of opioid-related deaths in northern Ontario occurred among individuals employed in mining, quarrying, oil and gas extraction, and the construction industries. Provincial system performance reporting has documented that residents of northern Ontario face lower rates of attachment to primary care, longer wait times for primary and specialist services, and greater reliance on emergency departments when timely care is unavailable. This isn't exactly a postcard to come live and work in our area. When northern Ontario has such a critical role as an economic driver in natural resources, mining, exports and critical mineral development, communities must be able to house, support and care for the workforce required to deliver these projects. For that reason, social infrastructure should be viewed as economic infrastructure.

Now to our second point, concerning maximizing return on investment: There are long-standing gaps in housing and support infrastructure in the north, which cause homelessness to rise at a faster rate in northern Ontario than the rest of the province. New municipal data recently revealed that homelessness in northern Ontario has increased 37% in the last year, compared to 8% provincially. This has placed unprecedented strain on our emergency departments, our shelters, our hospitals, our correction facilities, all of which are at high cost and ill-suited for long-term recovery and stabilization. Mental health emergency department visits in northern Ontario occur at two to four times the provincial average.

Cost and performance data from across the province shows that community-based mental health and addiction

services achieve stronger outcomes and lower system costs when aligned with housing and primary care.

For example, the return on investment for assertive community treatment teams is \$2.40 for every dollar invested. Assertive community treatment teams essentially were envisioned as a hospital without walls in communities, to support some of the most complex clients we have.

Where the province has shown its commitment to capital funding to build supportive housing units, it has lacked the same financial commitment to fund the accompanying mental health and addiction supports. This is where we can co-operate to really maximize the return on investment. For every dollar invested in supportive housing programs, the system saves up to \$3 in reduced use of hospitals, shelters and correction facilities.

A month in supportive housing costs—we're looking at somewhere under \$4,000; a shelter for a month is \$6,000; jail is \$12,000; in a hospital, it climbs up to nearly \$30,000 per month.

For all of these reasons, we urge the government to maintain momentum this year and provide another round of stabilization funding for the community mental health and addictions sector.

And if we need more reason to invest, northern Ontario is reporting as having the highest rates of potential years of life lost in the province, indicating elevated levels of premature and avoidable mortality. Simply put, we die sooner. It's not random. It's not genetics. It's linked to our lack of health care—it's fewer health services; it's longer wait times, higher rates of chronic disease, more poverty, lack of transportation infrastructure, and most importantly in this context, limited access to addiction and mental health services.

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

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** So the community mental health and addiction centre needs another 4% base budget increase for the next fiscal year. This will allow us to provide competitive compensation and fill up to 200 vacant roles across our branch network, which will in turn serve an additional 8,000 Ontarians with mental health and addictions services. It will ensure quality service is maintained; that we retain skilled professionals in our sector, who can continue to support our community and municipal partners; and improve outcomes for individuals in our community, while also being the fiscally responsible investment for government. You will see the return on investment through reduced emergency service costs, long-term sustained housing placements, and, overall, healthier communities.

Together, we can bridge that gap between the health outcomes for northern Ontario and our partners in the rest of the province.

Thanks a lot for listening to me. I will be happy to take your questions.

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

The next presentation is Dominion Dynamics—and it's virtual.

**Mr. Eliot Pence:** Chair and members of the committee, thank you for having me. My name is Eliot Pence. I grew up in Victoria, BC, and I have spent my career building defence companies. Most recently, I helped scale Anduril Industries into one of the most influential defence technology companies in the world, before coming home to start Dominion Dynamics. We're a Canadian company based in Ontario, focused on the north. We build rugged systems for challenging places, like the Arctic.

Let me put my ask on the table right away. We don't need lungs; we need purchase orders—contracts—small ones to start. Vast ones—we will earn the big ones. We just closed a \$21-million seed round with major Canadian and US investors, including the BC pension manager, BCI. It's the largest defence investment at this stage in Canadian history.

We're opening up a 25,000-square-foot factory in Kanata in March, and a development office in Toronto. We'll start with dozens of hires, and as we scale, we expect that to grow into the hundreds by the end of this year or early next.

Private capital is moving, because the need is obvious and the market is here in Canada. But we need your government, along with the other provincial and municipal police forces, to buy our technologies.

Auranet—which is what we build—is a network of rugged northern sensors that share data in real time. Think of it as an always-on tripwire for the Arctic and the Far North of Ontario. We also build an autonomous wingman aircraft—a drone designed to fly alongside fighter jets or on its own, taking the risky jobs so people don't have to. And we have designed and deployed the software that ties all of this together in allied systems. We've run field trials in northern Ontario, and we're deployed in the Yukon today, but we should be deployed here too.

## 1520

Ontario is an Arctic province, whether we use the language or not. The province has nearly 1,300 kilometres of Arctic shoreline on Hudson Bay and James Bay. In a time when Arctic sovereignty is a top priority, Ontario's coastline is a tremendous opportunity, but also a responsibility. Across northern Ontario, there are roughly 200 unmanaged or lightly managed airstrips. They are lifelines for medical evacuations and shipments of food and fuel, but they can also be targets for trafficking or other illicit activity if no one is watching. Our technology can watch, quietly and affordably, and they can queue a response only when there's something to respond to.

Recently, Dominion Dynamics has spent some time with a community in Peawanuck, on the Winisk River, just south of the Hudson Bay. This is one of the northernmost communities in Ontario. Community leaders talked about the unidentified drones and strange, unidentified aerial traffic. Sometimes it could just be prospectors with the drones, sometimes not. Just like during the Chinese weather balloon episode in 2023, there are unidentified objects in the skies over Ontario. Leaders in Peawanuck and other northern communities are asking a simple question: Can we know, in real time, what's over our heads and

using northern airstrips at night? We've been working with them to track and identify those objects. Ontario can help by treating communities like Peawanuck as early adopters of our technology, but of Canadian-owned and Canadian-controlled technology.

That same logic applies across the province. The OPP and regional police can use Auranet for airstrip and perimeter monitoring, share intelligence about unmanned aircraft systems and augment the drone programs they already run; wildfire management can treat Auranet as a standing tripwire for heat, smoke and movement, with small aircraft for confirmation; and at remote aerodromes we can log traffic, flag unauthorized night ops and provide video and telemetry when something isn't right.

So what do we need from Ontario, practically?

Start with a pilot order, an investment in Auranet nodes across a handful of priority sites, like airstrips and critical infrastructure. Put clear performance milestones in the contract; when we hit them, expand.

Second, create a fast lane for testing and contracting technology. The federal government is moving toward a defence industrial strategy that emphasizes speed and technology that is Canadian-owned and controlled. Ontario can build its own provincial strategy that nests into that and focuses on provincial security and emergency response.

Third, protect the IP we're building here. Loans are great for working capital, but companies that are building world-changing IP need a better contracting environment. We need to keep Ontario-created IP in Ontario; that's how you build the defence industrial cluster in this province.

Canada is finally investing in the things we've talked about for over three decades. Private capital, including institutional investors, are now backing early defence companies here. Dominion is one of them, but there are several others that are also getting funded.

The question for Ontario is simple: Do those dollars turn into Ontario manufacturing, Ontario IP and Ontario missions, or do promising firms move production and patents south because contracting is faster? Ontario's 2026 budget is a chance to answer that—not with another program for next year, but with a first purchase order this spring and a clear provincial policy that says that Ontario is an Arctic gateway and we will field useful capability at speed.

I'll end where I began: with the ask. Give us a small, fast contract. Let's prove the tech Ontario missions this spring and scale what works. And let's start speaking plainly about who we are: Ontario is an Arctic coastline; it is an Arctic province. Let's start acting like it and building the capacity to keep people safe in a harder world. Dominion Dynamics is ready to do our part.

Thank you. I'm happy to take your questions.

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

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** My first question will go to the Canadian Mental Health Association. Hey, Paul. How are you doing?

You listed some pretty sobering statistics, including that we have a shorter lifespan. What came to my mind is, basically, we're still a colony, in northern Ontario. We're great to get stuff out of, great to get gold, great to get silver, great to get to the Ring of Fire and great to make money, like if you're working in a mine or working—and I'm not trying to be partisan. Successive governments have not lived up to providing the similar services or equivalent services to other parts of Ontario.

How many positions do you have right now that are unfilled?

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** Across the branch networks?

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Yes.

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** Across the province, we're looking at somewhere around 200.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** And what about here?

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** We've been fortunate here that we've been able to sustain ourselves, but that is going to be very difficult in the coming fiscal year, and the following one after that is when we'll have to make some challenging decisions.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Statistically and anecdotally, we see homelessness coming up. What, in your opinion, do we realistically do to combat that?

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** It's a really good question.

Even if we did everything right right now, we still won't turn the corner on this for several years; that's even if we start today, pitching perfect baseball.

There are really three prongs to this—and I'm really speaking to the report that came out this month in regard to homelessness in the north.

There's a component around the bricks and mortar and deeply affordable housing—just access to it. Our stock is aging. It needs repairs. There isn't enough of it. So we need some stock. We need to build.

The second is, in order to support individuals to live independently as best as we can—there is a proportion of individuals who need supports that we offer, and we need operational dollars to connect to those folks to decrease that.

The third would be prevention. There are ways for us to support individuals who are currently housed not to get into homelessness. For example, rent arrears—it's a lot easier for us to get into a negotiation and support a client if we can get ahead of rent arrears with the landlord, rather than having them having to go through the homelessness system to get rehoused. Let's do the prevention component—prevention building.

I'll spend a little time on the operations piece. The operation is really where you maximize your return on investment. In that report that was provided earlier this month around protecting northern Ontario, there are three simulations that we were proposed, and clearly, when mental health and addiction services are integrated with housing and primary care, that's where you get your return on investment. We see some of this work happen in other

parts of the province. I'll give you an example: We see the province maximizing the scope of practice of professionals. We see pharmacists who have greater scope of practice now, and nurses have greater scope of practice. That's really to protect those most intensive services and protect people from needing more health care. That's what we can do from an operational perspective around health care and housing, and that's what maximizes the return on investment.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** The reason I'm going on the homelessness—

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Okay.

It's getting harder and harder to recruit people from other parts of the world and the province coming here when they drive through our towns and cities and see the social issues we're facing with no real—we provide services, but we have huge gaps, and it's getting harder and harder to fund or to make this economy work when we can't get people.

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** Yes, and particularly in the north.

For some of you, it's probably your first visit to Kapuskasing. On your trip here, you probably ran out of cell service at least a few times. That's the reality of—where we could do virtual services in other parts of the province, that's not a possibility; the infrastructure just isn't there.

The time that it takes for an individual to travel from one community to another—so where in one municipality in an urban setting you can see six clients in a day, here you might only be able to see two because of the transportation that's required to get to them.

There's an impact of all of these things that—

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

**1530**

We'll now go to MPP Fairclough.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Thank you to all three of you for coming to present today. I will have questions in both of my slots for each of you.

Julia, I'm going to start with you. Thank you for coming on behalf of parents today. We've had a lot of discussion about education over the course of the day and in other sessions.

I'm the mom of teenage boys in the public system, so I would also say I have seen a shift over the years as class sizes have increased.

You make a really compelling case for the need for more supports in the classroom and also for us to cap class sizes and, ideally, reduce them to make all of this manageable. If you needed to pick, though—based on what you're hearing from parents, are there certain age ranges that you think it's most important that we move to doing that now? Do you have any suggestions?

**Ms. Julia Evangelisto:** I don't think we can look at it in terms of age, because regardless of age, children with disabilities who have additional needs are going to continue to need that support. I'll use, for example, a child who is deaf; they're going to learn skills and strategies

along the way throughout their years. Our hope is that we get those specialized, qualified professionals who are working with those students so that they can gain those skills and so that we can phase out those supports over time.

If you look at it in terms of age, we hope, in the foundational years of the primary grades, kindergarten to grade 3, that we're really supporting children as best as we can so that we can, again, build skills, get them so that they can work together in groups and be able to navigate the school throughout their day safely.

Kids who have mobility needs, for instance, need that extra adult on hand to make sure that they're moving throughout the school safely and that they don't hurt themselves, or that they're keeping the focus and giving them the outlet to emotionally and physically regulate their bodies so that they are not acting out physically, so that they're able to return to the classroom, to the lesson situation and to focus and retain and gain some of that knowledge that's being taught.

If we don't have those supports early on, then the problems just get bigger as they get older, and we end up needing more supports down the road, even though we could have prevented a lot of what is needed. What we are hearing from parents in our community is that if it's not being given or if it's taken away—and lately there has been a reduction in EA support. For example, a child who did have full-time support was reduced to halftime and was forced to move throughout the school and their learning without that help and attention on their needs, and then it's being reduced—even less and less. So if we can have it possible to be given to children—what they need when they need it—we can reduce it down the road and have the long-term investment in so that they can develop and learn skills and gain independence and be able to move throughout the rest of their lives more successfully.

There are populations of children who are going to require support throughout their entire educational journey. Those children are able to stay in school until they're 21, and then they would transition to some sort of adult day program past that.

There's not a one-size-fits-all approach. We have to make sure that all of the components are thoughtfully considered so that all of it works, because if pieces of it are missing, it becomes ineffective. It's like getting a puzzle from a garage sale. You hope and wish that all of the pieces are going to be intact, but if they're not—

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

**Ms. Julia Evangelisto:** —it becomes useless, and I can't use it. The same goes for children—if they're not given what they need when they need it, in terms of speech and language assistance, occupational therapy, physical therapy.

Especially when we look in the north, those services and the service providers are fewer and far between. The geography definitely plays into how and where professionals can meet kids and give recommendations to the school so that they can develop in their language acquisition and learn the skills of reading and writing.

In terms of looking at the longevity of children who have needs, yes, early prevention is needed, but there is still a wide population that is going to need support and programs—

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

We'll now go to MPP Dowie.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** I want to thank all the presenters for being here today.

My question is for Paul at the CMHA. Thank you for the presentation and the materials.

I'm just hoping to get a better sense of the role CMHA plays in terms of crisis response. I know my community and I have worked incredibly well with them—they do the youth wellness hub, and they provide a lot of services, but they don't do the crisis response. So if someone in the community is suffering from homelessness, that's left to others to do. I'm not sure if that's the model province-wide. So I just wanted to better understand the role the CMHA plays in terms of that in-the-moment, emergency response, if any, or if it's more focused on scheduled appointments and something that is a bit longer-term versus in the moment.

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** In the Timiskaming area, we do offer mobile crisis response, which is a co-response with OPP. We launched that as an initiative in September 2020, essentially.

When the pandemic hit in March 2020 and we saw individuals starting to work from home and certain services being curtailed—one of the things that we know about mental health and addiction services is that isolation does not work well with health. You need to be connected. As we were doing that social distancing, the impression was, "We're likely going to see an increase in calls for OPP and emergency health services." And in Timiskaming, we launched a mobile crisis program, which we continue today. We've significantly decreased the number of individuals who access emergency departments in that district, and we've also significantly decreased the amount of time that OPP officers have to spend in the emergency department, through that program. That being said, we're still advocating for renewable funding for the program, as it has been year-to-year funding, with this year being a two-year allotment.

So that's what happens in Timiskaming. We partner with our organizations in the Cochrane district. Mobile crisis and crisis services in the Timmins area is offered through our local hospital, but we support them. The idea is that in responding to the crisis in the moment, if we want to decrease a repetition or going to the emergency department again, we need to hook them up to services. And that's the role we play, really, in the Cochrane district.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** So, ultimately, once someone responds to a case of a mental health crisis or, say, they're facing homelessness and they believe it's a mental health issue, it would be responded to by the emergency services, and then they would call you up and say, "We see a need for your program, to bring this person back to health." Is that how it works?

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** Not typically. That wouldn't be the typical pathway, because crisis—my definition of “crisis” would identify somebody who is at imminent risk of self-harm, harm to others, and that's not typically how individuals access services.

What we do, for example—we have a walk-in/call-in service. We're probably around 3:40 p.m. right now, and if you were to walk into our office in Timmins and you needed to speak to somebody in a moment, you're going to speak to somebody; if you call in and you need to speak to somebody, you're going to speak to somebody. If somebody is coming in, what we want to do is really that crisis avoidance. We don't want to rely, if we don't have to, on emergency services. We want to divert from the emergency department.

**1540**

So the definition of “crisis” for me, in some ways, is very specific around, there are emergency services involved. For the rest, we'd be the first call—we would be the ones. We would physically go to the location. We would connect. We'd sit at a table with other partners around a shared housing wait-list, saying, “We all have clients who need to access housing. They all need supports. Let's share this wait-list and prioritize them together.”

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

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Just a final follow-up, Chair: Ultimately, what are the biggest challenges that you are facing with getting someone back to health, in terms of the services that the CMHA does provide? Capacity concerns—just hoping you can share a bit more.

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** In the work that we do, one of the major challenges is housing. We often say housing is one of the first mental health interventions. We can treat individuals for their anxiety, for example. The challenge here is, somebody being anxious about not knowing where they're going to sleep tonight is absolutely normal; that is not something that should be treated. And even if we were able to treat it—

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

MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I've got one more question for you, Paul, and then I'm going to move on.

You mentioned that it's harder servicing clients in a spread-out region.

I just saw on my feed that just outside of Kirkland Lake, on Highway 11, a lady was turning into her driveway, not across the highway, and a transport didn't stop—just didn't stop.

You must have experiences with either yourself or your staff—is the highway a concern for your staff and for yourself?

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** Safety, in general, is a concern. The presentation of the clients we service, in the last 10 years, has changed dramatically.

I'm incredibly fortunate. I work with good people. Our front-line staff are dedicated. We had an incredible storm in Toronto, I think, just recently. We had a pretty incredible storm at the end of December. I opened the front door,

and even my dog turned around and said, “I'm not doing this.” I had people who made it to the office to deliver medication on that day, in that storm. I have incredibly dedicated people, and I worry about their safety in all aspects when they go out and do the work that's important with the limited resources that we have, and that includes on the roads. And it's reflected in the things that we had to do in terms of—for example, developing emergency codes that we've had to put in place, that may be more commonplace in hospitals, but for community organizations. Having to develop emergency codes for weapons on-site, and practising those and drilling those—that's a reality now. That's what we do.

So, yes. I'm concerned.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you.

My next question will go to Julia.

You made a very good presentation. You mentioned three things: increased investment, smaller class sizes, mental health support. I'm going to try to get to what would make the biggest—I know it's like a jigsaw puzzle: If you're missing a couple of pieces, you can't finish the puzzle. But what can at least get us the picture? I don't know if I'm explaining that correctly.

**Ms. Julia Evangelisto:** Absolutely.

The biggest impact would be smaller class sizes. If we're going to have a system that is based on a model of inclusion, where everybody is included into the classroom makeup, we need to be able to provide smaller settings so that kids can focus.

Currently, the system in the province in regard to class sizes, especially in the elementary grades—there's a cap on grades 1 to 3, at 20 kids per class, but that's a board average, so there might be a couple of areas that have higher population and it raises a little bit. In grades 4 to 8, there is no class cap size—and again, with the board, there is a recommended soft cap at 28, but that does exceed.

Specifically, in the north, in areas that have smaller classes because of lower population, the school might have under 100 students. In larger areas, the classes in those small communities are about 15, 20, 23 students—it's very low, but there are two or three grades within that one class. If you go to Timmins, for example, there is a greater population. Because the board averages—those classes are much greater, raising to a 30-to-32 class size, because it averages out amongst the board and because the smaller classes in the smaller communities give it the ratio average.

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

**Ms. Julia Evangelisto:** Smaller classes for everybody is going to be better. Kids are going to be able to focus. Teachers are going to be able to deliver their lesson without as many interruptions and do more personalized instructions.

Currently, there are too many students for the amount and the complexity of needs that are present—it's too great for the amount of kids who are in classes. Kids can't learn, teachers can't teach, and it's unsustainable.

Smaller class sizes would have the most immediate impact.

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

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** I'm going to turn now to you, Paul.

I want to start by saying this region is incredibly lucky to have you here, leading this effort. You've been extremely articulate today around the importance of mental health services, but also this link with housing and why it's so critical to make sure that these are available.

You also reminded me of the stat of the potential years of life lost; I'm sorry to hear that it's increasing.

You've also highlighted the needs for addiction services and what parts, what industries, are needing to rely on those services even more.

Your ask today is, "How do we maximize productivity?" but then also "How do we maximize the services?" Can you talk a little bit more about why these things are so importantly linked?

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** The ask is around 4%, for a base budget increase. The reason for that is, there are a number of things that are moving forward that are important and critical, but in order, again, to maximize that return on investment, that foundation cannot be eroded—that's that 4%.

We see the province looking at primary care and attaching family doctors to Ontarians—good. But services like we deliver, mental health and addictions services—we support individuals before they require those higher intensive services. It's a critical part of the health system.

I don't want to make light of the situation, but as an example, if we had people who talked about having knee pain and the automatic response was a referral to an orthopaedic surgeon, we'd overwhelm the system in about a day and a half.

We need to have those individuals on the front lines in the community, providing the service so that family doctors, physicians, specialists can quarterback what they need to quarterback, while we actually have better health outcomes for the individuals we see. They don't need to get to that point. We don't need for them to get into crisis before we get there.

The way to do that is a 4% base budget increase, to support the staff I have right now. I've got good folks; I want them to stay for a long time, because they do good work.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** I too will say that I commended the government, in the Legislature, for the base increase in community mental health. It was long overdue. I'm glad to see that we're trying to make sure that it's sustained.

I want to turn to Eliot. My background is health care.

I've just been looking on the Internet a little bit more about your company—in the defence space, I think that this is a lot of federal jurisdiction.

Can you highlight again the areas that you think are the biggest opportunities for your company to relate to the provincial mandate and provincial government's programs?

**1550**

**Mr. Eliot Pence:** Let me just say, as a Confederation, I think the provinces have a really critical and vital role in national defence. That is most obviously clear in the

Arctic, where much of that leadership is offered by the territories and provinces.

What the federal government is seeking is new technologies. There is a massive bureaucracy, obviously, associated with DND, OPP, RCMP. Municipal authorities can be a quicker, easier entry point for technology companies that are venture-backed or small; the potential for them to scale up into federal contracts is, of course, there. But there is a role here for provincial authorities to essentially trial a new technology and solve existing problems. I think the airstrip issue is one area in which both could be done: trial a new tool, and actually solving a problem.

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

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

I think I'm okay. Thank you, Chair.

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

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Thank you to our presenters today, not only for taking time to share your insight and recommendations for the upcoming budget, but also for the work you do in our communities.

Eliot, I'm going to start with you.

My riding has Base Borden in it. With the ambitious mandate from the federal government to get up to the 2% level on our GDP for our defence, but also to get now to 5%, Base Borden will once again, I think since the late 1950s, have a population of 10,000-plus. And that's important.

You may also know that Minister Bethlenfalvy hosted a press conference the other day to advance our advocacy to secure Toronto as the headquarters of NATO's newly created Defence, Security and Resilience Bank, with the province trying to play its role and work with the federal government in fulfilling that mandate.

There is a more immediate issue in my riding that is of concern to me, and that is the over-the-horizon radar transmission. My riding might be the receptor site—it is the receptor site for the beginning. They have determined that the transmission site will be in the Kawartha Lakes area and that the receptor site has to be within a radius of about 80 kilometres. The projection is about 700 acres of prime agricultural land for this site, and they are using pretty old technology—I think it's about 30 years old. They're going to plant receiver poles every five or 10 metres, in a grid pattern, across these entire acres. It's no longer going to be farmland.

Over \$50 billion of our GDP comes from farming, and it's a very critical part of my local economy.

What you are talking about seems to me to be a big opportunity, potentially. I know what your ask is of the province, but I'm just wondering what your discussions have been for your technology.

Would you have something that would be able to be used in this type of surveillance—over-the-horizon, for the high Arctic—that would alleviate the need for this antiquated technology that is going to consume massive amounts of farmland?

**Mr. Eliot Pence:** Yes, my company would, but there are also a dozen other Canadian companies that could offer a somewhat similar over-the-horizon. The company that the Canadian government chose is an Australian company.

It's my strong belief that large systems like that should both be modern but, even more important, spent on Canadian technology and Canadian businesses.

I won't speak to the placement of the over-the-horizon radars, but I will say that that Arctic defence is never about one site or one technology; it's about a system of technologies that operate across domains, from space to land to maritime. You need to think seriously about how we place those assets and, even more importantly, who we're paying to develop those. It should be Canadians.

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** I take your point.

As the parliamentary assistant to Minister Fedeli, at economic development, job creation and trade, we have been investing heavily in that sector, to attract foreign investment into our tech sector. So your comments about making sure it's Ontario-built, that we keep the IP in Ontario and that we innovate—I know you're in the defence sector, but it seems to me it's a critical piece of moving forward with our ec dev strategy in any event. I wonder if you have some thoughts on that.

**Mr. Eliot Pence:** I think it's absolutely critical.

The federal government has something called the buy-Canada policy. This buy-Canada policy allows American companies to qualify as Canadian, which is totally backward and obviously not reflective of the moment.

I'd encourage any provincial Legislature to revisit any of their local content requirements to actually explicitly preference the provincial companies that are owned and controlled by Canadians but also residents of the province.

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

**Mr. Brian Saunderson:** Thank you for that.

Paul, I have a very short time here. I want to comment on your presentation, but I also want to ask you a question, if I can get this out quick enough to give you time to answer.

You're talking about the combined services, with the crisis mobile unit with the OPP. We have that in Collingwood too. We have a mental health worker travelling, and if the call comes in—we've identified a number of 911 calls that come from a few frequent flyers, and we get them connected with wraparound services. It has been very successful. It sounds like you've achieved the same success in this area too, but I would also imagine it's more difficult with the spread-out geography of the area you serve.

**Mr. Paul Jalbert:** It is. What you articulated is exactly the successes we've seen: decreased wait times in the emergency department, diversion from clients from actually accessing, and then because we're also—

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

It also concludes the time for the panel. We want to thank everybody for all the effort you've put in preparing for it and delivering it so well. I'm sure it will be of great

assistance to us going forward. Thank you very much for being here today.

### THE PADDLE PROGRAM

#### ATCO STRUCTURES

#### TOWN OF KAPUSKASING

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** Our next panel is the PADDLE Program, ATCO Structures, and the town of Kapuskasing. The first two, the PADDLE Program and ATCO Structures, are virtual.

You have seven minutes to make the presentation. At six minutes, I will say, "One minute," and at seven, I will say thank you.

We do ask all the presenters to make sure you introduce yourself at the start of your presentation.

With that, the PADDLE Program is on the air.

**Ms. Megan Johnson:** My name is Megan Johnson. I'm the executive director of the PADDLE Program in North Bay, Ontario.

The PADDLE Program in North Bay, an [*inaudible*] learning and wellness hub serving adults with complex disabilities, is going to be forced to close, without immediate government intervention. The consequences of that decision, in our opinion, are fiscally irrational and morally indefensible. It represents, basically, a failure of basic fiscal stewardship and cross-ministerial governance.

We support adults whose developmental disabilities are almost always coupled with a mental illness as well as significant physical disabilities. So it's a very high-needs, very niche, complex population; many require one-to-one support to stay alive.

We were not originally designed as a crisis response program, but over 18 years, it has become one, because we can't watch people walk into crisis in real time and do nothing.

The reason it's so critical to keep programs functioning right now is because they provide consistent weekday structure and respite that adults and caregivers rely on to prevent crisis.

There are 20 caregivers supporting adults in our community who have stated clearly that if our program shuts down they cannot sustain their current caregiving arrangements over the next year. The impending closure of this program is therefore the destabilizing event. The closure of this program will directly precipitate emergency room use, prolonged hospitalization, and involuntary institutionalization.

#### 1600

As the Ombudsmen have found, adults with developmental disabilities are being inappropriately housed in hospitals because there are insufficient community supports and services available to meet their needs.

These adults and caregivers understand what happens when structure disappears: emergency room presentation, and prolonged hospitalization.

At the same time, the adults we support are watching a peer be confined to an institutional setting going on over

3,000 days. In their view, that person has been irreparably harmed. They reasonably understand that this is the pathway they are placed on if this program collapses.

This program serves 36 adults; 20 are at the breaking point in their caregiver relationships right now, and that is not a failure of their families or them. This is a system that told them there is literally nowhere else to turn. The Ombudsmen have found these problems—it's long-standing, it's systematic, decades-long, and similar concerns have been identified for a very long time.

When supports like this don't exist, people don't manage; they're involuntarily contained in emergency rooms, psychiatric units, police cells and hospitals. They don't require medical treatment, but because there's nowhere else to go, that's where they are.

This is the pathway: community stability collapses; prices escalate; and individuals are held in systems never designed for them, at an extraordinarily high public cost.

Ontario is currently paying millions of dollars to contain people it could support in the community for a fraction of that cost. The resulting harm is foreseeable, and it is preventable.

From a fiscal perspective, the contrast is stark. The PADDLE Program was seeking approximately \$400,000 in operational funding to stabilize these adults and to prevent the crisis that is oncoming. By comparison, Ontario's own data—including the Ontario Auditor General, Ontario Health, and the Canadian Institute for Health Information—shows that prolonged hospital and alternative-level-of-care stays cost hundreds to thousands of dollars per day. One individual—like we said, if we're looking at 3,000 days at the minimum, we're looking at millions of dollars just for that person.

So if even a portion of the adults whose caregivers are approaching crisis end up on this same pathway, that cost will escalate into tens of millions of dollars, and then it becomes absorbed across health, justice and emergency systems.

The funding being requested represents a fraction of what is already being spent to harm people. The cost does not disappear, either; it's absorbed across health, justice and social services, and it fragments itself in a way that makes it very difficult for the public to see, but no less real for the taxpayer.

The Ombudsmen have found that people often receive services only after a crisis occurs, rather than through timely preventive supports.

Ontario's current administration's approach requires people to enter crisis before supports are unlocked. That design directly drives higher cost in emergency and institutional spending.

In North Bay, it's not a temporary shortage; it's a documented deficit—we do not have any homes; we do not have short stay; we do not have crisis. If you wake up and your caregiver has passed, there is nowhere to go. So the pathway for people who require care to live is the hospital. And at 3,000 days and having to pay \$55 an hour to leave—it is very expensive.

In North Bay, again, we're not overwhelmed—it is misaligned. If we look at the findings and we look at Lost in Transition and we look at the number of expert panels, advisory tables, commissioned specialty groups convened over the years, a conclusion is unavoidable, and that's that cross-sector change has long been identified as necessary to prevent harm.

We've been here before. At Huronia Regional Centre, people were confined and buried. To this day, the identities of many of the remains found there have not been established. That work is unfinished.

Proceeding to create new forms of forcible containment at extraordinary public expense is not responsible governance.

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

**Ms. Megan Johnson:** We are asking you for time-limited bridge funding or pilot funding to keep this program open. We want you to consider a northern and rural Ontario pilot because of lack of availability and accessibility and a shortage of—an indefensible defence of options.

We're also asking you to put guardrails on alternative-level-of-care funding for individuals with developmental disabilities who are being held in those same institutional settings without medical necessity. When ALC beds are used as de facto containment because no community options exist, costs escalate, accountability diffuses, and harm becomes structurally invisible. It's a budget issue, a government issue and a human issue—prevention over containment, community over crisis.

In my job, we measure ourselves every day by how safe people feel in our presence—and I think that Ontario can do the same.

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

We now will hear from ATCO Structures.

**Mr. Steven Graham:** Good afternoon, Chair, committee members, fellow participants. I hope the weather in Kapuskasing is nice today and not too cold.

My name is Steven Graham, and I'm a senior director at ATCO Structures Canada. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's committee meeting and share ATCO's recommendations for the government of Ontario's 2026 budget, and thank you for the flexibility to do so virtually.

ATCO Structures is a modular building manufacturer; we're the largest in Canada, and we have a long-standing presence in Ontario.

Right now, we're building a major new manufacturing plant in Grimsby that will come online in just a few months.

At ATCO, we help governments and the private sector deliver infrastructure faster, with greater certainty and at scale; in practical terms, that means housing, community facilities, workforce accommodations, emergency response infrastructure, all delivered where and when it's needed.

We're very proud to be an Ontario-based manufacturing success story. Our materials and labour are almost 100% Ontario- and Canadian-sourced, and the work done in our factories is just the final step in a long, integrated

supply chain—one that stimulates local economies and local companies around our facilities.

Ontario is in the middle of a historic infrastructure moment. A 10-year, \$201-billion capital plan is under way, alongside expanding housing programs and new financing tools. At the same time, pressures continue to grow. Housing demand is rising. Health care capacity remains tight. Northern development requires faster and more flexible solutions. And recent emergencies have underscored gaps in response infrastructure.

That is the context in which modular construction matters. Modular construction shortens timelines, reduces on-site disruption, improves scheduling certainty, all while meeting the same quality and safety standards as traditional construction.

With manufacturing based right here in Ontario, projects can move quickly and be consistently delivered across the province, including in remote and northern communities. That experience is what informs our recommendations to you today.

Modular construction should be treated as a core infrastructure delivery tool. Today, modular is often seen as an alternative or niche solution. In reality, it is a proven, scalable approach that can deliver housing, health care, education, workforce accommodations, community facilities, all quickly.

Ontario's infrastructure challenge is not for a lack of ambition—it's a delivery challenge; it's a delivery certainty.

Recognizing modular construction as a core capacity allows the province to deliver faster without sacrificing quality or value for money, all while helping build the provincial economy.

Procurement and regulatory policies must enable modular delivery at scale. The biggest barrier to wider modular adoption is not the manufacturing capacity of the province; it's the process. Procurement rules are often designed around traditional construction timelines, financing and sequencing. Clear policy frameworks that recognize the advantages of speed, certainty and efficiency would allow modular projects to proceed more consistently across ministries and municipalities.

This is not about lowering standards. It's about modernizing the way infrastructure is delivered across the province so public dollars achieve better results.

Modular construction can play a meaningful role in accelerating housing delivery. Time is the defining constraint for housing today—how long it takes to actually build a home. Modular multi-family and single-family housing can move from planning to occupancy far more quickly than traditional building, and it meets the same building codes and safety requirements. Greater integration of modular approaches into provincial and municipal housing programs would allow Ontario to deliver housing faster without compromising quality, durability or community fit.

Modular infrastructure is critical to northern and resource development. Northern Ontario and critical minerals projects require infrastructure in remote and logistic-

ally challenging environments where getting materials and labour to build is difficult and costly. Modular workforce housing infrastructure and supporting facilities allow projects to proceed without long lead times and can be adapted as the needs change.

#### 1610

These solutions also support partnerships with Indigenous communities. We believe that embedding Indigenous participation into infrastructure delivery strengthens the outcomes and ensures the investment supports not only the physical asset, but also economic inclusion.

Emergency preparedness must include modular infrastructure as an essential capability. Recent wildfire and flood evacuations have demonstrated that emergency infrastructure in our province must be deployable in days, not months. Modular solutions can provide that rapid scalable housing, operations centres and accommodations, both for evacuees and for first responders. One of the key lessons from recent emergencies is that response cannot be built during a crisis; it must already exist. Flying residents from northern communities to hotels in Niagara Falls cannot be the solution. Maintaining domestic modular capability with emergencies ensures that Ontario can respond immediately when and where it's required.

ATCO has demonstrated that when Ontario invests in domestic manufacturing capacity, it gains speed, reliability and certainty.

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

**Mr. Steven Graham:** As the government looks ahead to budget 2026, there is a clear opportunity to modernize infrastructure delivery and ensure that Ontario can meet its housing, workforce accommodation, community infrastructure, and emergency response needs with confidence.

We look forward to continuing to work as a trusted partner to build the infrastructure that Ontario needs in every corner of our province.

Thank you very much.

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

The next presenter will be the town of Kapuskasing.

**Mr. Dave Plourde:** My name is Dave Plourde. I'm the mayor of the town of Kapuskasing and also the president of FONOM. I'd like to thank you for choosing Kapuskasing as your place to host the meeting this afternoon. I couldn't give up the chance to present to you fresh off ROMA and all the delegations we've had, so excuse me if this is a repeat of exactly what you've been hearing in the delegations that we've had.

Today, I'd like to speak to you about one, the highway—Highway 11 and Highway 17. I think you're fully aware that Highway 11 and Highway 17 are key priorities for FONOM. We've been lobbying to have the twinning and/or 2+1 of those two highways—the Trans-Canada—for many years. I think the time has come. I've taken the liberty of writing the Prime Minister myself, to suggest the possibility of a federal-provincial funding formula that would enable this to happen sooner than later. I have also suggested the possibility of including nuclear waste and maybe national defence as part of the funding formula,

because we know that if you were to blow up the bridge in Nipigon, there is no way to get from the west to the east without going through the United States. This is something that is key to many northerners. Quite frankly, this year has been probably one of the worst years I've seen, with deaths happening—within two months, we've had seven deaths, both to the east and to the west of Kapuskasing. It just can't continue. I'm not going to continue down that line. Certainly, you've heard enough about that; I'm sure that MPP Vanthof has shared his concerns on that.

I would like to also speak on NORDS funding. I understand that 2025 was the last year for the NORDS funding. We've spoken to Minister Pirie about the continuation of NORDS funding. It's really important that the NORDS funding continues for northern communities. The ability to stack that funding when necessary and use it with other funding really assists us in making sure that northern roads get what they truly deserve.

The other thing is recycling. It's a great step—to see that residential recycling is picked up and the people who produce are the ones who are paying. But like I see today around the hall, the water bottles that are actually here go to our landfill; they don't get picked up by—we're talking about commercial pickup of recycling. It has to happen. It's like the program hasn't gone from one stage to another; it has to proceed to commercial, as well. Restaurants, as you can imagine, make up a large part of what our landfill sees, and it's a cost to continue to maintain that.

The last is a NORDS-like funding; I like the word "NORDS"—but maybe something with a northern stream, a funding formula or mechanism that allows the infrastructure to proceed. We know that the future of Ontario is really in northern Ontario. I hear it often spoken that we have, in Ontario, everything that everybody needs; well, it's in fact right in our backyard.

So how are we going to enable the extraction of minerals and forestry to continue in northern Ontario, to grow Ontario, without the infrastructure in place? I bring you right back to highways—but we also need places for people to stay.

If we talk about Canada Nickel, just outside of Timmins—Timmins doesn't have enough space to house 2,700 contract workers and 1,400 full-time workers after that is open. It's great to have it in our backyard, but how are we preparing to house these people and keep them in our communities, making sure that they have everything they need to live, work and stay in northern Ontario? I think there's a lot to do here, but to do that—we're going to see Smooth Rock grow; we're going to see Cochrane grow; we're going to see Opasatika grow; we're going to see Hearst grow, Kap grow, but we need to put pipes in the ground and we need to build houses.

We're already dealing with infrastructure in the ground that's a hundred years old. How do I fix what's existing? Quite frankly, Kapuskasing was built for a population of 15,000 people—we're 8,500 people. How is that tax base going to pay for the infrastructure that's in the ground, but then further, the infrastructure that's needed to house the people who are coming? I think we want to play a role in

that. How do we do that? We're pretty creative. In northern Ontario, we're geniuses—how we can come up with different scenarios. Is it a stacked funding formula that allows our region to apply for funding as a whole, maybe, to see benefits from stacked funding—whether I include Timmins, Cochrane, Hearst, and all the smaller villages between to put all together their infrastructure and come up with a larger bid? How do we do that? I think it's about thinking outside the box, because we have to do more of it and we have to do it cheaper, because the tax base can't afford it.

In a nutshell—I know I have seven minutes, but I don't suggest that I take all your seven minutes; I think that you get it. If there's a way that either FONOM or the town of Kapuskasing or the region—NEOMA—can assist in how we can come about maybe some funding for infrastructure and what I've spoken about today, we're open.

That's my presentation.

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

That concludes the presentations, and we'll start with MPP Fairclough.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Thanks to all three of you for coming to present to us today.

A special thank you to you, Mayor, for having us here in your community. I've really been enjoying seeing Kapuskasing for the first time and wandering the streets a little this morning to take it in.

*Interjection.*

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Yes, it was very fresh.

I do have questions for each of you over my two time slots, but I want to start with you, Megan, and the PADDLE Program.

My background is in health care. Before I was elected, I was working at CAMH as the senior vice-president for clinical care.

This issue of how we're able to support people who have intellectual disabilities and mental illness is something that is actually a piece that's missing in our systems of care in Ontario. I think the Lost in Transition report really highlighted that, as well.

I just want to say you definitely have support from me for what you're looking for. I do think that we need to think more broadly.

I know at CAMH, we had some innovative partnerships with organizations like Reena that were doing purpose-built homes.

I want to ask about your request specifically around the guardrails around ALC and lengths of stay. What are you envisioning there be put in place?

**Ms. Megan Johnson:** To be honest, I'm not 100% sure how that works. But what I do know is that many, if not—I think there are over 200 individuals on ALC status not receiving medical care and being housed because of a developmental disability. That, I think, is an issue.

1620

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** You're absolutely right. There were people, for two years, staying in our hospital. This is something that we need to dig into, and I think that some

of the community solutions that you're suggesting are the direction that we need to be going in across the province. That's great. Thank you.

I'll turn next to the mayor. I've heard all day, actually, quite a lot about the roads and making sure that we can develop Highways 11 and 17 in the way you need to. I started the morning at the hospital, and I would say that the clinicians on the front lines to the leadership there were saying, "This is one of the most critical issues for us—making sure that road actually stays open, so that people can get access to some of the emergency care." I just wondered if you could speak a little bit more about the ways that we might be able to ensure that happens, and to not limit the availability of access to care for people.

**Mr. Dave Plourde:** Thank you for that question.

I think that the provincial police have done a really good job this year; specifically, in closing highways and enabling movement within communities, which wasn't the case in the past. Last year, if you had a nurse who was living in Moonbeam, for example—if she had to work at the hospital, she wouldn't have made it to work. And there's a lot of that. There are a lot of people living outside the community who really don't have access to the community if the roads are closed. I quite honestly take the chance on the highway every time that happens, because I happen to live in Moonbeam—and my wife is a nurse as well, so she can certainly speak to that. But I think that they've done a good job in making sure that there's movement within the communities. The same goes for teachers—it's in any profession that requires someone to be at work.

I think the big, big problem here is the movement of goods. Over the time that I spent at ROMA, I had the opportunity to speak with Mayor Wayne in Moosonee. And some of these things we don't think of—there was absolutely no food on the shelves, when that shut down.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Wow.

**Mr. Dave Plourde:** The food comes off the truck, onto a train. The train makes its way to Moosonee, Moose Factory. We still had food on the shelves. Four days is a long time, but I think we were doing okay. But communities like that pay the price.

So I think that it's—to look at this holistically, and how do we prevent the closing of highways? And I think that the unique suggestions of the twinning and 2+1 is that—

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

**Mr. Dave Plourde:** —there is a barrier between that prevents head-on collisions, that allows for the flow of traffic to continue. So I think that in itself is huge.

I understand that the weather has been a little different this year; certainly, it's one to remember. But I think there are so many ways that we could—and it's putting our heads together and making sure that we talk about it. We can't live in a bubble. We have to continue to make sure that these roads are safe for the residents and the people driving through.

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

**Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin:** Thank you to all of you for the presentations. It's always a good opportunity for us to learn more about all the challenges.

As an ex-mayor, I'll have to address myself to the mayor, and as the parliamentary assistant to francophone affairs, I will do it in French, if you don't mind.

Premièrement merci, monsieur le Maire, de nous recevoir ici à Kapuskasing.

**M. Dave Plourde:** Bienvenue.

**Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin:** Je pense que ça fait trois fois que je passe ici à Kapuskasing dans ma vie. Moi, je viens du côté est de l'Ontario, qui est vraiment une petite communauté très semblable à la vôtre. On peut facilement comparer mon village natal à Kapuskasing; le petit village d'Alfred de 1 200 habitants avec une grosse majorité francophone. Puis, je dois dire que je vous félicite pour vos années. Vous êtes en politique municipale depuis 1994, à ce que j'ai pu comprendre?

**M. Dave Plourde:** Oui, ça fait 33 ans cette année.

**Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin:** Donc, félicitations. Puis je pense que c'est vraiment une belle opportunité de pouvoir servir les gens. J'ai toujours dit que les gouvernements municipaux, ce sont ceux-là qui sont vraiment le plus près des gens. Quand j'ai servi, moi aussi—ça à l'air des inconvénients des fois. Ils peuvent venir cogner à la porte chez vous pour des services, mais, je veux dire, c'est vraiment le « fun » de pouvoir servir la communauté.

Je dois dire, en vous écoutant, j'ai réalisé que, comme plusieurs d'autres municipalités, la croissance due aux projets qui s'en viennent—on parle du « Ring of Fire » ici—ça va vraiment—ce sont des beaux problèmes, mais en même temps, ce sont des problèmes qu'on doit adresser. Comme vous dites, les routes, puis aussi le logement, ce sont vraiment des choses qu'on doit regarder.

Je suis fier de faire partie de ce gouvernement-là, parce que quand j'étais maire, j'ai réalisé que c'était un gouvernement qui travaillait à faire en sorte que les gens aient des bons services. Je peux me rappeler pendant la COVID, on a eu des fonds pour moderniser nos services, on a eu des fonds pour communiquer mieux avec nos citoyens. Moi, j'ai vraiment apprécié ça, puis c'est un peu la raison pourquoi aujourd'hui je fais partie de ce gouvernement-là.

Je veux juste dire que c'est le fun d'avoir ça, puis j'espère que vous avez eu la chance d'appliquer sur certains des projets. On a eu quelques phases à coût d'un milliard de dollars de « funding » pour les « water infrastructure, water and sewer »—

**M. Dave Plourde:** On a appliqué deux fois, mais on s'est fait « denied » deux fois. C'est pour ça que je ne l'ai pas mentionné dans ma présentation. Mais c'est vraiment ça que j'aurais dû dire : on a eu deux chances; on s'est fait dire « non » deux fois. Ce qui fait que la troisième fois, il faut que ça marche.

**Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin:** Bien, la bonne nouvelle, c'est qu'il va avoir une troisième fois, puis peut-être une quatrième fois—

**M. Dave Plourde:** Merci.

**M. Stéphane Sarrazin:** —puis je serais content de pouvoir pousser vos projets.

Je pense que Kapuskasing, puis Hearst, toutes ces places-là vont devenir des endroits—vraiment, avec le « Ring of Fire », ça va être un « game-changer ». Un peu comme quand on parle des régions qui ont des réacteurs nucléaires dans la—Bruce Power, tout ça, c'est vraiment un gros défi.

Parce que les gens, aussi, ils demandent de plus en plus de services du côté municipal, j'aimerais peut-être vous entendre à savoir comment est-ce que le gouvernement peut vous aider là-dedans, dans toute cette transition-là.

**M. Dave Plourde:** Merci pour la question. Si ça ne te fait rien, je vais répondre en anglais, juste à cause que—

**M. Stéphane Sarrazin:** Oui, absolument.

**M. Dave Plourde:** Yes, I think you raise a really important point.

We were built a hundred years ago for a population of 15,000 people; we're presently at 8,500 people. What we did have, for a long, long time, was an overabundance of infrastructure. We had houses—more than you could ask for. COVID—what happened there was, it turned everything around. What we found is that you could have picked up a house here for \$100,000; it wouldn't have been a real problem. Now that's not the case—everything is taken up. That's where we're going. It completely redirected how we think of things. Rather than downsizing, because we were getting smaller, now we have to upsize because we've got to grow. It's a really interesting time. It creates a different environment, where you're thinking differently. Where that happens, where you might have downsized a sewer pipe to access a subdivision, now you'll say, “Wow, why did I do that? It should have been bigger, because we're growing.”

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

**M. Dave Plourde:** Those are different problems to have—but certainly play a role in what we have to do going forward.

Again, thanks for the question.

You're right, absolutely; it's great to be in a bilingual community where everybody is fluent in both languages. We get along quite well, and we have a lot to offer.

We know that we have to grow and we have to grow fast. If we don't do it now, we're going to be sitting here three years from now, still talking about the same stuff.

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you to all three presenters. I'm going to start with Mayor Plourde.

Although it's no secret that we have indirectly campaigned against each other, I think, as northerners—I'm looking forward to working with you.

Congratulations on your presidency at FONOM, and on your long history of municipal politics.

On our shared issue—I would be remiss if I didn't start on highway safety. I thank you for writing to the Prime Minister, because I think this is an issue of national significance. You mentioned Nipigon—somebody mentioned Nipigon, but it's anywhere along this stretch of highway.

Could you expand on what it means to you to have, basically, Highway 11/17 here as the weak link in the country's Trans-Canada system?

**M. Dave Plourde:** Thank you for that question.

We have just under 10,000 trucks going through our community on a daily basis. I don't know if you can imagine that.

I drive on Highway 11 on a regular basis. I just got back from Toronto. I'm leaving tomorrow morning to go back to Toronto for AMO. I've barely had a chance to take the salt off the truck, and we'll be back on the road again. I've come close, on so many occasions, to accidents on the highway—and it's just going to get worse.

We know that the increase of traffic on Highway 11, and 17, for that matter—17, less in the winter. I think that's why we benefit from most of the trucks in the wintertime—because it's a little less safe on 17, because of the lake effect, but it just increases the flow right through our communities. Quite frankly, it's very dangerous—from people watching videos, if you can believe it, to texting, to impaired driving. It's a problem, and so much so that people don't want to drive in the wintertime. They don't leave their house.

I have a son who went to university in Thunder Bay. I didn't want to drive to Thunder Bay on that road. They hug the centre lane.

**1630**

So I think there's a need for highway safety. There's certainly some training involved.

For us who grow up in northern Ontario, we understand how it is to drive on northern roads—but not everybody has that. Even driving as much as I do on northern roads, as soon as the fall hits, I have to adjust my thinking of how I'm going to stop at that stop sign and do it a little sooner than I did in the summertime. We all have that built into us.

There's so much that we have to do, and I think it starts with the traffic and the highway. I think that it wasn't built for the kind of traffic that we're receiving. I'm seeing potholes on the road that I've never seen before, just because it's raining in December and then all of a sudden—it's plus 12, and then it's minus 50. Where have we ever seen that before? That's taking a huge piece of the road into consideration—it just beats it up. So I think more has to be done, and I think we have to move fast, or more are going to die—it's just going to increase; it's not going to get better. I'll continue to drive the highways, and I'll do it in a safe manner—as safe as I can—but I can't do it for others. We just have to make it better for everybody.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** You brought up one thing—did you say “10,000 trucks”?

**M. Dave Plourde:** Yes, just under 10,000—I think the number is something like 8,723.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** What a lot of people don't realize is Highway 11—and I'm from New Liskeard, and all the way—isn't designed much differently than your average country road in southern Ontario, where people go from

one village to the next. But we face 10,000 trucks a day—cross-country trucks. It's unique, and I think a lot of people—you mentioned it, as well—don't understand that.

**Mr. Dave Plourde:** No. I think actually driving it is believing it—you have to actually do it.

I was hoping, honestly, that everybody would have driven up yesterday to experience it. And then I wouldn't have to—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I did.

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

**Mr. Dave Plourde:** We haven't even dealt with nuclear waste yet. They're talking about three trucks a day for the next 50 years—call it exaggeration; make it five. That's just nuclear waste. There are going to be how many others? That number is going to increase.

So I'm all for increased rail traffic. Put more trucks on the rail—but we need rail. We need it to extend past Hearst—and further, if we're going to access the Ring of Fire. And there's a lot of work to do there too.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** We'll work together on this one.

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

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** Megan, I'm going to come back to you, with the PADDLE Program.

You started your presentation today by saying that you were concerned that the program that you have is going to close down. So my first question is, what is the budget ask or the amount that you're asking for to keep the program running? Then, as do you that, can you describe a little bit more the nature of the programming that you offer?

**Ms. Megan Johnson:** The ask that we had was for \$400,000 in annualized operating funding to reflect a long-standing structural gap—not necessarily an increase in spending, or an enhancement to an existing base, because we don't have that. We've never received core operational funding.

Actually, in 2007, we were a pilot project from MCCSS—a place where people could spend their individualized funding—which eventually became the Passport Program. It was quite successful, and we've been going for almost 20 years. It has sustained itself entirely through community donations, short-term grants and limited cost recoveries from individuals.

We run on a geared-to-income model, which is unheard of in Ontario. We're sitting at \$21 a day. It's \$100 to \$180 a day in other communities. There are people moving here in order to be able to maintain not being homeless and being able to afford day support. So it is a big, big issue—workforce realities, inflationary pressures, and post-pandemic issues. Safety requirements also drive up costs.

Trillium, NOHFC—we've done very well with that—highly earned and highly competitive, off the stories of these individuals who have experienced such trauma. We have received those things, but those are project-based. They run out. They're not consistent. They often require you to create new services that therefore need to be sustained, and that is just not where we're at.

The shortfall exists because our hub—we run five days a week. So you're at 2.5 to five days per week, 11 months a year—also unheard of across Ontario; it's in response to a local need. The reason why it's 2.5 to five is because we support individuals with programming that maintains their life skills, that acts as community crisis prevention and is going to keep them safe as we move forward in what is not going to get fixed in the eight-to-10-year framework. They don't have enough time. Journey to Belonging is the current framework. It's an eight-to-10-year plan, and these individuals do not have enough time. They have been told there will be no home here in their lifetime.

For me, we exist—oftentimes, I think about moms, to be honest with you. I think about the moms I've met over the years. When someone is alone—you're 87 years old, and you have cancer, and you're caring for a dependent adult with a developmental disability, and you come in on Monday to your day support and you say to me, "If we don't show up next week, can you just come over and make sure we're not dead?" There are no supports. There is nothing.

We have been a crisis response in the absence of urgent response—which was neither urgent nor responsive in our city, and that is a problem. We're watching people walk into this crisis and—we have 41 people on our wait-list. We're very particular. We're not a legacy-style day program. No one is sitting around just being bored. We're an experiential learning hub. We are out, and we are in the community. They're developing social capital, which—for people who do not have financial capital, social capital is what is going to keep them alive. It is so important. We're out everywhere. Every cashier, every Tim Hortons person, everybody at Winners—they all know everybody by name. And the reason why we do that—yes, it's inclusion, but it's also safety. People who have been lost have been found with cards related—

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

**Ms. Megan Johnson:** —to our organization on them.

There are a lot of people who will get hurt and will be harmed. The shrapnel of this is bigger than that, too.

I don't know if that answers your question.

**Ms. Lee Fairclough:** It does. Thank you very much for answering it.

I will say, as somebody who used to work in the health system, there was nothing sadder to me than when a parent would call and was somewhat distressed because of the dysregulation that might be happening at home, and the answer was to get the police to come and arrest their child. Too often, I saw individuals with these combined conditions in our forensic mental health system, and that's not good enough. That's not the place to care for people.

So thank you for your advocacy. This is certainly a gap in our system that we need to figure out how we fix—other jurisdictions have it filled; it's time that we did.

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

**Mr. Dave Smith:** I'm going to be a bit cheeky here, because this is something that we actually haven't had that much of an opportunity for. Earlier today, Unifor Local 89 came in and made a request to help convert Kap Paper to a supplier of OSB and MDF products. We've got ATCO here, which needs those types of products, and we have the mayor of Kapuskasing here. So, Steven, I'd like to introduce you to Dave. The two of you guys should have a conversation because he might be able to supply you with some of the materials that you need as you move forward.

1640

I see your trailers around a lot, obviously, at construction sites. I know that you do more than just trailers. You've got modular homes as well.

One of the programs that we have is, working with the federal government, we're removing the HST for first-time homebuyers. Is there an opportunity, then, for your modular homes to be picked up more often so that we are building that marketplace, so to speak, for the first-time homebuyer on it, because the modular home process produces a less-expensive-to-buy home? And is there an opportunity for us to do something that would promote that in a way that makes it easier for that first-time homebuyer—because they can get into a very nice home at a much lower price point.

**Mr. Steven Graham:** I appreciate the question.

Actually, I was at ROMA last week and had a chance to talk to a number of the northern mayors about some of their infrastructure challenges, and certainly there was no shortage of challenges that they've got.

One of the interesting things we heard, in talking to small communities, is that they've often got the land but they don't have the developer or the idea of what to do on that land.

Certainly, we do build single-dwelling homes; we build six-storey apartment buildings as well, at all different price points.

So if there's a community that has land—because the land is obviously the more expensive component. If a first-time homebuyer had access to a service lot, then purchasing a modular house that could be delivered and dropped on that lot is certainly a cost-saving option.

You've seen workforce trailers, which is great. That's one type of product. I'll just note that our homes don't look anything like the trailers either in construction or physical appearance. They're actually some beautiful homes at all different price points.

I think you're right—I listened to Minister Flack last week at ULI, where he talked about, "Ontario has to keep that dream of allowing every young person to buy their first house." That certainly resonated with me, with three young boys who live in Ontario, because none of them can buy a house like I did when I was their age. So whatever we can do, whether that's HST on first-time homebuyers, whether that's some kind of cheaper land or other deferred development charges or taxes—there are a lot of options out there, and I think by coming together as a group and

looking at those options, we can make that dream a reality for a lot of young folks.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** One of the things that has come up is that only about 5% of the new homes that are being sold are being sold as first-time homebuyer homes.

You brought up a really good point: that the cost of land is one of the highest aspects of the build. And what I think we're seeing, especially in southern Ontario, is that the cost of land and cost of servicing that land is so high that it's not possible for a developer to get their money back out, if they're looking at a \$400,000-to-\$550,000 home. If we find other ways to make it more affordable to start the construction—if we're talking about a \$300,000 or \$400,000 expense before you put the shovel in the ground, you cannot possibly put a home on there that's going to be less than probably \$850,000 or \$900,000, to cover your costs.

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

**Mr. Dave Smith:** So you make an excellent point—that some of the northern municipalities may have opportunities, then, to have some boon in the first-time homebuyer and attract people up into northern Ontario, where we're going to need a much larger workforce than we currently do have. Would you agree—

**Mr. Steven Graham:** Workforce housing is a great option for temporary folks. But when I've talked to some mayors, they say, "We don't want workforce housing. We don't want transients who will come in and spend two weeks in, two weeks out. We want houses for families with spouses and kids, who come and live and grow in our communities." So I think it's through a combination of both of those—maybe it's a workforce housing solution up front, while we build their permanent housing in behind; show people how great it is to live in northern Ontario, and then they'll want to stay and move their families up, and then we need to have an affordable house for them. Certainly, if the house in Kapuskasing is cheaper than the house in Kingston, then you're going to have people come.

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm going to continue with Mr. Graham.

Forgive my ignorance, but—I see ATCO trailers all the time; I see ATCO workforce housing—I honestly wasn't aware that ATCO built what I would say would be permanent modular housing. I get that it would be faster. How much more economical is it, per square foot, than stick-frame? That's your selling point, right?

**Mr. Steven Graham:** Not necessarily. We say we're price-competitive. Again, it all depends on what you, the developer, want. We can build to all price points.

Right now, there's certainly an interest in affordable, attainable homes, and we absolutely do build to that price point.

But if you, as a developer, are building a rental building, where modular comes in is the certainty—we stick to our schedules. I'm guessing most construction sites in

southern Ontario were shut down the last few days—it was running full blast inside our factories. We're not exposed to the elements. We can build faster. We can build quicker. If we can build your building and give you the keys in about 50% of the time, which is the average, then you're going to start collecting rent on that building a lot sooner than you would otherwise.

We do absolutely build houses. In fact, it was great to see the announcement in Toronto just a few days ago, announcing Dunn House phase 2 for Toronto. We built Dunn House phase 1. In fact, the seven buildings as part of the Toronto modular initiative were all built by us, and the feedback we're getting is extremely positive.

So we're very keen. We've done lots in British Columbia, lots in Alberta, and we're keen to spread that throughout Ontario. We think it's a great mode. We're much less disruptive in urban areas; we're there for a lot less time, and we'll give you, the owner, the keys a lot sooner than you would get them otherwise.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you.

I'm going to skip Mayor Plourde, because I think we agree on too much, and that won't work.

I would like to go back to Megan, on the PADDLE Program. If the program folds—which you're being very clear about—what happens?

**Ms. Megan Johnson:** At the end of July.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** What happens to the people who are now served out of your program? Where do they go?

**Ms. Megan Johnson:** There is no comparable service. We have, throughout the last several years, worked with our sectoral partners in the area to see what could be done in terms of absorbing service. Their response is that they cannot do that. It will be at least a decade, and it will be much more expensive and much less intensive, because of the way the funding stream works for these types of programs within the developmental services.

Does that make any sense?

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Yes. So, effectively, they'll be stranded?

**Ms. Megan Johnson:** Yes. Like I said about that mother—that's not an isolated story. For example, another 90-year-old—well, she was probably mid-80s; let's be real, or she'll get upset. Oftentimes, during personal care, a person who doesn't communicate traditionally might be hurt or have a sore or something—they were doing personal care in a bathtub. The caregiver touched the person in a way

they didn't like, and the person pushed. That caregiver fell to the ground and cracked open their head, crawled to a phone and said, "Get to my place. My son is going to drown."

It is abhorrent to me that we're putting these people in these situations—these mothers and these adults. These are autonomous, amazing adults who can thrive in our communities. We just didn't build for them. We didn't plan. We shut down institutions, and we did not plan for people to actually live longer. That's the reason why we shut them down—because people were literally losing years of their life.

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

**Ms. Megan Johnson:** They were being traumatized in ways that I can't speak about today.

Those are real people who are doing real things. These guys are working hard, and nobody has asked them what they need.

I can tell you, with all of my being, that if you listen to people, you believe what they need and you provide that, it is 99% of the time more effective, and always less expensive and less harmful.

I don't know what the end of your question was there. I probably missed a piece.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you for your presentation. We all learned a lot.

Thank you for all of your presentations.

**The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman):** That does conclude the panel.

We want to thank all the participants for a great job done of preparing and presenting your presentation here. I'm sure it will be of great assistance as we move forward in making recommendations to the Minister of Finance to make a perfect budget for 2026.

This concludes the hearings for today. Thank you for participating.

As a reminder, the deadline for written submissions is at 6 p.m. on Thursday, January 29, 2026. That means that for anyone who has made a presentation, you can still make a written presentation if you have more things you would like considered. So we would be very appreciative of receiving that.

The committee now stands adjourned until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, January 28, 2026, when we will resume public hearings in Thunder Bay.

*The committee adjourned at 1651.*





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