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SP-23

Standing Committee on Social Policy

Comité permanent de la politique sociale

Estimates

Ministry of Long-Term Care
Ministry of Colleges and Universities
Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility

Budget des dépenses

Ministère des Soins de longue durée
Ministère des Collèges et Universités
Ministère des Services aux aînés
et de l'Accessibilité

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Monday 11 September 2023

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Lundi 11 septembre 2023

Chair: Brian Riddell
Clerk: Lesley Flores

Président : Brian Riddell
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
SOCIAL POLICYCOMITÉ PERMANENT DE
LA POLITIQUE SOCIALE

Monday 11 September 2023

Lundi 11 septembre 2023

The committee met at 0901 in committee room 2.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Lesley Flores): Good morning, honourable members. In the absence of a Chair and Vice-Chair, it is my duty to call upon you to elect an Acting Chair. Are there any nominations? MPP Quinn.

Mr. Nolan Quinn: MPP Rae.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Lesley Flores): Are there any further nominations?

There being no further nominations, I declare the nominations closed and MPP Rae elected Acting Chair of the committee.

ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF LONG-TERM CARE

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Good morning, everyone. The Standing Committee on Social Policy will now come to order.

I believe MPP Martin just had her hand up.

Mrs. Robin Martin: I wanted to just bring a motion before we start to extend the time for the committee hearing today by the amount of time we were going to be here tomorrow, which I think is one hour, so that we cover that today and people don't have to come in tomorrow.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, MPP Martin. Is there agreement amongst the committee members? Great. Thank you, everyone.

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, MPP Gates.

Thank you, everyone. Good morning again. We're meeting to resume consideration of the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care. As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. I trust that the deputy minister has arranged to have the hearings closely monitored with respect to questions raised so that the ministry can respond accordingly. If you wish, you may verify the questions and issues being tracked by the research officer at the end of your appearance.

For the deputy minister, assistant deputy ministers and ministry staff, please state your name and title each time you are called on to speak so that the proceedings can be accurately recorded in Hansard. Are there any questions before we resume the consideration of vote 4501 of the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care? Are there any questions? I will continue. Great.

There is one hour remaining for the review of these estimates. The remaining time will be allotted for questions and answers in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition members, 10 minutes for the independent member—and welcome to the new independent member—and 20 minutes for the government committee members.

When the committee recessed on June 6, 2023, the government members had just completed a 20-minute round of questions and answers. We will now continue in the rotation with the official opposition for 20 minutes. As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

MPP Gates?

Mr. Wayne Gates: I'd just like to say, to start off, that it's very disappointing, the lack of amount of time that we've had for long-term care and continue to have on this incredibly important file.

I'd like to start by welcoming the new Minister of Long-Term Care. It's unfortunate that this file has been passed around to four different ministers in the last few years, especially since nearly 6,000 of our moms, our dads, our grandparents, our aunts, our uncles and our loved ones died in long-term care during the pandemic. Maybe if the Conservative government took the file seriously, that wouldn't have happened—and not have a part-time minister.

My question is directly to the minister. During the COVID-19 pandemic—I mean the entire pandemic, including the second major wave, when we knew much more about the disease and the necessary protocols and protections needed to keep residents and staff safe—do you acknowledge, and is it fair to say, that your government made mistakes that led to the deaths of thousands of long-term-care home residents?

Hon. Stan Cho: Let me start by saying, Mr. Gates, that I will agree with you that this is a hugely important file. It is the biggest honour of my life to be able to represent such an important area: our seniors, the ones who built this country, the ones we owe a huge debt of gratitude to; my parents, your parents, all of our parents and grandparents, those who built this country. I take that role very, very seriously, Mr. Gates.

That is exactly why we are investing a record amount into not just building more beds in this province, but having those beds staffed, to create—I don't even like to refer to them as "beds." Mr. Gates, these are homes.

We know when we came into power five years ago, we had a wait-list of 40,000 seniors waiting an average of 152

days to be placed into a home—totally unacceptable. When you inherit a system that's as broken as this, and on top of that, there's a global pandemic, which certainly exposed the weaknesses that were already existent—Mr. Chair, through you—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Can you answer the question I asked?

Hon. Stan Cho: Mr. Gates, I think I—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Can you just answer the question?

Do you acknowledge that your government made mistakes that led to the deaths of thousands of long-term-care residents? Yes or no?

Hon. Stan Cho: Mr. Gates, I gave you the opportunity to ask a question. I think I deserve the opportunity to answer that question. As I said—

Mr. Wayne Gates: It's my time; it's not yours. I want to make sure I get through as many questions as I can. I think the question is fair. I think it's balanced. I'm asking you to answer yes or no.

Hon. Stan Cho: Mr. Gates, as I said, it is the biggest investment into long-term care in our province's history, the \$72 million over three years to go after the bad actors—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Can I get my time back, please?

Hon. Stan Cho: —to making sure that we have the capacity. We've doubled the inspectorate, Mr. Gates; 156 new inspectors—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: He has the right to reclaim his time.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I have the right to do this—

Hon. Stan Cho: —and 344—

Interjection.

Hon. Stan Cho: Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister.

MPP Gates, you can continue. I remind everyone—I know it's the first day back for some of us—please don't talk over one another. I need to hear everyone.

MPP Gates, you have the floor.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I just want him to answer the question, because it's not question period, right? It's estimates.

We know that in long-term care we haven't had enough staff. We know that you brought in Bill 124. PSWs and RNs have been leaving in record amounts. We need to make sure that we have full-time jobs for our PSWs, including better wages, better benefits and, in some cases, hopefully pensions.

You brought in a bill, very clearly, that was directed to protect this government, so it was harder to sue this government on what was going on in long-term care. You also brought in that same bill that included long-term-care facilities, so they couldn't be sued.

When you talk about investment into long-term care, you're also going right back to the bad actors who ended up having the worst records, more people dying in their homes than anywhere else—in for-profit homes. And what do you do? You go into communities where the councils are saying, "No, we don't want this company in our community, and we don't want that investment in our community, because of their past record," and then you bring

in MZO's to make sure they get passed. You have the minister—not you, because you've only been here for a couple of days. The past minister was saying, "I've been given a mandate to build long-term care, and I'm going to build them whether the community agrees with them or not, or whether they're safe or not." What's your answer to that?

0910

Hon. Stan Cho: Well, Mr. Gates, there are about five different topics in there. Let me start with the first topic, which is about enforcement, because enforcement is usually important. That's why we've invested \$72 million over three years to go after exactly that—the bad actors. We know that the vast majority of those who work in this sector care about the residents, work hard for the residents. Union employees across all three types of these long-term-care homes—they care about what they do and they do incredibly important work. I hope we can all agree about that in this committee.

Now, the other thing we need to remember is that when there are bad actors in the system, you need to go after them. That's why we introduced not just reactive investigations but proactive ones. We've doubled the inspectorate to 344, a record investment. As Minister Calandra mentioned before, we're introducing an investigatory unit to go after those who actually breach the law.

Mr. Gates, this is the biggest investment into the inspection side of long-term care. I question why that didn't exist before in past governments, why there were only 611 beds built over a decade. This is an unacceptable investment when you have an aging population, let alone the new immigrants that are coming here, with seniors as well.

Mr. Gates, you ask about staffing: \$4.9 billion to invest into 27,000 new front-line workers, including nurses, including PSWs—the very people you claim to stand up for. Well, Mr. Gates, my question to you is why you vote against those measures when it comes to staffing, when it comes to those capital investments into communities, many of which are in your own riding.

Chair, through you, I say that this is the only government that is investing that capital, investing in the staff to actually make sure these beds are homes, and we're going to continue on that track.

Mr. Wayne Gates: If you cared about staffing, you wouldn't have brought in Bill 124 and attacked workers straight across the province of Ontario. And you continue to vote for Bill 124, no matter how many times you go to court, no matter how many times you lose or how many millions of dollars you're spending on Bill 124. So don't stand here and lecture me on Bill 124 and staffing and about workers. I know all about workers. I've been representing workers for over 40 years of my life. I'm telling you, staffing is the problem in these things. You can invest all you want. You can put all the beds you want into these long-term-care facilities; if you don't have staffing, do you know what they are? It's just furniture, my friend.

So let's talk about why you supported Bill 124. I've got another question: A damning new report released by the Ontario Ombudsman last week that laid bare the vast

failures and neglect of this Conservative government on the long-term-care file. The report found the government failed seniors, their families and workers, that the government had no plans for how inspections would be carried out during the pandemic, including that you cut inspections prior to the pandemic and that your ministry didn't provide inspectors with the necessary training or protective equipment to inspect the homes and enforce basic standards. They couldn't go into the homes because it wasn't safe, but it was safe for workers to go in there? You knew about it, your government knew about it and you hid from it for all this time until this report came out.

Do you agree, again, with the Ombudsman's finding in the report? I'm trying to get to as many questions as I can: Yes or no?

Hon. Stan Cho: I love how you frame it as a yes-or-no question, but the Ombudsman report requires a little bit more than a one-word answer, and that's why, Chair, if you'll indulge me here, we need to talk about that report.

There were 76 recommendations made in that report, more than half of which have already been in progress or completed. Let's remember this report is a snapshot in time that highlighted some of the weaknesses from a system we inherited—a broken system which was made worse by a global pandemic. Certainly, lessons are there to be learned and that's why I spoke about those record investments, not just into the capital side and building homes but, as you said, Mr. Gates, into investing into the workers who will make these beds actual homes for the residents who have diverse needs. That funding is there: \$4.9 billion towards that end, to create four hours of daily care per resident. This is a nation-leading standard, to create that environment for a compass of care where our seniors can age comfortably in an environment where they are, just as they deserve, feeling like they are at home.

Now, look, Mr. Gates, I have talked about the investments. I'll turn it to the deputy to go further into those investments, because it's exactly to your question.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Chair, again, he didn't answer my question. I asked a yes-or-no question.

When you talk about government, let's talk about what really started the problem in long-term care. If you want to go back in time, let's go back in time. It was the Harris government, under the Conservatives, who brought in the privatization of long-term care, who said very clearly, "This will take care of our seniors. It will make it better for our seniors. They will die in dignity and respect." What we saw is it became about profit instead of care. CEOs got rich as people died in long-term-care facilities. That's what happened, and if you want to go back further, your government was there in official opposition for 15 years and you did nothing. I just want to let you know that. If you want to go back in time, we can go back in time, but it was the Harris government that brought in the privatization of long-term-care facilities, where 78% of all our seniors—our moms, our dads, our aunts and uncles that died in these facilities—were in long-term-care facilities. So, again, you didn't answer the question.

I'll go on to the next question: Minister, your government cut inspections before the pandemic hit, and now we

are facing a reality that the cruel and negligent decisions cost thousands of people their lives unnecessarily. During the pandemic, the military was called in to take over, and they found some long-term-care residents died of dehydration. They couldn't even get a drink of water because there was no staffing in these for-profit long-term-care facilities. Their report on the conditions in for-profit long-term-care was horrific. The Ombudsman's report found that your government's lack of planning and preparedness was unreasonable, unjust and wrong.

Minister, can you explain why your government cut inspections pre-pandemic and why your government allowed conditions in long-term care to get to the point that people died of dehydration and neglect and the military was called in? Again, I'm going to say: It was our moms, our dads, our aunts, our uncles, our grandparents. Can you answer that?

Hon. Stan Cho: Mr. Gates, as I said right from the beginning how important this sector is—not just to me but to everybody sitting in this room. These are our seniors; there is a moral imperative to protect them. That's exactly why, when we inherited a broken system, we accepted all of the Ombudsman's recommendations right away—all 76, half of which are under progress or completed, as I said.

But when it comes to inspections, Mr. Gates, I hope you can hear me, because you keep accusing me of not answering the question, but this is now the fourth time I am answering that very question: A total of \$72.3 million over three years for the biggest investment into the inspection sector in our province's history. What are we looking at? We have doubled the inspectorate to 344. We are carrying out not just reactive inspections but proactive inspections to go into homes unannounced to make sure that they are held to the highest standard when they are caring for those such as our seniors.

Chair, through you, this isn't it. We understand that the pandemic highlighted the true weaknesses in a broken system that was inherited. That's why it's not just enough to invest the \$10 billion into capital. It's not just enough to invest the \$4.9 billion into staffing these homes. There's investment necessary to make sure we hold these homes to the highest standard possible. That's why, in addition to the financial investments, we are also introducing an investigatory branch to make sure that, when in the case that the law is broken—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Can I have my time?

Hon. Stan Cho: Sorry, Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister. MPP Gates?

Mr. Wayne Gates: Yes. I'll just add to that, from your rant: How many have been fined in the for-profit thing? And how many have lost their licence, had their places closed, and why do you continue to spend millions and millions of dollars into the very for-profit homes that had the worst records? Why do you continue to do that?

Hon. Stan Cho: It's so—

Mr. Wayne Gates: You talked about investment. Why are you not closing these facilities that ended up having the worst records, where our moms, our dads, our aunts

and uncles died in these homes? Why do you reward them for that?

Hon. Stan Cho: Mr. Gates, it is truly disappointing to hear you say my answers to your questions—the investments into our seniors—are a “rant,” because I disagree. These are hard investments, hard dollars, to improve the conditions in which our seniors live.

Now if you want a complete list of the administrative monetary penalties that you just asked about—

Mr. Wayne Gates: They’re still dying in these homes. They still have COVID outbreaks. What are you doing about it?

Hon. Stan Cho: Mr. Gates, I gave you the time to ask the question; I think I deserve the time to answer those questions.

Mr. Gates, if you want a list of the administrative monetary penalties, we can certainly provide that for you. But it’s this government that introduced the strictest penalties to make sure that bad actors are held to account. We are improving not just the amount of beds in this province; we are improving the quality of beds, and we are improving the enforcement system as well. I’d be happy to send that to you if you’d like, Mr. Gates.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Thank you. I’m going to turn it to Lisa Gretzky for a question.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Gretzky.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Thank you. I just want to say to the minister while you’re patting yourself on the back, nearly 6,000 people died in long-term care—nearly 6,000. That included workers.

You cut inspections before the pandemic. Under the act, you are mandating an inspection once a year in the homes where thousands of people died, in the home where the military went in and found people died because they couldn’t simply get a glass of water—a luxury you have sitting on your desk right now. So while you sit here and talk about how great your record is, the only reason—the only reason—you are talking about increased inspections is because you got called out over the record during COVID-19. That is the only reason, because your record shows that you cut inspections to these homes. You cut inspections to these homes. There were families calling the ministry, crying for you to come in and help, and nothing happened, and people continued to die.

0920

So rather than coming in here all combative and trying to justify what happened—my colleague simply asked, do you agree with what the Ombudsman said? It’s not what we said; although we were sounding the alarm bells along with the workers and the families all through the pandemic. And what are you actually doing to make it better? You can talk about doing inspections all you want, but if there’s no enforcement, people will continue to be neglected in these homes.

I can tell you, I know lots of RNs and lots of RPNs and lots of PSWs who work in long-term-care homes, and they are short-staffed every single shift, because you and your decisions during the pandemic, or lack thereof, chased them out of the sector.

With that, I’ll give it back to my colleague from Niagara Falls.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Does he want to answer, or is he just going to—

Interjection: There was no question.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Okay. Well, your government knew thousands of people were dying in private, for-profit long-term-care homes. And I’ll remind you, the Ombudsman stated—not me, by the way; this is coming from them—that lack of planning and preparedness was unreasonable, unjust and wrong. Your government pushed through and passed legislation to protect yourselves and the private sector, for-profit long-term-care operators with the worst track records from being sued by the families of the residents and staff who died. You acted to protect yourselves and the shareholders of private, for-profit homes rather than the people living and working in long-term care. How do you justify to the people of Ontario why you did that? Was it about costs, causing close to 6,000, as we continue to hear, to die in long-term-care facilities?

By the way, we still have outbreaks of COVID in our long-term-care facilities. We still have our elderly who are still dying, a lot of it because of lack of staff. They are running short in all facilities right across the province of Ontario because of Bill 124, the one that you’ve supported not once, not twice, not three times—probably 10 or 15 times, going to court, continuing to fight workers.

So answer the question.

Hon. Stan Cho: I’m not sure what the question is there, Mr. Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: How do you justify to the people of Ontario why you did that? Was it all about costs?

Hon. Stan Cho: Mr. Gates, as I’ve said—and I hope you can turn the temperature down here and hear the answers I’m giving, because the investments I’ve highlighted are truly those to fix the broken system that we inherited.

Mr. Gates, \$4.9 billion is the biggest investment in our history, and what does that go to do? Well, it goes to actually establishing four hours of daily care per resident, to make sure there is more hands-on care per senior in our long-term-care system. It goes to actually hiring PSWs and nurses—27,000 new ones, in fact—to service that investment of \$10 billion to build 30,000 new beds and improve over 28,000 beds.

I think we can agree on one thing: that in the previous 10 years before 2018, to build 611 beds total is simply unacceptable. That’s why the wait-list of seniors got to 40,000. That’s why the average wait time got to 152.

You would know, Mr. Gates, when it comes to how these long-term-care homes operate, that there are three types: there are for-profit, not-for-profit, and municipals. Since you asked about it, you would also know that they are funded exactly the same from the ministry, and that any leftover funds that don’t go towards nursing, to nutrition, to programs is all returned to the ministry, hard stop. It is exactly the same type of funding.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Gates, you have two minutes.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I continue to hear about your staffing and your investment. So from what I'm hearing from you, you don't agree with Bill 124, which caused the crisis right across the health care sector. Is that accurate?

Hon. Stan Cho: Mr. Gates, is it accurate—

Mr. Wayne Gates: It's a yes or no.

Hon. Stan Cho: —that you don't support the \$4.9 billion for four hours of daily care you voted against?

Mr. Wayne Gates: You don't get to ask the questions.

Hon. Stan Cho: Is it accurate that you don't—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Chair, can you explain to him that I ask the questions—

Hon. Stan Cho: You're asking about a voting record. I'm asking about yours.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Just answer the question. Do you still support Bill 124?

Hon. Stan Cho: I support the workers in our long-term-care homes—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Do you support Bill 124—

Hon. Stan Cho: I support all of them, whether they're not-for-profit, profit or municipal, because they are all—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): I'll remind everyone in the committee to not talk over each other.

MPP Gates, you've got one minute left.

Mr. Wayne Gates: The personal interviews conducted during the Ombudsman's investigation were alarming and showed a complete lack of action from the government on serious concerns from family. One family member made three complaints about the home that had 20 people die in 10 days—nothing from this government. Two weeks later, he received a call from an investigator who read him a message and then closed the file.

There's another case where a member contacted the ministry four times—four times—because her mother was sick. She wanted to save her life. Do you know what happened to that mother? She died. Do you know what else happened in that home? Fifty-three more people died in that home.

This is what was going on during COVID. You and your government have never taken responsibility for the number of people who died during COVID, whether it was in the first phase or the second phase. Are you finally going to be the minister that stands up here and says, "We know that we caused the mistakes that happened in long-term care. We know it was because of the things that we didn't do, including bringing bills that attacked workers and facilities"? Are you finally going to be the minister that stands and says, "Listen, we know that we could have done a better job. We know that people died"—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, MPP Gates.

We now—

Mr. Wayne Gates: I get another 20 minutes, right?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): I may be new at this committee, but not that new.

We now turn to our independent member. MPP Hazell—welcome, as well—you have 10 minutes.

MPP Andrea Hazell: This has a very sad feeling for me right now. I'm representing Scarborough, and I'm a

newly elected MPP. When I was out canvassing, these deaths that happened in long-term-care homes during COVID are still on the minds of a lot of residents in my riding. So my question to you is around funding, where that is going. Despite the pledge to increase long-term-care capacity substantially, capital expenses for the ministry are \$51 million lower. How does the ministry expect to increase capacity while spending less on capital? Can you explain that?

Hon. Stan Cho: Thank you, MPP Hazell—am I saying that right?

MPP Andrea Hazell: Yes.

Hon. Stan Cho: Congratulations on your recent election. I'd be happy to share all of the capital expenditures from the ministry directly with you. We've got our team from the ministry here with us, and we'll be sure to send that along.

The fact is, though, this is a record investment into capital, and there are many investments actually going directly into your riding for new and redeveloped beds. I'll be sure to get you a comprehensive list on that. This is not in any way an underspend in this ministry. First of all, it was this government who brought in a stand-alone long-term-care ministry when we were elected five years ago. It's the first time in our province's history that we have that. The reason we have that is because I, like the sense I'm getting from you, feel that our seniors are important enough to have a sole ministry dedicated towards long-term care and to make sure that our investments have that line of sight into seeing how these outcomes are actually delivered. That's what's really important to us, and we've got that capital investment of \$10 billion that is going towards homes all over the province.

I know my colleagues from the NDP like to highlight the political nature of the discussion sometimes, but that's not at all how we're distributing those beds. Those beds are going based on need in every corner of this province, in all 124 ridings of this province. That's why it's such a large investment. Of course, we do have capacity issues. That investment specifically, MPP Hazell, is going to build 30,000 new beds—new homes, as I like to call them—and improve 28,000 additional ones.

I can speak for my own riding. Before I got elected—we have an aging population, as I'm sure you do in Scarborough as well, and the investments weren't there. In Willowdale, where I'm from, we had no new beds built in the previous 10 years, and then just in the last few years alone, Carefree Lodge, at the corner of Bayview and Finch, got 200 new beds and redeveloped, improved 223 beds. That's a massive amount considering that the last government only built 611 during those previous 10 years.

So when it comes to the capital investments, as I've said, it is record; it certainly not an underfund. We will be there to make sure that program is rolled out—because the most important thing is it's not just capital that's there; it's also about actually getting those beds built.

When I look at Scarborough—I'll just mention Extendicare Guildwood. There's a redevelopment of 320 beds. Kennedy Lodge, in Scarborough as well, has 31 new beds

and 289 redeveloped beds. But certainly, MPP Hazell, I would love to share the complete list with you at a future time.

MPP Andrea Hazell: And so I have listened to you—and thanks for sharing where you're going with the investments. But it's just sad that you kept referring to how the last investments were just 600 beds. If you're saying that our seniors are so important to us—they've worked their whole life contributing and giving back to this amazing country, and at the end of their journey, this is the experience they receive. COVID should not have to be that pandemic that put our seniors to live in that condition. So where do you take accountability that a review job of the nursing facilities was not a job that was done properly? So when COVID hit, it just opened the existing problems that were there in all of our nursing homes.

0930

Hon. Stan Cho: There's an important point you make here, MPP Hazell, that is important to highlight, and that is that we inherited a broken system. So 2018 saw 40,000 seniors on a wait-list for a bed in this province—40,000; imagine that. And imagine the average wait time for those 40,000 seniors—like you say, our parents, our grandparents, the ones who built our communities. I can see that you have passion for that, and I'm glad you do, because I do as well, and I think we can build off of that shared passion for making sure our seniors are taken care of, because that's what this is about.

I think it's unacceptable that a senior waits 152 days for a bed in this province.

This is a country, this is a province, that gave my family everything when they moved here from South Korea 50 years ago. My dad is a senior now. My mother is a senior now.

I can't imagine a world in which we say that we've succeeded and live in a society that we can be proud of if our seniors aren't taken care of.

That's why this government, from day one, said that we have to create a system that's better. We cannot have our seniors waiting—40,000 of them—half a year, essentially, to get into a bed. That's why we said we're creating a stand-alone long-term-care ministry. That's one of the first things we did when we formed government.

The other thing we did, MPP Hazell, was introduce a new nation-leading standard for care. Previously, our seniors were getting something like three hours of care—hands-on care, direct care—and we felt that was unacceptable, so we increased that with an investment of \$4.9 billion, to say, "No, each resident should have four hours of hands-on daily care." This is very much a nation-leading standard that we're very proud of.

That's not the only thing we said. If you have 40,000 seniors on a wait-list, well, that means there's a severe shortage of beds in this province. That's why we have introduced the most aggressive capital plan in this province's history to reduce that backlog, to get rid of that backlog, knowing that it's not just about the capacity issues we have today but about preparing for the future when we have a growing population.

You saw the immigration numbers last year alone—500,000 in the province of Ontario—so it's a double whammy. We have an aging population internally, as our population gets older, but we also have immigrants coming here, many of whom are seniors. That means we need to move quickly. That's why there's a \$10-billion investment into building those beds. When you look at building 30,000 new beds in this province, it's on top of actually redeveloping 28,000, which is 58,000 beds in its entirety.

And that's not all, MPP Hazell. I know there were challenges in the previous system. We got rid of ward rooms, where you have multiple seniors with beds in the same room. That's unacceptable, and certainly the pandemic highlighted the disasters that can come about when you have such areas.

Just a few short years ago, only 40% of homes had air conditioning. Imagine—having a summer as hot as it was. With over a \$250-million investment, we are now proud to say that 99.5% of homes have air conditioning in place, and the other ones are just on the way and there's a plan to have them in there.

MPP Hazell, I appreciate your attention and passion in these questions. Certainly, I will be happy to share all of the information I've outlined here today, including the beds that are being built and redeveloped in your riding, with you at any point.

MPP Andrea Hazell: That is acting on top of the Ombudsman report, and that's being reactive. I wish you were proactive. Taking over a portfolio, we take accountability. So I'm still in disbelief that there was so much gap after you taking over—the report; you can have inspections done. You can pick up and actually close the gaps, knowing that something like this could have happened. Yes, we cannot predict it, but the gaps that were in the nursing homes, I would say, all across Ontario were a defeat for you. It's a defeat because there wasn't any proper inspection—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Hazell, one minute left.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I'm going to put in one more question. Bill 124 has decimated workers in the health sector at large by artificially capping their wages, even in a time of higher-than-normal inflation. Will the minister commit to better wages for long-term-care workers?

Hon. Stan Cho: Thank you, MPP Hazell. We're very tight on time, so I do want to address your previous questions and comments before, because they're important. I want to say, the previous Premier, Kathleen Wynne, said one of her biggest regrets was not investing more into long-term care. And that Ombudsman report really highlights what happens when you don't invest in long-term care, a snapshot-in-time report with 76 recommendations we've already acted on. We've accepted all of those. We're not underinvesting in long-term care. We're going to make sure we take care of our seniors moving forward.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thirteen seconds left.

Hon. Stan Cho: With record investments. As well, more than half of those 76 recommendations have been completed or are under progress.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister. Thank you, MPP Hazell.

I now turn for 20 minutes to the government side. MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Thank you and good morning, Minister. Thank you for taking action to address the gaps in long-term care that existed for decades.

My question is around wait-lists; they've become a problem in long-term care. Our province has an aging population, as does my riding in Burlington. For years, prior governments failed to make the necessary investments into new and redeveloping long-term-care beds. The people of the province of Ontario have been let down by previous governments' neglect of this very important issue. I understand our government is investing \$10 billion in one of the largest long-term-care capital development investments in Ontario's history.

Minister, can you please explain to the committee how this investment will help address the wait-lists and help seniors access timely, quality care?

Hon. Stan Cho: Thank you very much, MPP Pierre. That's a very important question. We've touched on some of the "why" earlier today. It's something we cannot talk about enough when we look at the growing, aging population and a population that internally is aging, itself.

But MPP Pierre, you know it's not like that's a new thing. I remember when I was a kid, decades ago, that we talked about an aging population. We knew that this was coming with the baby boomer generation. So really, in many ways, it's catch up—that's the frank answer—because the investments into long-term care should have happened many, many years ago. They should have happened when I was in high school, frankly.

That means that when you have a sort of government previously that didn't act—and you heard earlier I mentioned that the previous Premier has said her biggest regret was not investing into long-term care, to freeze hospital funding, which led to a bottleneck here as the aging population comes of age, so to speak.

That means that we have to move quickly, and that means we have to obviously move responsibility. But that also means that we have to move in very much a record way. That's exactly why it's a \$10-billion investment. It's a staggering amount of money. It is a staggering investment, but it is worth it when it comes to our seniors, as I said, the ones who took care of us.

To put that number into perspective, what does building or redeveloping 58,000 new beds mean? Well, essentially, what that means is we're building 100 times more than the last Liberal government did in a decade. That, to me, is meaningful movement on actually narrowing the gap.

I think we would all agree, for the committee members, that having 40,000 seniors on a wait-list for a bed, for a home is nonsense. It's totally unacceptable. To wait 152 days on average, could you imagine if that was your loved one? I can't; it makes me angry to think about. That's why these investments are necessary.

MPP Pierre, I know this is a passionate subject for you. I've got ADM Brian if you want to maybe chat about some of the investments further, or the deputy. Thank you.

Mr. Brian Pollard: Good morning, everyone. I'm Brian Pollard, ADM for long-term care capital development division within the Ministry of Long-Term Care. Yes, we have been on a very aggressive journey, as the minister said, in the last few years. I invite you to look at the Ontario Newswire releases that come out almost every week now, announcing groundbreakings all across the province. As the ADM in charge of this portfolio, I'm very proud to say that we have developments starting all over the province: in the north, in the east, in the west, in the south. We're able to also serve many of our culturally and linguistically diverse communities as well.

As the minister said, we are aggressively pushing ahead. We are not only redeveloping many of the older beds, which the minister previously indicated really are not fit for purpose anymore—they really do need to be redeveloped—but also as equally important, expanding capacity to help with those ALC issues.

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One of the strategies that we've taken, and you've seen this play out in terms of some partnerships that we've created with hospitals, is to be able to create the type of bed that will be able to pull those ALC patients out of hospitals. We have four accelerated build projects that were launched in 2020. Two of those are already up and running: one here in Toronto at Humber Meadows and another one in Ajax at Lakeridge Gardens. We expect the last two to be up and running in November of this year in Mississauga. Those are very targeted strategies to make sure that we're addressing the ALC issues and those homes have been built with a lot of specialized services, including bariatric services and dialysis services etc., but we haven't stopped there.

When we did our application process for long-term-care beds, starting in 2018, as the minister indicated, we were very deliberate in focusing on this ALC issue and making sure that the homes of tomorrow are built with the expectations that residents or patients who are coming out of ALC will be able to be served in those communities.

We are well on our way in terms of not only designing the infrastructure but also designing the service that will be necessary to solve the ALC issue.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Jordan.

Mr. John Jordan: Thank you, Minister, and all the ministry staff who are here, for all the investments that have happened in long-term care.

As PA, I've had the privilege of travelling around and visiting long-term-care homes. I've seen these capital investments, but most importantly, I've seen the results of staffing changes. We've certainly moved the dial on that. You have moved the dial on that. So this government is really well-received when we go into these homes, and for good reason—so I wanted to add that.

One of these investments has been in air conditioning. You mentioned the broken system we inherited—only 40% of the homes in Ontario had air conditioning. This has been a really nice summer but a really hot summer,

over 30 degrees a lot of days. So I wonder if you could just let us know the status of that \$200-million investment that this government has made in air conditioning across Ontario.

Hon. Stan Cho: Thank you, PA Jordan. I think the first thing I need to say is I want to thank you for your hard work as PA on this file. I know you've been travelling the province tirelessly to see the impact of these investments first-hand, to see the impact this is having with staff and residents in these homes. I can't wait to get out there with you. It's been six days for me, so I haven't had the opportunity quite yet, but I'm going to join you very soon.

I'm very happy you asked about air conditioning. It's something you know very well and have worked on for the last couple of years tirelessly, along with the team here at the Ministry of Long-Term Care.

You mentioned 40% had no air conditioning in the rooms; you're right. But did you know that 81 homes had no air conditioning at all? Could you imagine that in the sweltering heat how uncomfortable that is for seniors?

I think to when my grandfather was in the hospital before he passed away, how much difficulty he had regulating his temperature. That happens sometimes as we get older, that temperature regulation gets a little harder to do.

This isn't just a comfort item—to have air conditioning in a home—this is a necessity, in my opinion, because we know that in our province we've got four pretty brutal seasons. In the winter, it's cold, but in the summer, it's hot. We need to make sure that our seniors are aging in the most comfortable, appropriate conditions, living in the most appropriate, comfortable conditions that they can.

I'm proud to say that the \$200-million investment has now meant that 99.5% of homes have air conditioning, and there's actually a plan. I'm not sure if I can call up Jeff to talk about the remaining 0.5% and where the status is on that.

Mr. Jeff Butler: Thanks, Minister. My name is Jeff Butler. I'm the assistant deputy minister for the operations division in the Ministry of Long-Term Care.

As the minister noted, we have invested nearly \$200 million in air conditioning. There are now only three remaining homes out of 624 that have not met the current regulatory requirement to have air conditioning installed in all resident rooms. I can tell you that those three homes do meet the regulatory requirement to have designated cooling areas, and they also have interim solutions in place. Of those three homes, one of them is expected to complete their air conditioning installation project in the coming weeks; the remaining two do have some significant structural challenges and are working through their plans with respect to redevelopment.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Further questions? MPP Barnes.

Ms. Patrice Barnes: Minister, we recognize that with our seniors living longer, we are now facing more specialized and more complex needs with our seniors, as they live longer. A few decades ago, residents could go and come from long-term-care homes and it was easily done. But

today, as our seniors live longer and seek more complex care—I recognize that we've invested \$120 million to support complex needs, as well as we've grown the local priorities fund. I've seen some of that investment in my area in regard to special, complex needs. Could you expand a little bit more on that and what kinds of care are being covered with that funding?

Hon. Stan Cho: It's a very good question.

I think we can all agree that our seniors are diverse, with diverse medical needs and diverse preferences, and it's important to recognize that difference.

You mentioned the \$120-million investment in 2022-23 and the \$20-million local priorities fund. This will support 189 projects in the province this year. This fund will allow Ontario Health to make targeted investments—targeted in staffing, equipment and services to support the specialized needs of those in our long-term-care system. I know ADM Sean will expand on that a little bit more. This is something that's important to recognize—that we have diverse seniors with diverse needs.

Mr. Sean Court: I'm Sean Court. I'm the assistant deputy minister of long-term-care policy at the Ministry of Long-Term Care.

The ministry is moving forward with a comprehensive plan to support the development, redevelopment and continued service delivery in long-term-care homes. The estimates binder briefing note makes clear that there are six core principles that are driving that work: resident-centred; people-focused; dedicated to quality; outcomes-driven; sustainable; and also responsible. And I think it's that "dedicated to quality" piece that's most important.

Every senior in Ontario, under the Fixing Long-Term Care Act, has to have their own care plan. Homes and the health teams that are wrapped around them in those homes, for each of the residents, are focused on the individual needs of those residents, working with their caregivers and helping to make sure that their local circumstances and their health needs are well cared for. There may be times when there are specialized services that are required, whether those are behavioural supports, or as we've seen in the news, geriatric supports and other things like that. We do have some long-term-care residents who have needs that are quite extraordinary. But the foundation for all care in long-term-care homes is making sure that each resident has their own care plan.

We're also working quite closely with Ontario Health and others to implement a quality agenda in long-term-care homes. Quality in the health system is tried and true; it has worked, it's happening and is under way across Ontario's health system everyday—but making sure that each long-term-care home has its own quality committee and that they're working on quality improvement. They're focused on doing surveys and talking to their residents and family care councils, they're engaging their residents and caregivers, and they're making sure that they're listening to them when they're developing not just the care plan that they're delivering for individual residents, but they're also thinking broader than that—what do we need to be doing

in each of our long-term-care homes to make sure that it truly is the home for each resident and they're well-cared for?

Hon. Stan Cho: Chair, ADM Jeff can expand on the specialized care a little bit, too.

Mr. Jeff Butler: So a couple of other things to note on specialized care: The minister noted the \$20-million investment last year in the local priorities fund, which is administered by Ontario Health and supports accommodation of residents with specialized needs. That fund has increased to \$35 million this fiscal year and going forward, and we are working with Ontario Health currently on the next round of investments related to that fund.

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A couple of other things to note with respect to specialized care: Given the significant share of the population in long-term-care homes with dementia and associated responsive behaviours, we're also investing \$84 million in Behavioural Supports Ontario, which provides specialized supports for residents and their families that do have responsive behaviours, as well as \$3.2 million for Baycrest to provide virtual support to long-term-care homes in supporting residents with dementia.

Lastly, we have a specialized fund within our funding envelope called the High Intensity Needs Fund, which is to support residents that have a very high level of acute care need so that they can continue to be accommodated in long-term-care homes. We invest about \$100 million in that portion—so a range of supports to support people in long-term care that do have specialized needs.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Further questions? MPP Wai.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you, Minister, for saying how much our government cares for seniors. I do agree with you: Our government respects and cares for seniors. As the parliamentary assistant for the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, we work very hard to help seniors aging at home, and the same with long-term care.

I understand that Ontarians' long-term-care needs are becoming more complex over time, and to support these needs, industry advocates have called for more hours for care for residents. For years, the government—the previous government, I would say; other governments—paid lip service to increasing care but made no meaningful progress in this area. I see that this government has made a commitment to invest, as you say, \$4.9 billion to implement the Canada-leading standard of care of four hours per resident per day by March 2025.

Minister, what kind of staffing initiatives and investments are being made to help homes provide more care to residents?

Hon. Stan Cho: Thank you, MPP Wai. I think it's important, for the record, just for me to express my appreciation to you, PA Wai, for all the hard work you've done at the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility over five years. I know you're passionate about helping our seniors. I look forward to working with you, and I know that there's much that we can share and I can learn from you and your experience in that time.

Thank you for that question. It's a great question. We mentioned all of the capital investments that we have into building homes, but homes are only as good as you can staff them. In my brief week here, I've had a number of calls with several of the staff directly, with the unions that represent them, and I don't pretend to understand the challenges that they face and how hard they work. I am looking forward to getting into these homes and seeing it first-hand, as PA Jordan has done. This is not easy work that these brave front-line workers go through every day to care for our seniors. It is the work that many people wouldn't do, and that means we have to understand that when it comes to building beds we have to have the appropriate resources for us to fill those beds with these types of individuals. They're out there, and that's why we're investing \$4.9 billion. Part of that investment includes several—I'll give a couple of examples: \$100 million to help staff advance their careers in long-term care. I think the acronym for this is the LEAP program—

Interjection.

Hon. Stan Cho: Yes, thank you for that. I'm just learning the acronyms at the ministry now.

This is to allow those already working in the field to scale up their skills, to maybe move on in that area. This will add 2,000 nurses to the sector by 2024-25.

There's also our PSW challenge fund to support 11,000 individuals who enrolled or graduated from eligible PSW programs.

Through you, Chair: \$893 million invested to increase staff retention, and to make this increase publicly funded for personal support workers, direct support workers, to make that permanent.

MPP Wai, this is not an easy challenge to take on. It isn't, because the frank answer—and we've talked about it here at length this morning—is we had a long wait-list when we formed government in 2018. We had some bad conditions for our seniors when we took on this file.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute, Minister.

Hon. Stan Cho: That means that those investments—well, they need to get in there now. It was overdue. That investment that is being made, \$10 billion to capital, is not enough; it has to come with that \$4.9 billion into also increasing the level of care, and that very much includes supporting our staff. We've done measures in the past—we had \$1.3 billion that we invested in temporary wage enhancement. But these steady investments, whether in existing programs or new programs—they have to make sure that we are on that road map to increased care.

We all know that staff are an integral part of the long-term-care system. They are the heart and soul, as I said, of every long-term-care home.

Before I had the honour of serving in this role—I've been to a long-term-care home in my riding, and you see first-hand how much that staff cares, how they can brighten someone's day—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister.

We will now turn to His Majesty's official opposition for just under 10 minutes. MPP Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Advocacy groups have been ringing the alarm bells with your government over the projected growth in demand for long-term care. Over the next 10 years, demand for long-term care will increase by 38%, according to the OLTCA.

Your government has noted the number of beds it plans on building and redeveloping. However, many of the operators your government are assisting in their redevelopment or expansion are homes with some of the worst records during COVID.

I also want to say, before I give you a question, because you raised this, Minister: Right now, there are nearly 40,000 seniors on wait-lists for long-term care, waiting nearly 150 days for a bed in long-term care. As of now, it seems that Bill 7, which was a terrible bill, wasn't effective in shortening the wait.

The other one I want to make sure I get into the record, because I don't have a lot of time—we've heard serious concerns from stakeholders about leases expiring on long-term-care homes in the province and lack of planning to either extend the leases or redevelop needed beds.

Is the minister actively tracking the homes with expiring leases, and do they have contingency plans for private homes that decide to close and sell their land? It's happening right here in Toronto, as you should be aware of. This could result in adding many more residents to already large wait-lists in the province.

The other one I want to talk about is the increasing use of agency nurses, at a cost of between \$150 and \$300 an hour. Again, this is being caused by PSWs, RNs and health care workers leaving because of Bill 124.

I'll let you answer the last one, and then I'll go back to the first one that I read out.

Hon. Stan Cho: Chair, there are a few questions in there.

A topic that we haven't actually addressed is that line of sight into our long-term-care homes, which I think is very important to talk about, whether you are municipal, not-for-profit, or a for-profit home. We need to maintain that line of sight for our homes.

Mr. Gates is talking about the inner workings, the logistics, the operations, the future life of these homes, which is an important topic, because we can't afford to have fewer beds, fewer homes, as we have that aging population.

I'll call upon ADM Brian Pollard to talk about some of the planning there and the line of sight into these homes for future use.

Mr. Brian Pollard: Thank you, Minister.

MPP Gates, when you ask about what due diligence the ministry performs before we award a licence—that's our licensing division, and we actually have all of our requirements outlined in the Fixing Long-Term Care Act and its associated regulation. So there is a comprehensive review that all operators who are interested in operating a long-term-care home for 30 years will go through, and we follow those requirements. Just to give you a bit of a highlight about what those involve—we will look at past performance of long-term-care homes. We will also do

comprehensive public consultations and public meetings so that we can get a holistic view from the community about what they think about any particular—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Chair?

Mr. Brian Pollard: —operator, especially if they are an existing operator. And there are other—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Mr. Pollard.

Mr. Brian Pollard: And there are other aspects that come into play.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I'll just ask you to please send that to me in writing. I want to get through a couple of questions, and because of the lack of time that we have for this important file in the province of Ontario, if you'd just send that response to me in writing, I'd appreciate it.

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But I want to be clear on the second part that I said—to my question, because you raised it, Minister: Right now, there's nearly 40,000 seniors on wait-lists for long-term care—as you try to blame other governments—waiting nearly 150 days for a bed in long-term care. As of now, it seems that Bill 7—which, as you know, I disagreed with; I don't think we should be sending seniors up to 150 kilometres away from their families. I think it's absolutely a bad—I don't know how anybody could want to bring Bill 7 in, but you did and passed it.

What are your strategies to tackle the wait-list immediately, and could you keep it short? Because I want to get to this other question from an advocacy group, and give it to my colleague as well.

Hon. Stan Cho: Mr. Gates, you do acknowledge we have a growing population in this province with many seniors not just aging into their golden years but also many seniors moving into this province.

You acknowledge that building 611 beds over a decade was not enough. That means you should then, it stands to reason, be on board for the capital planning that we have for building 58,000—or redeveloping beds that exist in this province.

If you would join us and work collaboratively with us to make sure that those beds get built into the areas that need them the most, we start to address that faster. And that's exactly what we'd love to have: a spirit of that co-operation moving forward, because the capital is there.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister. MPP Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: You want to work with me, I love to work with everybody; I don't really care what party you're with. But you want me to work with you? Get rid of Bill 7, get rid of Bill 124, and that will be a really good starting point, not only for myself, but I think for workers right across the province of Ontario. So, if you're putting out that branch, there's a way to do it and do it with a little more heart—a little more desire with it.

I'm going to go back to this one here because I think this is a big issue. We've heard from stakeholders concerned about the leases expiring in long-term-care homes in the province and lack of planning to either extend those leases or redevelop the needed beds. Is the ministry

actively tracking the homes with expiring leases? And it's happening in Toronto—it's happened a number of times in Toronto already, where they've already sold the land and that means that we're going to have less beds. Could you answer this relatively quickly? Because I have one more question and I want to get to my colleague as well.

Hon. Stan Cho: Just a point of clarification, through you, Chair: You are talking about licences, not leases, correct?

Mr. Wayne Gates: Expiring leases, right, but what happens is once a lease—yes, I'm sorry. Once the leases expire, what they're doing is they're selling the land and they become not long-term-care facilities.

Hon. Stan Cho: So I'll throw it over to Brian Pollard.

Mr. Brian Pollard: So we are tracking licence expiries. To the extent that those licence expiries are tied to leases and that's been disclosed to the ministry then, yes, we would also be tracking that.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Thank you very much. I'll turn it over to my colleague.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you very much. There are two things I would like to receive in writing.

There's four categories of funds that go to long-term care; one category of funds is not required to be paid back. I'd like details on what's happening with that fund, what the rules are around it.

And the other thing is, Southbridge Roseview in Thunder Bay had a very bad outcome and yet Southbridge is building the new home. I would like to see what penalties were put on Southbridge for what happened at Roseview.

Now, to my question: Can you tell me why the minister has not made a clear directive to long-term-care homes requiring a specific staff-to-resident ratio? And I'm not talking about administration; I'm talking about hands-on caregivers. We can talk about this four hours of care—we know we are nowhere close to having that right now because the staff isn't there and because PSWs are leaving in despair.

The question is, will you create a staff-to-resident ratio that actually guarantees that there are enough people in long-term care who are capable of giving hands-on care and qualified to give hands-on care?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: So, in other words, four hours is vague; I want a very clear ratio of how many people are required to look after the number of residents.

Hon. Stan Cho: So, in a word, yes, MPP. That's exactly why we're investing into the PSWs and nurses—27,000 new ones—including a scale-up program; a challenge program with significant resources—\$893 million towards that end.

You're absolutely right—I'll agree with that. You don't create a nation-leading standard of four hours of daily care without having the actual workers to create that level of care. That's exactly why it's a capital investment, but there's also that staffing investment—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I'd like to take the time back. We've got another question.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Gretzky, you have 20 seconds.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: The minister stated that he has data he could share with the committee. So I'd like the minister or the ministry to provide data to the committee around how much of the funding is going into private, for-profit long-term-care operators, how much of that funding actually goes to the hands-on care patients—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, MPP Gretzky. My apologies.

This concludes the committee's consideration of the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care. Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 4501, ministry administration program, carry?

Mr. Wayne Gates: Recorded vote, please.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Recorded vote.

Ayes

Barnes, Jordan, Martin, Pierre, Quinn, Wai.

Nays

Gates, Gretzky, Hazell, Vaugeois.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): The motion is carried.

Shall vote 4502, long-term-care-homes program, carry?

Mr. Wayne Gates: Recorded vote.

Ayes

Barnes, Jordan, Martin, Pierre, Quinn, Wai.

Nays

Gates, Gretzky, Hazell, Vaugeois.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): I declare the motion carried.

Shall the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care carry?

Mr. Wayne Gates: Recorded vote.

Ayes

Barnes, Jordan, Martin, Pierre, Quinn, Wai.

Nays

Gates, Gretzky, Hazell, Vaugeois.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): I declare the motion carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care to the House?

Mr. Wayne Gates: Recorded vote.

Ayes

Barnes, Gates, Gretzky, Hazell, Jordan, Martin, Pierre, Quinn, Vaugeois, Wai.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): I declare it carried.

Thank you. We will now recess until 1 p.m.
The committee recessed from 1008 to 1300.

MINISTRY OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): All right. Good afternoon, everyone. The committee is meeting to begin consideration of the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Colleges and Universities for a total of three hours this afternoon.

The ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. I trust that the deputy minister has arranged to have the hearings closely monitored with respect to questions raised so that the ministry can respond accordingly. If you wish, you may verify the questions and issues being tracked by our research officer at the end of your appearance today. Are there any questions before we start? Great.

I now call vote 3001, which sets the review process in motion. We'll begin with a statement no longer than 20 minutes from the Minister of Colleges and Universities. The remaining time will be allocated for questions and answers in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition members, 10 minutes for the independent member and 20 minutes for the government members of the committee.

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for taking the time to be here today. As Minister of Colleges and Universities, I'm here to talk about and provide more detail on our government's investments in the post-secondary education and research sectors. It goes without saying that the last few years have presented a magnitude of challenges across all sectors and industries. Now more than ever, it's critical that students can continue to access high quality post-secondary education right here in Ontario.

My top priority as minister, and frankly as a mother of three post-secondary-age daughters—one of whom studies here in Ontario—is ensuring that our students know that they can rely on our post-secondary system to support them throughout their educational journeys and help position them for success as they move into the workforce, because we all know, as a key part of our province's social and economic fabric, our colleges, universities, private institutions and Indigenous institutes play a pivotal role in contributing to the overall strength and health of our communities.

During my tenure as Minister of Colleges and Universities, I've had the privilege of visiting dozens of post-secondary institutions and research institutes across the province, and it's incredible to see first-hand how they're fostering vibrant learning environments for learners that

spur new ideas and promote valuable innovation that not only contribute to our overall economic growth but also allow Ontario to compete on the global stage.

Looking ahead, my ministry will continue to build on the groundwork we've laid over the past year—and, really, since 2018—to support Ontario's post-secondary education and research sectors and, most importantly, our greatest asset—the people of this province—to the benefit of students, employers and the economy as a whole. In a nutshell, our vision is this: By removing barriers to post-secondary education at all points of a learner's journey, we can prepare students for in-demand jobs, which in turn will support a strong Ontario workforce across all sectors positioned for economic growth.

To build on our track record of success, we recognize the importance of continuing to engage with students, families, employers and post-secondary institutions to understand where support is needed the most and how we as a government can best help. We are constantly listening, adapting and taking action. For example, just last week I was at the Université de l'Ontario français to announce that the province is expanding French-language-teacher education. We heard directly from the francophone community that there is a critical need to train more French-language teachers. They are especially needed in Toronto and the eastern part of this province. That's why we're funding a combined 110 additional French-language-teacher education spaces at Université de l'Ontario français and the University of Ottawa for this current academic year, with the invaluable support of the government of Canada. This is just one example of how our government is taking action that aligns with our strong vision for post-secondary education and keeps our students front and centre.

Today I would like to speak to you about some of the other key investments my ministry is making to ensure students can continue to access high quality education, make an immediate impact with employers and contribute to the strength of the Ontario economy. As with most things in life, that all starts with a strong foundation. For my ministry in particular, that means ensuring our sector is built on solid ground so that it can continue to support learners now and into the future at each stage of their educational journey.

Students, their families and the taxpayers of Ontario deserve to know that when their hard-earned dollars are invested into Ontario's post-secondary system, their investment will pay off. That's why earlier this year we announced the creation of a blue-ribbon panel made up of experts and leaders from the business and academic communities. This panel will provide our government with advice and recommendations on actions Ontario can take to protect and grow our post-secondary education system so learners can continue to get the skills and education they need for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

I'm pleased to report that research and consultations with key stakeholders are now complete and we're expecting the panel's final report in the coming weeks. My colleague, Deputy Minister Wai, will provide more details shortly about the focus of the blue-ribbon panel's work,

but I am confident that their findings will help ensure Ontario's post-secondary sector remains sustainable for years to come so students can continue to access a high-quality education.

"Access" is a critical word here because financial institutions can easily be the first and most challenging hurdle for a student to step foot into a classroom. On that note, I'm proud to say we are continuing a general freeze on tuition for the 2023-24 year for most Ontario students. This builds on our province's historic 10% reduction in 2019-20, along with tuition freezes over the past three years.

Prior to 2019, Ontario had the highest tuition fees for undergraduate and graduate programs in all of Canada. But now, our average tuition has dropped into the fourth-highest in Canada for undergraduate students and the third-highest for graduate students. In fact, when we first introduced the tuition reduction, students were provided with a relief of about \$450 million annually when compared to tuition costs in 2018-19. That's an impressive global number, but when we break it down, what it really means is that more students have been able to access their post-secondary journey. Because of that, I consider this an extremely worthwhile investment.

I'm also proud to say my ministry is also moving the needle in a big way to ensure more students can pursue high-demand areas of study like health care. In both 2022 and 2023, our government announced an expansion of medical education, committing more than \$193 million over the next five years. That first expansion was the largest in over a decade. In total, our investments will support 260 new undergraduate seats and 449 postgraduate positions, preparing the next generation of doctors to support our health care workforce.

I'm pleased to say we're not just stopping there. Our government is also investing \$390 million over three years to train thousands of additional nurses and PSWs. This includes expansion of nursing and PSW programming at publicly assisted colleges and universities as well as at six Indigenous institutes. Not only is our health care workforce in need of more workers; there are also so many learners in Ontario who are passionate about a career in health care, whether as a first-time post-secondary student or as an established worker reskilling to change careers.

I want more students to have the opportunity to pursue these programs of study and the rewarding careers that follow, ultimately ensuring our health care system has the qualified professionals needed to care for our parents, children and neighbours and to help build it up to be stronger, more resilient and better than ever. That begins with a solid foundation in education.

On top of these key investments, we're continuing to think outside the box, identifying new ways to remove barriers to education and strengthen our workforce. For example, this very week, the first cohort of students benefiting from the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant are starting their programs. This new grant is helping to add more health care professionals, specifically nurses, paramedics and medical lab technologists, in certain underserved communities across the province.

By thinking outside the box, this program provides students with full, upfront funding for tuition, books and other direct educational costs. In return, students will commit to a term of service to work and care for people in the region where they studied after graduating. Interest in the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant has been tremendous, with nearly double the number of expected students applying since the application was launched this spring. It confirms our belief that by removing barriers to education—in this case, financial barriers—more students are eager and able to access post-secondary education to prepare for in-demand jobs.

This is a historic investment in our students and in the future of our health care workforce and one that I am extremely proud of. Importantly, we can see this investment is already working, with thousands of students starting their eligible program this semester. I look forward to seeing the impact these students will have in underserved communities in the years to come.

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I've talked about laying the foundation for a sustainable post-secondary sector and the progressive ways my ministry is helping to get students into the classroom, but, as discussed, this is just the first step in our government's vision for post-secondary education in Ontario. Next, we have to ensure that students are gaining the skills and experience that allow them to successfully transition to the workforce or upskill to meet today's labour market demands.

One way that we're doing this is by investing more than \$32 million over the next three years to support over 6,500 research internships through Mitacs, which is an organization that builds research partnerships between post-secondary institutions and industry. These internships range widely in discipline, with support for key provincial priorities like critical minerals, manufacturing and health care. Tying back to our government's vision, students and recent graduates gain experience in their area of study, and employers get access to a pipeline of skilled talent to support a strong workforce positioned for economic success.

My ministry is also getting creative about how we support Ontario's workforce needs by investing in short duration, labour-market-specific education programs like micro-credentials. In 2020, we announced Ontario's micro-credential strategy, which has been supported with investments of over \$60 million. This included a challenge fund to encourage post-secondary institutions and industry to work together to develop micro-credentials that equip learners with the exact skills that employers need.

This first round helped to create up to 250 new micro-credentials across the province, which are building skills in crucial, critical areas such as artificial intelligence, mental health, dementia care and Indigenous relations. It was such a success that we're investing an additional \$5 million to launch a second round of the challenge fund. This will support the creation of even more micro-credentials that will help learners transition to the workforce or upskill to take the next step in rewarding careers.

I would be remiss if I didn't take a few moments today to share how Ontario's research sector fits into the big

picture of my ministry's work and the economic strength of Ontario. We recognize that research is foundational to commercialization and innovation that will help grow our economy and attract and retain world-class talent in the province. Importantly, the work of our research sector strongly aligns with areas of focus for our government, including health care, agriculture, critical minerals and electric vehicles.

Over the last year alone, I've had the privilege of visiting several research organizations that our government is supporting—organizations that are creating tremendous job opportunities and growth. My colleague Deputy Minister Wai will tell you more about our investments in the research sector shortly. Now, with my fantastic PA, MPP Pierre, I've been visiting facilities like the McMaster Nuclear Reactor, whose work is enabling more research in clean energy and helping to treat conditions like heart disease and cancer; or touring the Sudbury Neutrino Observatory, or SNO lab for short, which is helping the province remain a leader in advanced science, technology and innovation. Those are experiences that remind me Ontario is a true research powerhouse, bringing tangible benefits to the people of Ontario and our economy.

I'd like to close today by reiterating that the Ministry of Colleges and Universities is committed to investing in our province's future by continuing to do what is best for learners at all stages of their educational journey, and of course the taxpayers. While our colleges and universities begin the next phase of prosperity and excellence domestically and around the world, our post-secondary institutions and research institutes are important sources of job creation, skills training, research, innovation and commercialization, making them leading contributors to our overall economic growth. We'll continue to support the sector, so learners can continue to get the skills and education they need for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

I would now like to pass it over to my deputy minister, who will speak next.

Mr. David Wai: Thank you, Minister. Good afternoon. I'm pleased to be here today to speak to this committee about the important work of the Ministry of Colleges and Universities—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Excuse me, Deputy Minister. Could you just state your name and title for Hansard? Thank you.

Mr. David Wai: David Wai, deputy minister of the Ministry of Colleges and Universities.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Speak up, as well, please. Thank you.

Mr. David Wai: Thank you, Minister. Good afternoon. I'm pleased to be here today to speak to this committee about the important work of the Ministry of Colleges and Universities. As Minister Dunlop noted, the post-secondary system is a critical part of the province's social and economic fabric, contributing to the economic growth, prosperity and competitiveness.

I joined this ministry just a few months ago, and I'm learning each and every day about the tremendous innovative work happening at post-secondary institutions and

research organizations in Ontario. But one thing that hasn't surprised me is learning that we truly have one of the best post-secondary education sectors in the world. The colleges, universities, private institutions and Indigenous institutes located across our province provide students and job-seekers with high-quality education, training and skills, producing a talented and skilled workforce that contributes greatly to the health and wealth of Ontario. Knowing this, it's critical that we continue to remove barriers to post-secondary education and help students for in-demand jobs, as this will support an even stronger Ontario workforce positioned for further economic growth.

The ministry is committed to ensuring that the post-secondary sector in Ontario can continue to provide high-quality education to students for years to come. To make progress in this area, as Minister Dunlop mentioned, we launched a blue-ribbon panel back in March, made up of experts from the academic and business communities. The panel will provide our recommendations to the government on the financial sustainability of the post-secondary education sector over the long term and providing the best possible student experience.

Considering the sheer size and diversity of Ontario's post-secondary sector, this is no simple task. But the panel has been consulting with key stakeholders and developing strategic recommendations for several months now with the following five principles in mind:

- (1) enhancing student experience and access;
- (2) rewarding excellence and financial sustainability;
- (3) improving labour-market alignment;
- (4) promoting economic growth and prosperity; and
- (5) keeping education affordable for lower- and middle-income families.

I know the minister very much looks forward to receiving the panel's findings, which will help to further strengthen the foundation of Ontario's post-secondary sector. But while we wait for the panel's report to be delivered this fall, rest assured the ministry continues to do important work to support the financial sustainability and effectiveness of our colleges, universities, Indigenous institutes and research organizations.

Financial sustainability remains a top priority for the government because we've seen first-hand what can happen if we don't take steps to ensure the health of the post-secondary sector. Members of this committee might be aware of the situation that occurred at Laurentian University, where the institution had to file for creditor protection in 2021. The ministry has been helping Laurentian University chart a course for success so that it can continue to serve students, faculty and the community. For example, we're acquiring real estate assets of a value of up to \$53.5 million to help Laurentian implement its plan of arrangement.

But it goes without saying, this is not a situation we want any of our other institutions to find themselves in. That's why the ministry is implementing a new financial accountability framework for universities, informed by the recommendations of a third party and the Council of Ontario Universities. The framework allows the ministry

to monitor university financial health and define the respective roles of the ministry and universities in addressing financial challenges. Identifying and addressing any emerging issues much earlier in the game will ultimately reduce the impact on students and their educational journey, and that is of paramount importance. Students should be able to focus on their studies and have confidence that their post-secondary institution can continue to provide the high-quality education they need to successfully transition to the workforce.

As Minister Dunlop mentioned in her remarks, the ministry's vision for higher education in Ontario starts with removing barriers to post-secondary education. Whether it's tackling financial barriers by decreasing tuition costs; adding more seats to in-demand areas of study like medical, education and nursing; or supporting new types of post-secondary education like micro-credentials to support life-time learners, increasing access to post-secondary education is that first key step. But the next step, which is equally critical, is ensuring students are positioned for success after graduation. As such, the ministry is doing a lot of legwork to ensure students are graduating with skills that truly align with the labour market.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute remaining.

Mr. David Wai: Perhaps I'll close my remarks by reiterating that the post-secondary education sector and research sectors play a critical role in building a better and brighter future for families, workers and businesses in Ontario. Through critical investments that are removing barriers to post-secondary education, helping learners successfully transition to rewarding careers and strengthening the various talent pipelines into Ontario's workforce, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities is delivering on many key government priorities that are supporting students, addressing labour needs and driving Ontario's economic growth and prosperity.

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The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Deputy Minister and Minister Dunlop.

We will now begin questions and answers in rotation of 20 minutes for the official opposition members, 10 minutes for the independent member and 20 minutes for the government members for the remainder of the allotted time.

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): For the deputy ministers, assistant deputy minister and ministry staff, there are two hours and 40 minutes left.

For the deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers and ministry staff, please state your name and title each time you are called on to speak so the proceedings can accurately be recorded in Hansard. As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair and lean into the mike. Today we're finding some issues with hearing.

I'll start with the government members for the first round of questions for 20 minutes. MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Thank you, Minister. I'll start.

Deputy Minister, did you have any further comments that you wanted to continue with, or had you had an opportunity to deliver your remarks?

Mr. David Wai: Perhaps I might just follow on the research and innovation point that the minister talked about. During Minister Dunlop's remarks, she mentioned the importance of the ministry's research investments and how research at our post-secondary institutions can be a catalyst for innovation and commercialization. This can help position Ontario for economic growth, another key part of the ministry's vision.

I know Minister Dunlop has had the opportunity to visit many of the research institutes and facilities across Ontario during her time with the ministry. As I settle into my new role, I plan to do the same, but I immediately recognize the social and economic benefits investing in research brings to the people of Ontario and the strength of our workforce. As such, I'd like to highlight for you the newest investments the government announced as part of budget 2023.

There's a \$6.8-million investment to support the expansion of the McMaster Nuclear Reactor, which is enabling more research in strategic areas like advanced materials, creating quality jobs in southwestern Ontario and supporting advancements in health care to better treat our loved ones dealing with cancer and help heart disease.

There's also the \$14-million investment to support and expand the operations of the Sudbury Neutrino Observatory, or SNO lab, which is located two kilometres below ground in Sudbury, as the deepest and cleanest lab in the world. Their research truly is critical, helping to ensure the province remains a leader in advanced science, technology and innovation, and continues to be a jurisdiction of choice for scientific research in the field of fundamental physics.

The government is also investing \$5 million to create a centre for analytics at the Ontario Brain Institute, helping to transform the science and discovery labs into data and insights that are made accessible to the broader research community. In turn, that data can be used for early detection and treatment of brain disorders such as Alzheimer's or dementia.

Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Thank you.

And thank you, Minister, for your remarks and for being here today to discuss how the government is investing in post-secondary institutions, our system and our students.

I know a lot of progress has been made on several initiatives within your ministry since the last time you appeared at estimates, especially given we're another year removed from the COVID pandemic, which means another year that students have been able to be back on campus receiving the invaluable in-person hands-on learning that's so important. But we also know that careers and workforce needs are evolving as well, and as a result of the pandemic, we need education to evolve alongside it. Our post-secondary institutions have done a fantastic job at adapting to the needs of students and employers, so ideally the government—or, really, your ministry—gives them the tools to be even more flexible than they already are.

Something that you've spoken about on several occasions over the past year is the new Learn and Stay grant,

an innovative initiative that's really changing the way we think about how and where we educate our young people and in a way that really sets students up for rewarding and meaningful careers. Minister, can you tell us a bit more about the learn and stay program, how it's going so far, what you've seen through the process of its launch—I know we had our first cohorts start just last week—and perhaps what the next steps might look like for this program?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Minister.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you so much, MPP Pierre. To your point about the effects of the pandemic on the post-secondary education sector, Ontario saw an unprecedented shift across the sector from in-person learning to virtual learning, which became essential for delivering service and ensuring learning continued for students. And I must say, I was incredibly impressed by the resiliency of our students, staff and faculty, and the grace in the face of such challenges. We know that shift wasn't easy, nor is the transition back to in-person learning.

Over the last several months, I've had the pleasure of visiting many of our post-secondary institutions, where I saw first-hand students' excitement about being back on campus, hitting the ground running, for the in-person learning that they need after they graduate. I was at TMU last week, and I talked to students during orientation week. It's good to see that excitement back on campus—and not just for students, but also for faculty and staff.

Something else the pandemic really brought to the forefront, not just in Ontario but across Canada and around the world, was some of the current needs and future labour gaps in our health care system. And while the pandemic really highlighted our focus on how to improve nursing, medical education and, really, post-secondary education as a whole, this work has been ongoing since before the pandemic began. What became quite clear was that more needed to be done, that we needed to strengthen the supply of health care professionals in every corner of the province, connecting them to better care experiences closer to home. And that starts with expanding high-calibre education for those on the front lines.

I've been working closely with the Premier and the Minister of Health to ensure that we are not only fostering education for health care professionals, but that we are also addressing specific regional and community health care needs across the province, especially in this time of need.

That's where the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant comes into play, which was designed to address the pressing need for qualified health care professionals in the communities that need them the most. Following significant work, I'm proud to say the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant officially and successfully launched on May 16 of this year. This grant, which we've dedicated \$61 million to, will be a game-changer for students and communities across the province, increasing access to post-secondary education while also addressing local workforce needs, especially in underserved regions struggling to build and maintain their health care sector. It will provide eligible students with

upfront funding to cover the costs of tuition, books and other educational costs to post-secondary students who enrol in priority programs in regions that have been challenged by staffing shortages—and as important, it will commit to working locally when they graduate. This means that these students will graduate with no tuition debt if they continue to work locally in their professions after graduation. For the first year, the grant will focus on health human resources to help get skilled workers where they're needed the most and will support first-year students entering eligible nursing, paramedic and medical lab tech programs in northern, eastern and southwestern Ontario. In the simplest of terms, for example, if a student enrolls in an underserved community, takes one of the identified four-year-length programs of need and commits to working in that community in their area of study for two years following graduation, our government will fully cover the upfront costs of their education. By providing targeted financial incentives to encourage students to learn and work in priority communities, the Learn and Stay grant will ensure that our health care professionals get the training they need to make immediate impacts in local hospitals, long-term-care homes and other health care facilities after they graduate.

Let's look at the riding of Thunder Bay–Atikokan, for example. Through the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant, graduates of Confederation College's practical nursing program, Thunder Bay campus, will be able to make immediate impacts at local hospitals like Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre. This initiative is not only a career builder, but also a community builder. Not only are we giving students the training for in-demand fields in Ontario, but we are also ensuring that communities across the province get the workers they need to support their local labour market needs. And it's clear that young people are eager to start their health care careers, with over 4,441 students who have submitted applications for the 2023-24 academic year.

I have a couple of other examples I'd like to share. In northern Ontario, 1,439 students have applied to eligible programs at eligible schools, like Cambrian College's paramedic program or Nipissing University's bachelor of science in nursing program. These are students who can go on to work at St. Joseph's hospital in Sudbury or North Bay General Hospital in North Bay, and more within the region.

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In the east, 1,351 students are eager to attend eligible programs like Loyalist College's bachelor of science in nursing and the University of Ottawa's master of science in nursing, which will support health care needs for places such as Belleville General Hospital in Belleville and the Ottawa Hospital in Ottawa.

And in the southwest, 1,651 students will go on to support the local health care needs across the entire region, including through programs like St. Clair College's medical lab technologist/medical laboratory science program, and one day potentially working at Windsor Essex Community Health Centre.

As we continue to prioritize a strong health care workforce in the years ahead, training the next generation of health care workers has never been more important. Looking ahead, as I mentioned, the program is designed to be responsive to evolving labour market needs and could be tailored for any program, profession or region where there is identified need. That means it may be expanded to include more programs and regions to help respond to localized labour market needs in underserved communities in Ontario. I'm confident Learn and Stay will have a huge impact on supporting local health care systems in every corner of the province, attracting and retaining the best and brightest students, and I can't wait to see the first round of graduates coming out of this program.

As an aside, I'd like to share that I was at a graduation at one of the high schools in my area, and I recognized one of the young ladies who was graduating from high school going into a nursing program at one of the identified areas, so I spotted her parents afterwards, and I went over and I said, "Has your daughter applied for Learn and Stay?" but she actually had, so it was good to hear. Actually, the daughter of one of our colleagues in the chamber is attending the University of Windsor and has also applied to the Learn and Stay program, so it will benefit the students, the communities and the local labour market needs.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Jordan.

Mr. John Jordan: Thank you, Minister and Deputy Minister, for all your work with our colleges and universities. The Learn and Stay program is a great program, I agree, and building our workforce is so very important, as well as providing all these great opportunities for our young people, so it's much appreciated.

My question is around international students. We've heard issues around housing, tuition and recruitment, so I'd be interested in knowing the ministry's strategy relative to international students and what support we're offering them in our colleges and universities.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Jordan, for that question. Before I dive into some of the key issues, I want to stress that our government truly values those who come from around the world to study at our post-secondary institutions in Ontario. Not only do students who come to Ontario to further their education enhance our reputation as a leader in higher education globally, but they enrich the academic, social and cultural well-being of campuses across the province.

These are students who not only understand the value of an Ontario-based education, but they also see Ontario as a place where they want to build careers and even start a family. We believe that all students have a critical role to play in fostering Ontario's future prosperity, and that our sector has a duty to ensure that the environment they provide for students creates the best possibility for them to succeed academically and socially.

While Ontario boasts a solid reputation as a leading destination globally for students looking to receive a world-class education, I know we have faced some challenges when it comes to our international students, challenges that I find concerning on both a professional level as a

minister, but also on a personal level as a mother. I can assure the committee that my top priority has always been and always remains providing all students with more and better learning opportunities, including providing adequate supports every step of the way in the post-secondary journey to ensure that they have a smooth transition to Ontario, and taking the necessary steps to ensure they're protected throughout that journey, from the early days of recruitment all the way to graduation.

To be perfectly clear, our post-secondary institutions are autonomous, so matters like international recruitment, tuition and enrolment are made at the sole discretion of each institution. But that being said, when it comes to tuition fees specifically, it's important to note that they are comparatively low to other international post-secondary institutions in comparable countries, including the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom.

When it comes to recruitment, all levels of government have a part to play in the future of our international students, from their safe entry into Ontario to creating conditions that make it easier for them to access post-secondary education. I'm sure we're all aware of the disturbing media reports that came out late last year, highlighting the issues we're seeing with international student recruitment. International students come here to receive a world-class education, and they deserve to be free of the predatory treatment that has become far too common from bad actors. That's why, last December, I wrote to federal minister Sean Fraser, who was Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship at the time, about the need for the federal government to step up to protect prospective international students and reduce the backlog on visa wait times. Not only has this led to talented students choosing other countries to pursue their education, but it leaves those wanting to get to Ontario vulnerable to predatory marketing and recruiters from their home countries.

On our part, our government is working hard to remove loopholes, improve oversight and develop best practices to help ensure responsible international student recruitment. For example, we review and approve post-secondary education institutions seeking designated learning institution, or DLI, status under the International Student Program, which allows them to recruit and receive international students. Under the ISP, DLIs must demonstrate an honest and ethical approach to recruiting international students. My ministry continues to work with partners, including the federal government, to review ISP requirements on an ongoing basis to ensure they reflect best practices.

Additionally, under our Public College-Private Partnerships: Minister's Binding Policy Directive, which was updated this past March, there is a new requirement for colleges to establish procedures to conduct regular reviews to ensure ethical international student recruitment practices with the goal of strengthening accountability.

Ontario is also doing its part through the incredible work of Colleges Ontario and Career Colleges Ontario, which have both developed standards of practice for international education, to ensure their member organizations comply with ethical recruitment practices, advertising and

compliance and enforcement measures. This includes things like:

- ensuring the marketing of programs to international students is accurate and transparent;
- requiring international agents working for Ontario's colleges to have completed a sector-endorsed agent training program;
- ensuring information on services, supports and facilities are provided to students before they arrive in Ontario and once they are in the province; and
- providing targeted assistance to help international students adjust to a new environment.

All signatory colleges are expected to adhere to these standards in their delivery of education of international students.

I must say, I am incredibly proud of our sector and how they continually set the standard for others to follow.

While previous governments neglected international students, our government has supported them every step of the way in accessing high-quality post-secondary education right here in Ontario. An increasingly important part of these efforts is student housing and supporting them while they study here in Ontario. Students should be able to focus on their education and not have to worry about finding appropriate housing. Thanks to our government's policies, we have delivered historic results in getting more housing built faster—and complement our more than \$4.4-billion investment to grow and enhance community housing for vulnerable Ontarians and Indigenous people. In fact, last year, Ontario reached a 30-year record for new rental housing construction—the most units built in a single year since 1991.

Addressing the housing crisis is a long-term strategy that requires long-term commitment and collaboration at all levels of government, stakeholders and post-secondary institutions. I regularly engage with our schools and key stakeholders, and we are all committed to continuing to build on these partnerships to address the housing issue and to ensure students have proper access to housing. Publicly assisted colleges and universities in Ontario are responsible for their student housing. And Ontario universities have had a 10% increase in new resident spaces over the past five years.

Over the past few months, I have visited several of our institutions that are doing fantastic work on getting shovels in the ground quickly on student housing. For example, earlier this summer, I visited Carleton University, where their president highlighted a new housing project currently under construction, which will house over 400 undergraduate students when completed.

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The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: On our part, the public college-private partnership binding policy directive continues to place greater emphasis on ensuring adequate housing. Colleges must conduct consultations every two years with their local communities, including other post-secondary institutions and municipalities in which they have public college-private partnerships operating, to ensure adequate community capacity to welcome international students.

I'm also pleased to report, this fall, together with the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, we'll be hosting consultations with post-secondary institutions and key stakeholders to further discuss together and as a government how we can better understand how we can remove barriers and red tape and explore new opportunities to chart a solid path forward that will help build affordable student housing on and off campus for our students today and the next generation.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister.

We now go to the official opposition. MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you to the minister and the deputy minister for joining the committee today.

Minister, as you are well aware, per-student funding in Ontario is the lowest in the country. It has been that way for decades. We saw a report last week, which I'm sure you read, from HESA, which called Ontario's post-secondary funding abysmal. The report stated that on a per-student basis, the province funds universities at 57% of the average of the other nine provinces, and on the college side, just 44% of the average of the other nine provinces.

So my question is, is the minister proud of this record of being the lowest in the country? Does the minister think that the lowest per-student funding is enabling Ontario colleges and universities to deliver the high-quality education that our province has always been known for, and enabling students to access the post-secondary opportunities they deserve?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Sattler, for that question. I'll start off with your final comment about access to post-secondary education, which is the most important—that all students are able to access post-secondary education in Ontario.

In 2019, we decreased tuition by 10% in this province. As I mentioned in my opening comments, Ontario had the highest tuition rates across Canada. We continued to freeze that rate until the 2023-24 academic year because we want to ensure that everyone has access to post-secondary education.

Before I turn it over to Deputy Wai, I'll just give you a little bit of background on the operating funding for my ministry. In 2022-23, the government provided more than \$5 billion in operating funding to the post-secondary sector. That would be \$3.65 billion to universities and \$1.38 billion to colleges.

In 2022-23, the government allocated \$1.38 billion in operating grants to the college sector. This was an increase of \$74 million, or 6%, over 2008-09 college transfer payments of \$1.3 billion.

As I mentioned with the universities, in 2022-23, the government allocated \$3.65 billion. This was an increase of \$500 million, or 16%, over the 2008-09 transfer payments of \$3.1 billion. So the province provides core operating funding for enrolment based on a corridor funding approach.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay. Thank you. But in comparison to the other provinces, Ontario remains the lowest in the country in terms of per-student funding, and as you will also be aware, any increases that have been provided

by the ministry have always been below the rate of inflation. So when you provide an increase that is below inflation, it is actually a cut, which is why Ontario has remained at the bottom of every other province in Canada.

My next question: Is there a plan to increase per-student funding to at least the national average?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that question, MPP Sattler. I'd like to mention the blue-ribbon panel that I also mentioned in my opening comments. We announced the creation of a blue-ribbon panel of experts to provide advice and recommendations for keeping the post-secondary education sector financially stable and focused on providing the best student experience possible. This panel is made up of experts from the business and academic sectors, as well. They've been working tirelessly all summer. The consultations have finished at this time and we are waiting for the report back, which should be coming in the next few weeks.

I know my ministry, as well as our stakeholders, are looking forward to those recommendations and moving forward and working together on the recommendations that come from that report.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

A lot of the instability in the post-secondary sector was actually introduced, was triggered, by the tuition reduction and subsequent freeze that your government implemented in 2019. Certainly, colleges and universities immediately raised concerns about the impact this is going to have on the long-term financial sustainability of the sector. They've continued to raise those concerns four years later.

It's important that this blue-ribbon panel has been struck, but my question is: Why did the government wait so long to do anything to acknowledge these concerns and also, related to that, why were current students, staff and faculty excluded from direct representation on the blue-ribbon panel?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that question, MPP Sattler. It sounds like you were actually in favour of having the highest tuition in Canada and were against a tuition cut and substantial continued freeze. I heard from students, from families, and they were in favour of a tuition cut and to continue the freeze.

The blue-ribbon panel, as I mentioned, has been working all summer across the sector. They've heard consultations from many of the post-secondary institutions; also, submissions were made. We actually have one of our members who was a former president from OUSA, the undergraduate student alliance. So, we have great representation on that panel, many experts from across the field, and I'm looking forward to other recommendations that will be coming shortly.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay. I'm going to have more questions specific to student financial aid and student tuition, but at this time I just want to stay on the underfunding of the sector.

We heard from the Financial Accountability Officer in the Q4 expenditure monitor that the government is not even spending the limited dollars that it is allocating. The government underspent on its original 2022-23 plan by

\$392 million. So can you explain to us, given the concerns about financial sustainability in the sector that we have been hearing about for years and the lowest per-student funding in the province, why budgeted money was not spent on colleges and universities?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: I'm going to turn that question over to my deputy.

Mr. David Wai: Sure. The 2023-24 expenditure estimates set out the ministry's operating and capital spending requirements and constitute our formal request to the Legislature for their approval. The allocation for 2023-24 is \$12.1148 billion. This is an increase of \$1.314 billion from 2022-23 and represents a 12% increase relative to 2022-23.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I was actually asking about the 2022-23 budget, which was underspent by \$392 million.

Mr. David Wai: I'll ask my ADM Kelly Shields to come up and to provide some colour on that 2022-23 information. Just while she's coming up, I will describe what was in the difference between the estimates between 2022-23 and 2023-24. There is \$155-million change related to an increase in grants, \$101 million related to grants—

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I actually was asking about the money that the FAO found was underspent in the 2022-23 plan.

But I'm going to move on now to OSAP and student access. The estimates this year say that there's going to be a 1.9% increase in student financial aid, as you just mentioned. But, as we all know, that is well below inflation, so that is not an increase, that is a cut. My question: Why is your ministry effectively reducing financial assistance for students to attend colleges and universities?

1350

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that question, MPP Sattler. Let me take it right back to the beginning: There was a tuition cut in 2019-20, because Ontario's tuition was the highest in Canada. This was done in order to ensure that all students have access to education in Ontario. We continued the freeze on tuition until this 2023-24 school year.

I might remind the member that OSAP is a needs-based program; we are making it affordable and accessible for everyone. We now also include micro-credentials, which are available for OSAP, as well as Indigenous institutes and private career colleges.

But what we're finding is that students aren't using the system. It's not that we've cut anything; they're just not using the money that is available for them—

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Right, but we know students are struggling enormously with cost-of-living pressures that all Ontarians are experiencing. There was a recent study by RBC that said almost half of students aged 18 to 29 are going to be living at home with their parents—it was only a quarter of students in 2013; almost half of students expect to graduate with up to \$20,000 in debt, and that is an increase from just 30% in 2013. So we know that there is financial need.

Going back to the FAO report, we also know that there was \$141 million that was unspent in student financial

assistance last year. So, again, I'd like to ask the minister why that money was left on the table when there are thousands of students in this province who are struggling to get through college or university.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Sattler, for the question. You made an interesting comment about students living at home. I don't see that as being a negative thing. In fact, the work that we've done with colleges—and I know we have President David Agnew here from Seneca College joining us here today—to allow stand-alone nursing programs at Ontario's colleges, the work that's being done with three-year degrees is so important and gives students the ability and access that they want to stay home and learn in their communities and meet the local labour-market needs. That is an option for them.

I'll just give you a few numbers before I send it to the deputy to talk a little bit more about the grants versus loans. In the 2021-22 academic year, approximately \$4.2 billion in student aid was issued through full-time OSAP. In the 2021-22 academic year, approximately 385,000 students received assistance through full-time OSAP. The average per-student value of full-time OSAP assistance issued to students studying at different Ontario post-secondary institutions were as follows: publicly assisted universities, \$9,946; publicly assisted colleges, \$10,314; private career colleges, \$20,663; and other publicly funded and private institutions, \$11,454. So 80% of Ontario assistance issued to full-time students was in the form of grants, while 54% of federal assistance was in the form of grants.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: But we also know that last year there were 160,000 students in this province that had to access the Repayment Assistance Plan, which means that they had major difficulty repaying the student loans that they received. Many of us have kids in our families who are still struggling to repay OSAP loans. So my question related to OSAP loans is, can the minister tell us what portion of student loans are never recovered? There's 160,000 students who had to go to the Repayment Assistance Plan. We know that at some point—seven years or 10 years—those loans are written off. So can you tell us what is the amount that is never recovered, and how much does the government spend in hunting down students to try to get them to repay loans that they are having great difficulty repaying?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question, MPP Sattler. I'll start off, but I'll ask my deputy minister and possibly an ADM to contribute as well.

For full-time OSAP, Canada and Ontario have a harmonized and integrated single student loan, and this means one payment and one repayment. For students who receive loans from OSAP, the Ontario portion of the loans are interest-free during full-time studies. Interest accrues on students' provincial loans when they have ceased full-time studies. However, students have at least six months following the end of their studies before loan repayments are required. Terms of repayment are typically based on a period of nine and a half years, although borrowers have

the option to renegotiate payments for up to 14 and a half years. The average repayable debt for students who were in the final year of their program in 2020-21 was \$21,322 for a four-year university student, \$13,127 for two-year college students, and \$14,790 for one-year private career college students.

The Ontario Student Loan Rehabilitation Program allows borrowers who have defaulted on the Ontario portion of their student loan to re-establish good standing through scheduled, partial payments.

The governments of Ontario and Canada offer assistance to student loan borrowers who are having difficulty repaying their loans, through the Repayment Assistance Plan. There are different eligibility criteria for federal and provincial repayment assistance programs, so students may qualify for different levels of assistance for their federal and provincial loans. Example: Students may qualify for zero payment for their federal loan but qualify for an affordable payment for their provincial loan.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: That provincial loan—my understanding is that once the interest-free period is over, the rates are prime plus 1%, which means that students who are repaying OSAP loans today are paying a rate of 8.2% interest.

Can the minister tell us how much revenue is being generated for the provincial government based on the interest that they are earning from provincial student loans?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: I'm going to hand it over to my deputy to talk a bit about the grant portion of that first.

Mr. David Wai: Just to be clear: I'd just remind the committee that 80% of Ontario funds are funded through grants, as opposed to only 50% of federal assistance which is through grants. So 80% is through grants, and only 20% is through loans.

I can ask ADM Anna Boyden to come forward and provide further information around the costs for those loans.

Ms. Anna Boyden: Thank you, Deputy.

I'm Anna Boyden, acting assistant deputy minister, advanced education learner supports division.

With regard to the OSAP default rates and the repayment assistance program usage rates, I can confirm, since 2018-19 to present, we've actually seen a decline in the percentage of students up-taking these particular programs. In 2018-19, for the OSAP default rate, we saw 6.1% of students defaulting on loans after two years of repayment; in the most recent year we have completed, 2021-22, that number has dropped to 3.7%. On the repayment assistance program—confirming in 2018-19, we saw 36.3% of students adopting that program, whereas in the last year, 2021-22, we saw that program's usage drop to 23%.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to go on to some of the changes that were introduced to OSAP eligibility with the tuition rate reduction in 2019.

We have heard, as I'm sure the minister has heard, from students that the changes to OSAP that were made around the financial criteria for eligibility have excluded many students in this province from accessing financial aid to attend post-secondary education.

So my question is, what is the minister doing to ensure that OSAP actually enables students in financial need to access post-secondary education?

1400

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Sattler, for the question. The government observed an increase in the budgeted amounts for student financial assistance between 2022-23 and 2023-24 as a result of an update to the OSAP forecast and additional funding for the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant. The additional grant funding—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: —and revised expectations for OSAP are reflected by the following impacts to OSAP transfer payment expenses and loan portfolio, which have been reported in estimates:

—a \$16.3-million increase for the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant;

—an \$8.4-million net increase in student financial assistance funding related to previous updates to the OSAP forecast; and

—a \$21.5-million reduction in the operating assets.

Just to remind all the members here today that we provide approximately \$4.2 billion in student financial assistance to approximately 400,000 students every year. This is a needs-based system. As I mentioned before, we have seen a decrease in the students accessing the OSAP program. But I want to thank—I was at the Ontario colleges and universities fairs last year and actually got to meet with the OSAP representatives from our office who were there first-hand, talking with students and ensuring that they were helping them work through the system—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister.

We will now turn to the independent member for 10 minutes. MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: So as the housing crisis intensifies across Ontario, students are particularly impacted. We cannot expect all students to work full-time while doing university full-time. How does the government plan to ensure new university residences are built faster? I didn't hear an urgency for this crisis—it is a crisis—pointed out in your report. In my riding, Minister, there are landlords that are renting houses with four international students in one bedroom. We have a lot of that through Scarborough. Are you aware that this is a crisis right now for international students coming into Canada?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Well, thank you, MPP Hazell. Very nice to meet you, and congratulations on being elected.

I was actually in your riding just last week at the Scarborough campus. We visited on the Wednesday and the residence was opening on the Friday, so we were still wearing hard hats and work boots—commotion everywhere where they were finishing up construction to welcome 750 students to that new residence on the Friday. So within a couple of days, these students would be arriving. That would be doubling the capacity of the residence at the campus in your area. Incredible work that's being done across the province—I'll just use that as one example, because it is your riding.

We know it's a housing crisis, not just with students but across the province. That's why this government is working hard to build 1.5 million homes. But I look at what our sector is doing to step up, to help alleviate the pressure on municipalities. Right now, we are undergoing consultations through the ministry with the sector, with colleges and universities. Those have been under way. I will also be hosting a minister's round table coming up in September and October where not only will we have colleges, universities and private career colleges at the table, but we'll also be hearing from municipalities.

Most of us just came back from AMO. That was a question that I had from most municipalities: What about student housing? Because everyone agrees having a campus in their region is a win-win for all. But we want to ensure there's adequate housing, because if there's not enough housing for students, then there's not enough housing for residents of the community. So the work that I see across the colleges, universities and private career colleges, this really is a priority for my sector—not just my ministry, but for the stakeholders right now—to ensure that there is adequate housing on campus.

I can tell you from my time working at Georgian College prior to politics, I worked at the Orillia campus, and there was a time where there wasn't student housing. Every open house in the spring, parents and students would come and they would visit and they loved the campus, but the question that parents always asked was, "Where is the housing?" Because we want to ensure, as parents sending our children off to university and college campuses, that there is adequate and safe housing located on campus, especially with those first-year students. It's kind of a selling feature for campuses as well, to ensure there's adequate housing.

So we're working with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing on the consultations and as part of the housing supply action plan. So that is a priority for myself, for my stakeholders too, to ensure that not just only our domestic students but international students who are coming here for the first time aren't having to worry about housing. I'll admit, we all know there's a housing issue in this province. I hear it in every region I visit. It takes not just the provincial government but all levels of government to step up. It really takes municipalities to ensure that housing projects that are under way or that are in the early stages by institutions—that they work with municipalities and municipalities help to accelerate these types of housing.

I'll give you two examples. The University of Toronto—I met with the president recently. They have a project under way that will hopefully open next year. This project has been 15 years in the making because of holdups from the municipality and eventually went to LPAT. These are our neighbours who are complaining about student housing, but this is housing for our future doctors and engineers, for the people who are going to work and run this province.

Another example was at the University of Guelph. There was a housing opportunity on the street right across from the campus. It was a private developer working in

conjunction with the university, which we see happen in many areas, which is a great opportunity for our institutions, but the council—everyone except one person, and it was the mayor—voted against the student housing. We can't have this happening. If municipalities want campuses in their areas and they value that, then they really need to step up and be a partner working with the institutions to ensure that there is housing—

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you. I have another question to follow up, because I only have 10 minutes.

Following its bankruptcy, Laurentian University has shuttered 58 of its programs, including mathematics, environmental sciences, geography and political sciences. Northern Ontarians deserve quality education, but many have been driven south because of the closure. Many of those students will stay in Toronto and other southern cities, a brain drain of the north. Does the minister view this as a problem, and how do they plan to address this situation?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you very much for that question. We inherited a crisis with Laurentian University, and it was this government and this ministry that stepped up to ensure that Laurentian was able to successfully move forward. It's not just about having access to education in the north for those students, but you think of the benefits of a university in an area for the community but also for the local labour market needs, the different industries in the northern area. Having access to education is very important, and that's why we worked together across government to ensure that we were able to work with Laurentian to support them through that process to see them come out on the other side of it and be successful.

As far as any cuts to programming, colleges and universities are autonomous institutions, so they make those decisions in the program offerings that are available, but we worked with them to ensure that they were successful coming through the CCAA process.

MPP Andrea Hazell: One more follow-up question: Similarly, the province denied to fund the University of Sudbury despite having a qualified business plan—

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Excuse me. MPP Pierre, on a point of order, I believe.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Yes, a point of order: The Ministry of Colleges and Universities doesn't fund the University of Sudbury, and so it should not be a part of today's conversation. It's strictly about estimates.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay. My last: York University has applied to open a medical school in Vaughan. Will the province move forward with this proposal? We need more doctors, of course, in our province, so why the wait?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that question and acknowledging that, yes, we need more doctors. I know in my own community I could use some, and I'm sure around the table we all could. That's why this government had the largest expansion of medical education in 10 years. We originally announced 160 undergraduate and 295 post-graduate spaces and then continued that expansion in the

2023 budget—100 undergraduate and 154 postgraduate spaces.

We acknowledge that there is a lot of work to be done in training doctors, especially family medicine. We have committed to the new TMU medical school that will be built in Brampton, the U of T campus Scarborough—so it looks like Scarborough is doing quite well. I have met with York University several times, and I know they've consulted with many different politicians across the area. But we're working with them, and I know they have brought a plan forward, so we want to see—right now, we have TMU Brampton, that will be starting shortly. So we have had that medical seat expansion across the province, and we'll continue working and we're proud to be a partner with York University and work through that process.

1410

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you, Minister.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): That concludes the questions from the independent member.

We will now move to the next round from our government members. MPP Barnes.

Ms. Patrice Barnes: Thank you, Minister. My question is, both yourself and the deputy minister have spoken about research and innovation being an integral part of MCU and the many investments that have been made so far in this area. Can you expand some more on the research security and intellectual property protections that have been put in place?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that question. I've said this before, and I'll say it again: Our sector really does amazing work when it comes to research with some of the best and brightest minds right here in Ontario. It is clear that Ontario is home to a world-class sector of researchers that continue to compete and thrive in the global economy, and they are crucial to the advancement of technologies and practices within education, health and business. Their advancements make real differences in the lives of Ontarians.

I'm sure that we all agree our researchers cannot do it alone, and that is why our government has stepped up and become an active player in the Ontario research and data community. When it comes to funding research, our government continues to work with post-secondary institutions and academic hospitals to support their research needs. To give you a better idea, the majority of these funds are divided into three competitive funding streams, all with specific and vastly different needs: the Early Researcher Award, the Ontario research fund - research infrastructure and the Ontario research fund - research excellence.

Since 2018, the Early Researcher Award has awarded over \$25 million to help promising, early-career, Ontario-based researchers build up their research teams while improving Ontario's ability to attract and retain the best and brightest research talent.

Since 2018, The Ontario Research Fund—Research Infrastructure has awarded over \$334 million to ensure that Ontario's research infrastructure continues to be competitive to engage in global research and development and allows Ontario to leverage matching federal funding through the Canada Foundation for Innovation. The Ontario

Research Fund—Research Infrastructure comprises the large infrastructure fund, the small infrastructure fund, the college fund and the Biosciences Research Infrastructure Fund.

The large infrastructure fund helps cover the costs of building and renovating and equipping facilities to conduct large-scale, collaborative academic research. The small research fund helps cover the costs of acquiring and renewing research equipment. The college fund provides Ontario colleges with state-of-the-art, industry-relevant research infrastructure to foster partnerships with the private, not-for-profit or public sectors and support businesses and/or community-led innovation. And the Biosciences Research Infrastructure Fund is a one-time, \$16-million investment to help address the immediate infrastructure needs in post-secondary institutions and affiliated research hospitals' capacity to support pandemic preparedness and respond to emerging health threats.

Finally, since 2018, the Ontario Research Fund—Research Excellence has awarded over \$238 million to support leading-edge, transformative and internationally significant research of strategic value in Ontario. It also leverages federal funding with Genome Canada through the following three active programs, including Genomic Applications Partnership Program, Ontario research fund interdisciplinary challenge teams and Ontario research fund genomics hub.

In addition to the competitive research programs, Ontario supports groundbreaking work at leading research institutes and university facilities across the province, many that I have seen first-hand upon touring institutions across the province. I'm happy to share that last academic year, in 2022-23, our government invested \$129.8 million to support groundbreaking work at leading research institutes and universities across the province. These investments include world-class research institutes, including Clinical Trials Ontario, Compute Ontario, Fields Institute for Research in Mathematical Sciences, the Ontario Brain Institute, Ontario Genomics, Ontario Institute for Cancer Research, Perimeter Institute, the Centre for Aging and Brain Health Innovation, SNOLAB, Vector Institute, and advanced research computing facilities at 13 research institutions across the province.

I had the privilege of visiting SNOLAB late last year, where I and a staff member were in awe of the incredible research being done almost two kilometres below the earth's surface, just outside of Sudbury. Like SNOLAB, these institutions are completing research in crucial economic areas and areas that match our government's initiatives in health care, agriculture, critical minerals and electric vehicles.

As announced in the 2023 budget, Ontario is investing \$6.8 million in the McMaster Nuclear Reactor, Canada's largest nuclear research reactor and a world-leading supplier of medical isotopes used to treat cancer. Spread over three years, this funding will contribute to the university's \$25-million project to optimize operations of the nuclear reactor to 24 hours a day, five days a week, and increase the diversity and number of isotopes produced. I had the opportunity to

tour the reactor just a few months ago with my colleague Minister Todd Smith, the Minister of Energy. The work being done there is truly remarkable and game-changing.

In addition to supporting our research community through investments in capacity, talent, applied research programs and addressing research gaps, our government is committed to ensuring that investments made by Ontario tax dollars have a direct benefit to Ontario taxpayers. Thanks in no small part to our sector, Ontario is a leader in academic and research excellence in areas like life sciences and cancer research. In today's global economy, the foundation of success in global competitiveness is the value of the ideas and intellectual property the sector is bringing to market, but for too long and across too many sectors we've seen the benefits of ideas, innovations and research generated in Ontario leave Ontario. IP assets are commercialized somewhere else instead of creating value right here at home.

Under the leadership of Peter Cowan at Intellectual Property Ontario, or IPON, it's finally on the path to become a world leader in not just research but protecting and commercializing IP. Our government invested \$58 million in 2020 over three years into IPON, with MCU directly investing \$7.2 million in 2022-23, and it's set to receive \$7.7 million in 2023-24. IPON has made great progress over the past three years and has selected 40 clients to work with across four priority groups:

- 12 clients from the medical technology sector;
- 11 clients from the automotive sector;
- 13 clients from the artificial intelligence sector; and
- four clients that are recipients of the Ontario Research Fund—Research Excellence award.

IPON has made incredible progress. It has on-boarded and begun service delivery for all 40 clients, and has already received positive client feedback for the approach to micro-credentialing and basic education workshops. In addition to aiding their clients, IPON also launched a post-secondary education commercialization support program in February of this year to provide financial support to post-secondary institutions for pilot projects that will enhance post-secondary commercialization capacity and commercialization efforts. IPON received 23 proposals and selected seven projects to fund, totalling \$2 million to go directly to institutions to support hiring new staff, including full-time equivalents, and to implement pilot projects. Institutions who have received funding for their remarkable proposals include Conestoga College, La Cité college, Durham College, Niagara College, Lambton College, York University, and a joint proposal led by universities, with Trent, Lakehead and Nipissing universities.

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In addition to these projects, IPON is supporting the ministry to implement a Commercialization Mandate Policy Framework. As a key pillar of the government's intellectual property action plan, the government introduced the Commercialization Mandate Policy Framework to help colleges and universities to be more intentional in their approach to IP management and commercialization, with a focus on ensuring Ontario-made innovations benefit Ontarians.

IPON plays a pivotal role in advising the ministry on institutions' foundational commercialization policies and develops an annual sector report on the implementation of these policies. Along with the ministry, IPON also leads a joint working group to identify metrics that will help institutions demonstrate progress on achieving goals of their commercialization mandate.

Overall, the future of intellectual property in Ontario is bright, thanks to this government's leadership. And as Ontario continues to be a global leader in research and intellectual property, our government is taking the necessary steps to ensure that the benefit of research undertaken in Ontario colleges, universities, academic hospitals and research institutes is safeguarded from hostile actors. To that end, MCU has integrated security reviews, developed in partnership with the Ministry of the Solicitor General, into all of MCU's competitive research funding programs. Additionally, the ministry has held consultations with public universities and colleges to get a better understanding of what research security capabilities institutions possess and what guidance they are looking to from the ministry.

Ontario's research programs and institutions are recognized globally for having a reputation of excellence, and we owe it to students to do everything we can to uphold that reputation. All across the province, our research institutes, hospitals and, of course, colleges and universities continue to push knowledge to its limits. Our government will protect taxpayers' dollars, promote Ontario-based research and ensure that we continue to support an innovative environment that builds capacity and creates jobs, opportunity and growth for our economy.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Quinn.

Mr. Nolan Quinn: Thank you to the minister for being here today.

My question is on campus safety. I know that is something that you and this government have taken very seriously over the years, but with the recent events at Waterloo over the summer, it bears bringing it up.

Can you please tell us what you have done to support campus safety, and hopefully, what is yet to come to ensure our students, staff and others on campuses across our province feel safe?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question, MPP Quinn. It's a very important one, and it really hits home for me on a professional and a personal level. I mentioned earlier that I have three post-secondary-aged daughters. My youngest is actually just going into her fourth year at Western. So there's nothing that's more important to me than the safety and well-being of our students and ensuring that they feel supported on- and off-campus.

Off the top, I'd like to address the horrific incident that took place at the University of Waterloo this summer. No one should have to experience something like this when they pursue an education. All forms of violence have no place in our communities, on or off our campuses. When I spoke to the president of Waterloo following the shocking incident, I offered our government's support to staff, faculty and the student community.

As minister, I expect that our college, university and Indigenous institute partners have plans and supports in place to keep students and faculty safe, and that they frequently review safety and security measures to ensure the safety of students, faculty, staff and visitors on their campuses is maintained. We all have a role to play to provide students and staff with a safe environment that is conducive to their education, and anything short of that is unacceptable.

As a government, our priority is to support Ontario students and help them access high-quality education—education that will help them develop the knowledge and skills that they need to get good-paying jobs and support the growth of our economy. But in order for students to flourish in post-secondary education and beyond, we first need to provide them with a solid foundation that fosters success.

All students in Ontario deserve to learn in a healthy, safe and respectful environment—one where they don't have to worry about discrimination or harassment while accessing an education—and an environment where there are supports in place that students can rely on when they need help. The safety and well-being of everyone on Ontario's campuses is a critical responsibility of our post-secondary institutions as autonomous entities. That said, our government will continue to have those ongoing discussions with our institutions on how we can take action to support them in their efforts.

To help students feel safe on campuses, my ministry has developed several initiatives to put students first. This includes the Campus Safety Grant, a \$6-million investment annually to help assist and support publicly assisted colleges and universities with campus safety programs like safety training, consent and healthy relationship workshops or programs, security cameras, lighting, safety apps and emergency notification systems; and things like safe-walk programs, sexual-violence-prevention websites and programs, safety and sexual-violence-prevention workshops, conferences and speakers series, assault-prevention programs and bystander/upstander training.

We are also investing an additional allocation of \$1.35 million from 2023-24 to 2025-26 in a new Indigenous institutes Campus Safety Grant to support the institutes in conducting a campus safety-needs assessment and policy development, safety awareness and training programs for students and staff, including de-escalation and suicide prevention, campus safe-walk programs, security cameras and panic buttons.

We pride ourselves on being a government that is responsive to the evolving needs of its people, and we know that issues as pervasive as sexual violence and harassment aren't addressed by quick fixes. That's why in August of 2021, following reports regarding sexual misconduct cases in post-secondary institutions, our government engaged with colleges, universities, private career colleges and student groups to develop a plan of action to build on and expand our existing measures. Following these consultations, it was clear that there was more work to be done to ensure a safe learning environment for students.

To that end, we introduced and unanimously passed, thanks to all the support across the House, the Strengthening Post-secondary Institutions and Students Act, 2022, which requires publicly assisted colleges and universities as well as private career colleges to have specific processes in place that address faculty and staff sexual misconduct on campus, and to make these processes transparent. These processes include:

- equipping institutions with stronger tools to address instances of faculty or staff sexual misconduct against students, like being able to dismiss a faculty member or staff who committed sexual misconduct toward a student;

- preventing the use of non-disclosure agreements, which can be used to hide the prior wrongdoing of an employee when they leave one institution for another; and

- requiring institutions to have employee sexual misconduct policies that outline rules of behaviour between employees and students and contain examples of disciplinary measures for employees who break these rules.

This builds on regulations announced in 2021 that required all institutions to update their sexual violence policies to ensure they empower students to report acts of sexual violence without that student having to face any potential repercussions for violating the school's drug or alcohol policy.

Bill 26 is survivor-centric and driven by consultations from over 100 members from across the post-secondary sector—consultations that made it clear more tools were needed to address matters of faculty-on-student sexual violence. I want to note that these have been well received by leaders in the post-secondary education sector and by students I've spoken to, with shows of support from the Council of Ontario Universities, Colleges Ontario and Career Colleges Ontario. Across political lines, everyone was in favour of this. I know everyone around this table is aware that this bill passed with unanimous consent.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute remaining.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: It should be noted that these measures make Ontario one of only two Canadian jurisdictions that require institutions to have policies requiring rules for behaviour between faculty and staff and students who impose disciplinary measures on faculty or staff who break these rules. It's also important we acknowledge the many other factors at play in the context of ensuring campus safety. I'm proud to say that our government has taken definitive action to better support the inclusion, access and success of more students at Ontario's post-secondary institutions.

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For example, my Ministry of Colleges and Universities engaged with the Premier's Council on Equality of Opportunity in March 2021 to receive feedback from key stakeholders and advocates on how the government can better respond to accessibility challenges faced by under-represented groups at our colleges and universities. The insights garnered through that process is helping our government shape a better, more inclusive post-secondary system, with many programs in place.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister.

We will now turn to the official opposition for the next round of 20-minute questioning. MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I'd like to continue on the theme of student housing. We've talked about that already today and, certainly, as the minister pointed out, student housing is becoming a major concern of municipalities across this province. The official opposition met with more than two dozen delegations at the AMO conference in August and heard repeatedly about some of the pressures that municipalities are facing. They welcome colleges and universities in their communities as anchor institutions that are critically important for local economies, but they are facing financial stress because of the provincial underfunding of post-secondary education. That has meant that many of the costs of post-secondary are being downloaded to municipalities, and that's particularly the case with student housing at a time when we are facing an unprecedented housing crisis in this province.

Colleges and universities are finding it challenging to be able to allocate the funding necessary to build student housing. Students can't afford to pay rent. They're not getting the kind of support they need with OSAP or institutional bursaries and are really struggling to be able to find somewhere to live. In response to all this, we hear your government talk about carving up the greenbelt as the solution to the housing crisis in Ontario.

I'd like the minister to explain how the government's decision to sell off protected greenbelt land to well-connected developers—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Sattler, I'll remind you, please direct questions related to the estimates. Thank you.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Well, we have been talking about student housing as being part of the estimates and the fiscal challenges that colleges and universities are experiencing because of underfunding. So, my question is—the government's greenbelt strategy that involves selling off protected greenbelt lands to insider developers, how is that going to ease the housing crisis for Ontario post-secondary students?

Mrs. Robin Martin: Point of order, Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Martin.

Mrs. Robin Martin: On a point of order: I don't really see how that question has anything to do with the estimates of the Ministry of Colleges and Universities.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Unfortunately, MPP Sattler, I will rule it out of order.

MPP Gates?

Mr. Wayne Gates: I appreciate that—except the minister, during her opening comments, mentioned the fact “that's why our party is building 1.5 million homes,” which includes the greenbelt. You brought it up in your statement, so therefore, the Chair should allow it because it was her that actually raised the 1.5 million homes which are tied to the greenbelt, even though we know we don't need to build on the greenbelt. So I disagree with your ruling.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Pierre?

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Just a point of order: The Ministry of Colleges and Universities doesn't fund student housing and, as such, should not be a part of today's conversation.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you.

Go ahead, MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Chair, we did hear the minister refer to new student residences that are being built at Carleton University, and what I understand from colleges and universities is, because of the lowest per-student funding in Canada because of the ongoing financial pressures that universities are facing, they are hard-pressed to be able to build the housing that students need, and the cuts to student financial assistance have made it very difficult for students to afford paying the rent.

Since I can't ask about how selling off the greenbelt is going to help Ontario's students, my question is, what is the Ministry of Colleges and Universities planning to do this fiscal year, 2023-24, to ensure that college and university students in the province can access decent, safe and affordable housing while they are attending post-secondary?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Sattler, for that question. I'm happy to talk about student housing, because it is a priority not just for my ministry but across our whole sector.

Earlier, I talked about the consultations that are under way. I talked about the colleges and universities being part of that, as well as municipalities, and then I got off track and didn't come back to tell you about the fact that we are having students as part of the consultations and round table, as well as some of the companies that are in the sphere of student housing development. This is an opportunity that some campuses have participated in that's not necessarily—sometimes it could be due to lack of space on-campus to build new accommodations, but partnerships with private companies too, to build student residences.

Some of the campuses I visited over the summer—I mentioned U of T Scarborough campus recently, and Carleton University in my opening remarks. I was also at the University of Windsor, where they're getting shovels in the ground to build a new student residence. A new student residence went online at Western University just in the past couple of weeks. So we're seeing it across the sector in universities and colleges, and private career colleges, making sure that there is adequate housing on- or off-campus for students.

There's more work to be done in this area, and I really think it is not just a responsibility of the provincial government, but also municipalities, to step up and be part of that—and in that manner, I mean as far as accelerating student housing with the permitting process and to not hold up these projects that are critical to our areas, because, as I said, colleges and universities are stepping up and taking the pressure off municipalities. When colleges and universities are building student housing and making that a priority for them, it eases the burden on municipalities that need that housing or those rental spaces for residents who live in the area.

So there is more work to be done, but the work that we're doing with the consultations, working with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the round tables that will be coming—working together to ensure that we're collaborating, moving forward.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you, Minister. I'm going to get back to housing in a moment, but I want to ask some questions about international students.

We saw two fairly recent reports from the Auditor General about the overreliance of Ontario's post-secondary sector on international student fees.

There was a report in December 2021 where the auditor said that Ontario colleges received 68% of their tuition fees from international students in the 2020-21 fiscal year.

We know that there are many colleges that actually have more international students than domestic students.

The HESA report that I mentioned earlier, issued last week, found that students from just a single country, India, are contributing more to college revenue in Ontario than the government of Ontario, which is shocking.

In 2022, the auditor also found that international students are paying 45% of university tuition revenues, even though international students make up only 14% of the student body.

So with the academic year under way, can the minister tell us exactly what percentage of revenue for Ontario colleges this academic year is from tuition paid by international students and what percentage of revenue for Ontario universities this academic year is from international student tuition?

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Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Sattler, for the question. I'm going to ask the deputy to pull up that information, but before we get to that—because I don't have that right in front of me—I just wanted to talk about the world-class education system we have here in Ontario. International students come here because of the education that's offered in Ontario. It's the education but also the job opportunities that are available.

I'm sure every one of us around this table can talk about the local labour market needs in our own communities. I know them in mine. When I travelled around the province visiting different communities, I was with MPP Gates in his community about a month ago meeting about the ribbon-cutting for the new public-private partnership and the programs that were going to be offered at that school that were meeting the local labour market needs for Fort Erie. On top of that, one important thing that I took away is the student housing building that they're looking at doing. It's a real partnership, and we know that's important.

I'll get to the number. I'm going to pass it over to the deputy because he has the breakdown in front of him.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Yes, I'd just like those two specific breakdowns: what percentage of revenue for Ontario colleges in this academic year is from international student tuition and the same for Ontario universities.

Mr. David Wai: Thank you, MPP Sattler. For clarification, we wouldn't have 2023-24 yet, but for 2022-23,

international tuition revenue represented 32% of total revenue.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: In colleges or in universities?

Mr. David Wai: Sorry, in colleges.

Then in universities, we do not have finalized data for 2022-23. For 2021-22, in universities, international tuition represented 21%.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: How do you explain the discrepancy with what the Auditor General had reported: that Ontario colleges received 68% of tuition fees from international students in December 2021? The auditor had also found 45% for universities from international student tuition.

Mr. David Wai: Just for clarification, the numbers I provided you, 32% and 21%, were of all revenue sources. So are you asking—

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Of tuition revenues.

Mr. David Wai: Of tuition revenues.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Yes, of tuition revenues.

Mr. David Wai: I don't have the number in front of me, but my understanding is that domestic tuition—this is in colleges—was roughly 11% of all revenue sources, so I'd have to do the math. Then on the university side—

Ms. Peggy Sattler: So 89% international for colleges?

Mr. David Wai: No, it would be roughly \$2.2 billion of the \$3 billion. Then on the university side, domestic tuition represented 22%, so roughly the same as international tuition—about 50%, is my understanding, of tuition. Maybe I'll ask ADM Kelly Shields to provide any further clarification.

Ms. Kelly Shields: Kelly Shields, ADM of the post-secondary education division.

Deputy, that's correct in terms of the figures that you were saying.

Mr. David Wai: Okay, thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Speak into the mike a little more, sorry.

Ms. Kelly Shields: Oh. I was just saying that what the deputy had outlined, that's correct in terms of the most recent—

Ms. Peggy Sattler: So 2.2% of \$3 billion in revenues for colleges is from international student tuition?

Mr. David Wai: It's \$2.2 billion of roughly \$3 billion.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: So \$2.2 billion of—

Mr. David Wai: Of the \$3 billion.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: —is from international.

Mr. David Wai: Right. Then on the university side, roughly, what I have is about 22%, or \$3.6 billion, from domestic, and \$3.3 billion from international.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: So almost half in the university sector. Okay, thank you.

Clearly, universities and colleges have turned to international student tuition both as a means of strengthening our economy in this province, but also to deal with that funding shortfall that was created by the government when domestic student tuition fees were frozen. We know that international students can pay as much as 10 times more than domestic students for tuition, so that represents thousands and thousands of dollars that international students are contributing to the sector.

We have heard the federal government float the idea of a cap on the number of international students entering Canada, and hence, entering Ontario. We are hearing about the possibility of another COVID wave, which could affect the number of international students coming to this province. Either of those things, or other unexpected issues or events, would have an immediate and drastic financial impact on Ontario's colleges and universities.

So my question is, what is the ministry's plan to deal with the potential huge loss of revenue that would result if there is a decrease in the number of international students entering this province?

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Martin.

Mrs. Robin Martin: Thank you, Chair. On a point of order, I'm just wondering, again, if we're not doing estimates here—because the universities are institutions that have revenue sources of various kinds, as we've heard, but we're supposed to be looking at the estimates of this ministry. So I'm not quite sure what a federal policy has to do with the estimates of this ministry or if we have now gone outside of the purview of this committee.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Sattler, you're walking an extremely fine line on your questioning. A lot of things you mentioned in your last question are federal responsibilities.

Minister, you have the opportunity to answer.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Sattler, for the question. Yes, that is a federal matter, and no, I'm not in favour of a cap. I think that international students strengthen our communities. We need students to come here. We need immigration in this province, and immigration through the pathway of education, I think, is fantastic. Students choose to come to Ontario. That's their choice. You talk about the tuition rates, yet Ontario's tuition for international students is still below countries like Australia, the US and the United Kingdom. So students are making that choice to come study in Ontario, and we welcome them to our communities. We need them.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Yes, but the sector is precariously balanced on international student tuition fees in order to be able to deliver post-secondary education in Ontario. We just heard how much of the tuition revenues for colleges and universities are made up of the fees that are paid by international students. So just in terms of looking at the overall financial stability and sustainability of the sector, I would hope that there would be some thought given by the ministry through the estimates process to anticipating a possible decrease in the number of international students, which could be caused by the federal government or things happening in other countries around the world, and the impact of that loss of revenue on Ontario's post-secondary sector.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question, MPP Sattler. Two things I would like to comment on, addressing your question are, one, the blue-ribbon panel. They are looking at international students across the sector. So that will be one of the things that they have been consulting on and hearing back from the sector, and they will be making

recommendations on that as part of the report in the coming weeks.

The other is looking at the long-term financial sustainability of colleges and universities. We've done a lot of work in that area because we don't want to see another Laurentian University situation. The ministry engaged a third party to provide advice on the design of a new financial accountability framework, which includes financial ratio metrics and target thresholds, risk ratings and actions to be taken based on the risk rating. The framework, developed with input from the third party, uses eight core financial metrics or ratios and individual credit ratings to measure the financial health risk of universities and determine the appropriate course of action for both the ministry and the universities. The framework is going to be implemented in collaboration with the sector and will serve as an effective tool for identifying institutions experiencing financial challenges and allows for proactive corrective action before significant financial sustainability risks emerge.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute remaining.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you. If I could just finish off the questioning about international student tuition—is the ministry considering regulating international student tuition fees, and if not, why not?

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Hon. Jill Dunlop: Well, international student tuition is up to the universities and colleges, and universities and colleges are autonomous institutes.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: But the ministry regulates domestic student tuition?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Yes, we do.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: So is the ministry considering regulating international student tuition, and if not, why not?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: No. Not at this time.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): We'll now go to the next round of questioning, with the government members for 20 minutes. MPP Wai.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you, Minister, for your presentation.

We understand that students and families and the taxpayers of Ontario deserve to know that when their hard-earned dollars are invested into Ontario's post-secondary system, their investment will pay off.

Thank you for updating us and reminding us that we have the blue-ribbon panel made up of experts and leaders from the business and economic communities. Can you please give us a little bit more information on the issues or recommendations you have heard from the sector that will be a priority moving forward?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Wai, for that question.

Students, their families and the taxpayers of Ontario deserve to know that when their hard-earned dollars are invested in Ontario's post-secondary system, their investments will pay off.

Unlike the opposition, our government respects every tax dollar and does not believe in piecemeal solutions. That is why we have launched the blue-ribbon panel to consult

with key stakeholders and provide tangible, long-term solutions that will keep our sector strong. Led by Dr. Alan Harrison, this panel is tasked with casting a wide net to look into how our sector can be more fiscally responsible and ensure education meets the needs of the labour market, all while maintaining the high-calibre education students have come to expect, among other key initiatives. The panel has been hard at work over the last several months conducting research and consultations with key stakeholders, with their final report expected this fall. We're looking forward to receiving the recommendations on improving the financial sustainability of the sector while providing the best student experience possible.

Laying the groundwork for the financial sustainability of the post-secondary education sector will protect it for current and future students, ensuring they can continue to receive world-class education provided by Ontario's post-secondary institutions. Ontario's post-secondary institutions are one of the most important economic engines of the province, and keeping them financially sustainable means keeping the province strong. That's why our government has taken every opportunity to support our institutions.

Take the COVID-19 pandemic, for example. This was a challenging time for our institutions. With reduced on-campus services, enrolment declines and a decrease in investments and donations, there was a significant decline in post-secondary revenues based on circumstances outside of their control. Because of these circumstances, we had to act fast to help ensure the financial sustainability of the sector. We provided \$25 million as immediate relief for COVID-related expenses at the very onset of the pandemic in March 2020. That support continued through 2021, when we made the largest COVID-related investment of any province into their post-secondary sector by offering \$106.4 million to our colleges and universities to deal with the financial impacts of the pandemic. This was immediately followed by another \$5 million of relief to assist our colleges and universities in transferring in-person career services to the virtual environment in April 2021. It was these supports that were integral to helping our institutions endure the financial difficulties of the pandemic and move the sector forward in a sustainable manner. But our support doesn't stop there.

In 2022-23, our government provided more than \$5 billion in operating funding to the sector. That's \$1.38 billion for colleges, an increase of \$74 million since 2008-09, and \$3.65 billion for universities, an increase of \$500 million since the same year.

And even in an environment with declining enrolment, because of this government's corridor funding approach, we committed to providing each institution with the same level of funding, regardless of how much their enrolment declines.

Additionally, as a part of our tuition funding framework, we allowed institutions to raise their fees for certain programs where the current tuition fee is not aligned with the sector average, up to a maximum of 7.5% annually for incoming first-year students, ensuring their continued financial sustainability.

These historic measures were also complemented by substantial capital grants to our colleges and universities. For 2023-24, our government is investing \$170.9 million in critical maintenance, repairs and renewal to help colleges and universities ensure that their students, faculty and staff have modern and safe learning environments. This builds on our funding starting in 2020-21 to invest \$30 million every year for the last three years to help colleges and universities renew and purchase modern, state-of-the-art equipment that increases students' virtual access to post-secondary education programs, to prepare students with skills for the in-demand jobs of today and tomorrow.

These capital expenditures help take financial pressures off of our institutions, ensuring that they can sustainably grow into the future. Of course, proper financial oversight is always needed to ensure that the hard-earned dollars of Ontarians are translating into tangible benefits in the post-secondary sector. That's why, in November 2022, our government announced a new financial accountability framework for our universities which uses publicly available information to measure their financial health risk, a crucial component in deciding whether an action plan is needed to remedy any concerns. We also use a similar framework for ensuring the financial health of our colleges by evaluating their internal financial data against seven indicators, allowing us to proactively monitor their health and sustainability. Please know, we do this all with students in mind.

I've travelled across the province and visited all of Ontario's publicly funded colleges, universities and many private career colleges, and the thing that stands out to me at our institutions, above the state-of-the-art facilities and beautiful campuses are the students. Ontario's students are hard-working, adaptable and have proven the future of the province is in good hands. With how much they support our province, they deserve an affordable, high-quality post-secondary education.

With students as our top priority, in 2019-20, we reduced tuition fees 10% relative to 2018-19 levels, providing an estimated \$450 million of relief to our students. This was followed by a tuition freeze from 2020 to 2024, allowing us to reduce our fees to no longer being the highest in Canada. Remember, even with these historic achievements in tuition affordability, we have always continued to offer OSAP to students across the province.

We're also investing over \$70 million between 2020 and 2024 in Ontario's Virtual Learning Strategy to support the needs of Ontario's post-secondary institutions, learners and educators. This infrastructure has helped strengthen the province's position as a global leader in the post-secondary sector, bolstering the financial sustainability of our institutions. Together, these policies have helped make post-secondary education more affordable for all Ontarians, while keeping growth at sustainable levels.

Our post-secondary institutions and research institutes are important sources of job creation, skills training, research, innovation and commercialization, making them leading contributors to our overall economic growth. By launching the blue-ribbon panel, which will help inform actions Ontario can take to protect and grow our post-secondary education

system, learners can continue to get the skills and education they need for the jobs of today and tomorrow. As always, we will lean on our experts to provide thoughtful and independent advice to our government on what the future of post-secondary in Ontario should and can look like.

We have long said that Ontario is the best place to get an education, but you can't be the best if you're not willing to put in the work to be better every day.

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Our government will continue to do what is best for students, their families and, of course, the taxpayer, while our colleges and universities begin the next phase of prosperity and excellence domestically and around the world. I look forward to seeing the results and how we can use them to build on the work we've done thus far to support the sector.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you very much.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Questions? MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Minister, the pandemic really shone a light on mental health, and we know that post-secondary students are no exception. Can you tell us what initiatives and programs are in place to help college and university students with their mental health? Specifically, what is the government doing to improve access to mental health for university and college students and how are we continuing to support students with their mental health needs?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that question, MPP Pierre. As the PA to the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, you have been instrumental in the work you've been doing in this ministry, working with the colleges and universities and looking at the mental health supports that are offered around the campuses, what we currently have, and what we can do to ensure that students continue to be supported.

Some of the work we have been doing—I'll talk about some of the programs that are offered on campus. We have the Good2Talk program, which is a post-secondary mental health helpline and represents a partnership among Kids Help Phone, ConnexOntario, 211 Ontario and the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health. This helpline is available 24/7, 365 to all post-secondary students and provides live professional counselling, referral to community service providers and information resources. In 2023, the ministry allocated a total of \$11.82 million to Good2Talk over the next three fiscal years, 2022-23, 2023-24 and 2024-25, to continue operations and for expansion-related activities.

We also fund the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health. The Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health is a partnership between Colleges Ontario, the Council of Ontario Universities, the College Student Alliance and the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. The centre promotes knowledge exchange and facilitates access to expertise, fosters collaboration and research, and facilitates initiatives to build institutions' capacities to meet the mental health needs of students. A multi-year

TPA with the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health was signed this past June.

We also fund the Mental Health Worker Grant. In 2023-24, we funded \$4.5 million. This grant supports publicly assisted colleges and universities in hiring direct service mental health professionals to help meet the needs of students. In 2021-22, this grant funded a total of 207 positions and professionals for mental health supports at institutions. Top service categories included counsellor services, of which they hired 107; social workers, 18 hired; and they hired 18 wellness workers. Other workers include peer supports, psychotherapy, medical support and administrative support. Institutions reported a reduced pressure on campus-based services, shorter wait times, increased contact hours with students and overall better capacity to assist students in 2021-22. On July 21, 2023, grant allocations for institutions were announced for the 2023-24 year.

We also fund the Mental Health Services Grant, and this was \$6.05 million in 2023-24. Through this grant, the ministry assists colleges and universities in the development and/or expansion of post-secondary mental health services on campus. The types of initiatives included mental health awareness and education, counselling therapies, specialized supports for identified at-risk groups, online and virtual supports, Indigenous-focused staff and programs, mindfulness and resiliency-building programs, peer-to-peer supports, crisis intervention, suicide prevention, as well as other initiatives.

In 2021-22, over 180 distinct services were developed, which serviced approximately 353,146 post-secondary students—incredible numbers. This includes services targeted at students with disabilities and Indigenous students.

We also fund the Indigenous Institutes Mental Health Grant—this was half a million dollars in 2023-24. Funding is provided to the nine Indigenous institutes for the provision of culturally relevant, trauma-informed mental health and wellness services, conducting a mental health needs assessment and/or strategic plan, and/or the hiring of mental health workers and cultural support staff, and/or planning and development of the new or expanded mental health and addictions worker or related programs. In 2019-20, \$0.35 million in funding was allocated to this grant, and this marked the first time that Indigenous institutes had access to dedicated mental health funding. In 2020-21, half a million dollars in funding was allocated to this grant. In 2021-22, \$1.2 million in funding was allocated to this grant.

We also fund the call for proposals—and the mental health call for proposals invites applicants to submit project proposals that address post-secondary student mental health. In 2022-23, the ministry announced another round of the call for proposals, inviting publicly assisted colleges and universities to submit projects that focus on international student mental health. Four projects have been selected by the ministry and will receive funding for one year. This \$2.64 million includes \$2.25 million through the MOU with the Ministry of Health and also \$0.39 million in MCU's base funding.

We also fund the Get A-Head program, which, in 2023-24, we funded \$12.5 million. This is an interesting and exciting online platform that can connect individuals in need of mental health support with counsellor trainees in a peer-to-peer model. The goal of the platform is to enhance access to virtual mental health services while expediting the graduation of post-secondary students in mental health fields such as psychology and social work. In 2023-24—to do our multi-year planning, Treasury Board authorized an investment of \$12.5 million in 2023-24 in the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to support the ongoing expansion of the Get A-Head platform.

So we have a lot of great work going on at the campuses across Ontario. And I thank the PA for all your hard work. I know it has been an exciting time for you as well, visiting the campuses and meeting not only with the staff and faculty who work with the students, but the incredible students. I'm proud of the supports that we offer. I have three daughters who have been through or are in the process of going through the post-secondary education system here in Ontario. We want to ensure that students have access to the supports, whether in person, on campus or virtual.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw the need for virtual supports enhanced, but I think that was something that the students also have continued to access following the pandemic. Students like the accessibility of being able to pop online to do a counselling session with a mental health counsellor and also probably will access those systems more frequently when they're able to.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Martin, you have less than two minutes.

Mrs. Robin Martin: I was excited to hear the announcement about the French-language-teacher education and training. Certainly, there are a lot of people in my riding who are interested in having their kids educated in French and making the most of that. So we certainly need those teachers, I know. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about the announcement, which I think was at the Toronto-based Université de l'Ontario français—I'm practising my French—and about post-secondary institutions and how they're teaching French-language education programs.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Martin, for that question.

Yes, last Thursday was an exciting day, not only for French teachers in Ontario, for the University of Ottawa and Université de l'Ontario français, but for myself and the Minister of Education and the Minister of Francophone Affairs too.

We hear in our communities—and as you mentioned, in your community—about a shortage of French teachers. I also have a francophone community in my area, and I have frequently heard from them, and not only the French school boards but also the English school boards who have a shortage of French teachers. This was a great announcement where we announced 110 additional French-language teachers, and Minister Lecce and Minister Mulroney and I

had an opportunity to meet with some of those students who are enrolled in the program and who are very excited about their futures.

1510

We were actually talking with one student who was from Kenya, and a couple of years ago she saw the announcement about the opening of the new Université de l'Ontario français, and she said—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister. I'm sorry.

We will now go to the official opposition for 20 minutes. MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to move on to the issue of performance-based funding. There has been research done in other jurisdictions that have moved to performance-based funding in the post-secondary sector, and that research has demonstrated that performance-based funding can have a negative impact on the quality of education, on research, because it prioritizes short-term private sector market needs above quality, equity and long-term social benefits.

My question is, after quite rightly pausing performance-based funding during COVID, why is the ministry proceeding with performance-based funding for year 4 of the strategic mandate agreements, possibly year 5 of the strategic mandate agreements? Will the ministry reverse performance-based funding for the next round of strategic mandate agreements?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question, MPP Sattler. I'd like to talk a little bit about what the metrics are that the SMA is looking at, because I know you said you're not in favour, but I think they're very favourable metrics. The taxpayers of Ontario deserve transparency and to know that their taxpayer dollars are well spent. The metrics are as follows:

- employment rate in a related field: a portion of graduates employed full-time in a related or partially related field to their program of study;

- the institutional strength and focus: a portion of students in an identified area of institutional strength and focus;

- graduation rates: students go to school to graduate and to get a job;

- community and local impact: the student population as a portion of local population;

- institution-specific economic impact metric;

- graduate employment earnings;

- experiential learning: ensuring that students are not just in a classroom, they're actually learning hands-on and getting opportunities in their communities—looking at the number and proportion of graduates who participated in at least one course with a required experiential learning component;

- research revenue for universities and total revenue for colleges attracted from private sector sources;

- research and capacity: the federal tri-agency funding secured, total and shared—this is for the universities only;

- institution-specific apprenticeship-related metric, for colleges only; and

- institution-specific skills and competencies and related metrics.

So the performance-based funding model was introduced in fall of 2020. It links a larger portion of provincial post-secondary operating funding to student and economic outcomes, making this province a national leader in performance-based funding. For 2020-25, the government has developed individual agreements for 45 publicly assisted colleges and universities. This move will help students get the education, skills and experience that they need to find good jobs by ensuring that post-secondary institutions offer programs that align with local labour market needs. Institutions are reporting annually on indicators such as graduate employment rates in related fields, experiential learning and graduate employment earnings. By tying a portion of government funding to performance in the SMA framework, Ontario is encouraging institutions to focus on making sure that students and graduates have the real-world skills that they need to get rewarding careers.

On March 24 of this past year, MCU announced the activation of the system-wide portion of 10% in year 4 for 2023-24, and a deferred decision on the activation of performance-based funding portion in year 5 for 2024-25, pending the outcomes of the blue-ribbon panel.

I've mentioned here today several times about the work the blue-ribbon panel is doing with consultations and submissions across the sector. We'll be looking forward to those recommendations moving forward.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you for that response, Minister. I want to focus on two of the metrics of performance-based funding that you just referred to. The first is around graduate employment rates. We know from the Auditor General's report—actually, two separate audits; one in 2021, one in 2022—that there are concerns about using graduate employment rate as a metric because it is outside the control of universities and colleges.

The auditor recommended that the ministry not use performance-based funding related to graduate employment because that metric is significantly influenced by external factors and the economy. As you have just told this committee, you have decided not to listen to the recommendation of the auditor. You've decided to start moving forward with that metric this year, possibly next year, which could result in a reduction of funding for colleges and universities—that, as I have pointed out, are already very overextended because of the underfunding of the sector by your government. Their funding could be reduced for something that is largely outside of their control.

My question is, why did you choose to reject that recommendation from the Auditor General?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question, and I'm going to ask my deputy.

Mr. David Wai: Sure. I will ask ADM Rachel Simeon to come talk a bit about the metric that you spoke about.

Ms. Rachel Simeon: Thank you very much. Rachel Simeon, ADM of data, research and innovation.

We have heard institutions cite the idea that some of the metrics are beyond their control and we saw those recommendations from the Auditor General, including related to graduate employment earnings, graduate employment outcomes and the graduation rate. While student outcomes are generally affected by student characteristics, demographic and economic conditions, and prior educational experience, which is true, we do believe that institutions can influence those outcomes through their program offerings, admissions criteria and creating connections to employers in the labour market.

To support sustainability and mitigate risk related to the metric volatility of the performance-based funding model, there are a number of design features to support impacts that are outside of the control of institutions. This includes the fact that institutions are measured and evaluated against themselves, meaning that a small institution like Algoma is never going to be compared to a large institution like the University of Toronto. Additionally, institutions can weight the metrics by placing a greater emphasis on ones that they think they will perform well in or would improve on. Also, when we introduced the 10% activation, we introduced a stop block mechanism that will ensure any performance that falls below 95% of target achievement will be capped in terms of funding loss. We believe that this is a balance that will support continued accountability without destabilizing the funding of the institutions.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you for that answer.

I want to move on to another metric that has been criticized by the Auditor General, and that is the community local impact of student enrolment, otherwise known as “corridor caps.” That metric gives schools a very narrow window for the number of funded domestic students that they can admit. Similar to the graduate employment metric, the auditor recommended that the community local impact metric be changed. We know in the submission of the Council of Ontario Universities to the blue-ribbon panel that because of the corridor cap, universities are receiving no provincial funding whatsoever for more than 20,000 Ontario students who are in Ontario universities.

My question is, why would the ministry want to limit the ability of Ontario students to enrol in Ontario’s post-secondary programs?

1520

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Before I pass it back over to the deputy, I just wanted to comment that the NDP wants to increase tuition and increase programs, without jobs. We’re going to stand by our students, our communities and our local sectors to ensure that students are educated in fields that have rewarding careers following. To be clear, if we don’t point institutions to positive labour-market outcomes—do you think it’s okay for students to graduate after four years or two years of education and not have any job prospects? I’m going to pass it over to the deputy to talk more about the metrics.

Mr. David Wai: Maybe I’ll ask ADM Kelly Shields to come talk about the corridor funding model that you mentioned, MPP Sattler, if that’s okay.

Ms. Kelly Shields: Kelly Shields, ADM of the post-secondary education division. Through the estimate process, when it comes to enrolment funding, there is a base amount of funding that’s provided to all institutions. Anyone that goes above their mid-point or their quarter of what we’ve agreed to fund—that is an institutions’ choice. As you note, they don’t receive funding for that. The only time that funding would be provided is if there’s an agreement with the government. For example, in nursing programs, paramedics, there has been funding provided for increased enrolments—similarly, with personal support workers. But otherwise the way that the model works is there’s an agreed-upon enrolment level, and that’s what we work within.

There’s also a band that—if institutions fall below their agreed-upon amount, we do have some thresholds where there’s some stability for them as well. So it’s on the downside as well in terms of the core operating grant.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you for those responses. I do want to make clear that my question was around the recommendations of the Auditor General to change those metrics, but I appreciate the response about how those metrics work.

I also want to clarify for the minister that the NDP is very interested in ensuring that our post-secondary sector is funded appropriately, and the ongoing underfunding by the provincial government, with the shift from publicly funded colleges and universities to publicly assisted colleges and universities with private interest, private student tuition, making up a more and more larger share of the revenues that the institutions receive, is a huge concern. We want to make sure that students are able to attend post-secondary institutions, and we have pushed the government to make up the huge revenue hole that they created for colleges and universities when they introduced the reduction and then the freeze on student tuition. That is what we have been calling for the government to do: to fund that revenue gap that was created at the time of the government’s policy decision.

But I want to move on to some questions about public-private partnerships. The minister has talked at several times throughout the questioning today about the government’s moving ahead with public-private partnerships. Just as with performance-based funding, there is a lot of research that has been done in other jurisdictions that have gone with public-private partnerships. We have seen the negative consequences of public-private partnerships right here in Ontario. But the government has consistently dismissed criticisms and warnings that have been received from experts about the risks that are associated with public colleges partnering with private providers who use the college’s name to offer programs that are delivered by the staff of that private provider, not the faculty of that college, and these so-called campuses end up being operated by the private partner, not by the college.

It is clear, once again—going back to that chronic and ongoing underfunding of our college and university system—that the major impetus behind these partnerships

is the need for additional revenues to be able to deliver education, or maybe even just to keep the doors of the main campus open.

So, Minister, do you not see it as problematic that our public institutions are effectively, in many cases, being forced to enter into these partnerships, which then exposes those institutions to risk, just because of financial desperation with the ongoing underfunding of the sector?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question, MPP Sattler. There's lots to get to in that question, but I'll start off with the value of private career colleges.

If we look back to the pandemic, the private career colleges offered the PSW program at an accelerated rate. When we needed PSWs in every corner of this province, private career colleges stepped up and ensured that training. They play such an important role, and they are an opportunity for not just international students, but domestic students and, I find, in a lot of cases, mature students who are looking to upskill or to change their career—that they're able to enter through a private college.

I just wanted to go back and give you some information on the work that we have been doing to ensure that students entering into a private college are protected, whether it's through the private college or through a partnership with a public college.

The Public College-Private Partnerships: Minister's Binding Policy Directive was first released in December 2019, and it applies to the 24 publicly assisted colleges and sets out requirements for public college-private partnerships. Since the release of the directive, nine colleges—Algonquin, Fanshawe, Fleming, Georgian, Loyalist, Mohawk, Niagara, Sault, and Sheridan—have received the necessary approval to establish new partnerships. And La Cité is currently—the ministry has currently approved. Six colleges—Cambrian, Canadore, Lambton, Northern, St. Clair, and St. Lawrence—had existing PCPPs prior to the release of the directive.

In November 2021, the minister provided direction to proceed with a review of the directive and the associated stakeholder engagement plan.

The ministry consulted with stakeholders in early 2022.

This past March, the ministry released a revised directive, after a review of the system, which includes several new and updated requirements for colleges entering into these types of arrangements. These include:

- a private-public partnership enrolment ceiling of 7,500 students for each college that replaces the 1-to-2 enrolment ratio;

- implementation of compliance measures, including financial penalties to enforce the enrolment ceiling starting this fall;

- a requirement for colleges to be responsible for all recruitment, admission and enrolment decisions and not delegate responsibility for those decisions to their third-party partners;

- a requirement for colleges to establish procedures to conduct regular reviews to ensure ethical international student recruitment practices;

- a requirement for colleges to report issues or complaints received in relation to its PCPP that have the

potential to have significant negative impact on public-private partnership students as well as the actions being taken to address them;

- a requirement for colleges to consult every two years with the local communities in which these partnerships are operated;

- a requirement for colleges to publish key performance indicators in relation to all students enrolled in partnership programs; and

- colleges may no longer enter into the public college-private partnership for the delivery of programs in another province or territory of Canada.

We do take this very seriously. We want to ensure that students are protected when they're entering into any of our post-secondary institutions.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you for that response, Minister.

I want to refer you to a report that was provided to the previous government in 2017 by David Trick. He warned against public-private partnerships in the post-secondary sector for a number of reasons: the potential for lower-quality student learning experience; poor access to student services and supports for students with disabilities; lack of accountability to students; subpar facilities; and many more.

So my question is, what is your government doing to track the negative impacts of public-private partnerships in our post-secondary sector?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for that question.

I just mentioned the updated requirements of the revised directive that was released this past March looking at the—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: —requirement for colleges to establish procedures to conduct regular reviews to ensure ethical treatment of students; a requirement for colleges to report issues or complaints received in relation to its partnerships that would have potential negative impacts on the students; and a requirement for colleges to consult every two years with the local communities in which the partnerships are operated.

1530

So student supports are very important to these partnerships and ensuring success for all the students, but the work that we're doing with the public-private partnerships is important for our communities. It's also important for local labour market needs and for these students to graduate into high-demand jobs in those areas.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister. Thank you, MPP Sattler.

We will now go to the government side for the next round of 20 minutes of questioning. Anyone? Last call. Okay.

I will now turn to the official opposition for next round of 20 minutes of questioning. MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I now want to turn to a discussion around faculty and staffing in Ontario's post-secondary institutions. For some time now, Minister, we have seen contract faculty carrying the majority of the teaching load in Ontario's public universities, and the latest available data shows us that it is actually greater than 50% of the teaching load that is taught by contract faculty. These professors, these faculty members have no job security.

They have minimal benefits, and students are the ones who are affected by this, because they have contract faculty who are going from institution to institution picking up a sessional here or a sessional there, and it is often very difficult for students to connect with their professor if they need assistance after the class.

So my question is, does the government have plans to address the precarious staffing situation that we see in Ontario's universities and engage in faculty renewal across the sector? I should clarify that it's not just a university problem; it is also what we are seeing more and more in the college sector as well. So what are the plans for dealing with this increase in contract faculty across this sector?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question, MPP Sattler. Before I defer to my deputy minister, I just wanted to comment. Prior to politics, I was a faculty member at Georgian College, and I was one of those faculty members who was on contract and held multiple contracts in my time while I was at the college.

Universities and colleges are autonomous institutions and make decisions on their own, but I'm going to defer to the deputy.

Mr. David Wai: I will ask ADM Kelly Shields to provide some support to that.

Ms. Kelly Shields: As the minister notes, all of the academic decisions such as hiring and the type of complement of faculty is solely within the purview of our colleges and universities, so we don't have a direct role in that, but thank you for sharing what you've heard. That's helpful to know. As we continue working with our sector, that's something that we can certainly raise with them. But, again, as I noted, as a ministry, we don't have responsibility over that. It's up to our institutions to determine their hiring and their complement of staffing.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: So there are no plans to have a faculty renewal strategy across this sector? Okay.

We know from Stats Canada that there is data about post-secondary education teaching staff, but that data is limited to full-time staff with appointments of longer than 12 months. That data excludes staff who are there on contract or on term appointments, so this does not provide a clear picture of staffing in our public institutions.

While you've just said that you have no intention of looking at faculty renewal across the sector—I'm wondering if the minister could at least commit to collecting more fulsome data, so we can get a more accurate picture of staffing in post-secondary institutions, and then making that data publicly available.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question.

No, I'm not committing to that at this time. The deputy, myself and the ADM have already commented that institutions are autonomous and are responsible for the hiring of faculty on their own.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: We know that across the sector—it's not just within the teaching faculty complement that there are staffing challenges. The underfunding of the sector that I have talked about today has led to a significant increase in contracting out within the sector and the loss

of good service and trades jobs, which has a direct negative impact on local communities.

Colleges and universities are also struggling to attract and retain skilled trades employees due to lower wages, compared to other public sector institutions.

So while the government is signalling on the one hand that skilled trades are supported, the continued underfunding in post-secondary education is leading to a reduction of skilled trades workers employed at our post-secondary institutions.

Can the minister tell us if there is a plan to support skilled trades within post-secondary institutions, including instituting apprenticeship programs?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question.

I can tell you that 85% of skilled trades workers are trained at Ontario's colleges. I've had the opportunity to visit all of the colleges and also to meet with many of the skilled trades programs and see the incredible work that those students and those faculty are doing.

We all know we need skilled trades workers across the province. Whether it's building our roads and hospitals and schools, their work is valued.

I can tell you, when I came to this place in 2018 and received the private member's bill draw and saw that I was number one and had about two weeks to get something together, I did a motion calling on the government to look at skilled trades as a priority. Having grown up in a skilled trades family, I know the benefits of being a skilled trades worker and the benefits to your community—high-paying jobs, ensuring that this province is built. So we don't have a strategy in place—working with colleges on a skilled trades partnership with faculty—but I do recognize the benefit.

I'm excited when I visit the schools now and I hear them talking about actual wait-lists for students to get into trades programs. Obviously, the talk that everybody has been talking is working; students are getting the message. Whether it's parents, guidance counsellors—the people in those young kids' lives are getting that message across that these are fantastic, rewarding careers. It is now playing out in colleges, and we're seeing more and more students signing up for these programs.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Right. But the students who are graduating from those skilled—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Gates?

Mr. Wayne Gates: Just to answer that—I know I haven't said much during this, because she's the critic, but I toured Niagara College with my colleagues Jeff Burch and Jennie Stevens just about six weeks ago and their programs are busting at the seams, which is all good news, but the reality is that they're underfunded. They don't have the money to expand those programs because there is that need. So their message, if I got a chance to talk today—and I just got that chance to relay that message to you—is that the colleges need more funding for the skilled trades program so they can expand the program.

I don't know if you've been to Niagara College yet. It's incredible what they do there. They tear houses down, they

put them back up and then they sell them out. So they're getting all kinds of trades.

My suggestion is, please put in your notes to contact Niagara College and see what type of funding they need so they can expand the program. The program is working, but they need more support and they need more funding. I just wanted to say that with that question as well.

1540

Hon. Jill Dunlop: I appreciate that comment. Actually, that was the school I was referring to. I first heard about wait-lists in the plumbing program. They have their new plumbing building there, and already, students are on wait-lists because they're so interested in the program. As you said, it's good to see on one hand that they're filling up and students are getting that message—

Interjection.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Can you see this? Can you see this? That's what they need. They need money, okay?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Just to get back to my original question, one of the realities is that colleges and universities themselves are not able to hire skilled trades workers because we are seeing increasing contracting out because of the constant underfunding of post-secondary education. I appreciate the question from my colleague as well about the skilled trades programs within our colleges.

Carrying on from what my colleague said about programs that are bursting at the seams, I have a question about capital funding for Ontario colleges. My understanding is that capital funding for colleges is not based on need. Why is it not based on need when we have such discrepancies in terms of levels of deferred maintenance and repair at Ontario's post-secondary colleges?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question. I'll just give a breakdown on the numbers for the capital programs at colleges and universities. In 2023-24, the facilities renewal program was \$170.9 million. In 2023-24, the College Equipment and Renewal Fund, which is specifically what you were asking about, was \$20 million. The Training Equipment Renewal Fund is \$10 million, and the Capital Support Program is \$0.2 million.

I just wanted to talk a bit about—we call it CERF and TERF; CERF is the College Equipment and Renewal Fund—the types of equipment or investments that can be made through that funding. It's an ongoing program that supports colleges to buy and renew instructional equipment and learning resources. This helps colleges deliver relevant, high-quality education and training that meets the evolving needs of employers and supports Ontario's economy.

CERF was designed to ensure colleges have the most up-to-date hands-on technical equipment needed to train college students to be prepared for the ever-changing labour market. This investment recognizes today's rapid pace of technological change and helps ensure college students are trained using the latest software, equipment and machinery that is used by industry today.

Deputy, would you like to add to CERF?

Mr. David Wai: Sure. So just on the CERF, the allocation of \$20 million, the ministry will distribute \$10

million of this funding through public colleges using an enrolment formula and the remaining is distributed—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Deputy Minister, could you speak into the microphone? Sorry.

Mr. David Wai: Oh, sorry—\$10 million will be distributed through an enrolment-based formula to the publicly assisted colleges in Ontario. This guarantees that all colleges will have a minimum level of funding to buy and renew instructional equipment and learning equipment used by students. The remaining \$10 million in funding is being distributed through a competitive applications-based process. Projects submitted for approval under the program need to show a matching financial or in-kind commitment and a clear link to industry needs and anticipated benefits. I'll stop there.

Maybe I'll just add, on the funded facilities renewal program that the minister talked about, it's to help colleges and universities renew and modernize their campuses. It provides funds to repair, renovate and modernize existing facilities owned by colleges and universities which are used for academic—that is, teaching or research—purposes. They can use the funds from the facilities renewal program for projects that support renewal and modernization of campuses, including major building system upgrades, roof repairs, heating and ventilation system upgrades and mechanical and electrical systems upgrades. Funding provided by the program is intended to supplement the institution's own capital renewal program activities.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Just on the issue of capital funding for colleges and universities, does the ministry have a specific plan to help colleges and universities deal with the impact of climate change? We are not only in a housing crisis in this province, but we're in a climate crisis. Many of our institutions could be at risk of the severe weather impacts and other climate impacts that we are seeing across Ontario.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the comment.

It's actually up to the colleges and the universities to spend that money as they see fit, so I can't specifically say it will be used towards climate change. I know in some of the capital projects I've seen on campuses, where they're trying to make the building energy-efficient—that's some of work that they're doing on their own, but it's not something that we direct from the ministry.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: So there are no specific funds allocated to help post-secondary institutions prepare for the impacts of climate change?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: No. They would spend their money as they see fit.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: It would just be that they would apply to the general fund?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Yes.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: What is the overall amount that would be in the maintenance backlog that is currently reported at universities, colleges and Indigenous institutes across Ontario?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Are you asking how much we're investing?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: No. What are colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes telling you that they need to deal with deferred maintenance and repair and capital needs?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: I'm going to defer it to the deputy, who I think is deferring it to the ADM.

Mr. David Wai: Yes, I'll ask ADM Kelly Shields to come forward.

Ms. Kelly Shields: The current deferred maintenance backlog at colleges is \$1.2 billion, and at universities it's \$5.1 billion—so a total overall college and university sector deficit of \$6.3 billion.

I know you asked about Indigenous institutes. I don't have that figure handy, but we've been working closely with that sector as well in terms of helping them to address their needs. We've supported them to do facility audits and to come up with their deferred maintenance figures. And supporting them—we now have a new capital facilities renewal program for Indigenous institutes that has been put in place.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Sorry; you said \$1.2 billion deferred maintenance in colleges, \$1.5 billion deferred in universities—

Ms. Kelly Shields: It's \$1.2 billion in colleges, \$5.1 billion in universities, so a \$6.3-billion overall deferred maintenance backlog.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: How much is currently available in the renewal fund that institutions can apply for?

Ms. Kelly Shields: Under the facilities renewal program, for 2023-24, \$170.95 million has been invested.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: So they are looking at a \$6.3-billion deficit in deferred maintenance and repair, and they're able to tap into a \$170.9-million capital—

Interjections.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: —to deal with the \$6.3-billion deficit across the sector.

Ms. Kelly Shields: Yes.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: In light of the \$6.3-billion deficit, do you feel that a Facilities Renewal Fund of \$170.9 million is sufficient to support the sector in addressing some of these capital and maintenance needs?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: We work closely with the sector, but again, the schools are autonomous institutes, and they make decisions on their spending with the amount that they receive. I would just leave it at that.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: How much time do I have?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): You have a minute and 35 seconds.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I'm going to just go back for a moment to the blue-ribbon panel, which you spoke at some length about, Minister, in your introductory remarks and also throughout your answers today. I think that, certainly, we've heard the ministry is putting a lot of weight on the report of the blue-ribbon panel. You have indicated that some decisions are going to be waiting until that panel reports back.

1550

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: My question is, is the ministry committed to making the report of the blue-ribbon panel public when it is presented to the ministry?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question, MPP Sattler. I have spoken at length about it many times today in many questions because it is very relevant to the future of the post-secondary sector and the financial sustainability and ensuring that we continue to have the best post-secondary education possible. I am committed to working with the sector on the recommendations that will follow, and we're hoping to have those within the next couple of weeks. I'm proud of the work that not only the panel has done, but also—

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Will the report be made public?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Yes, the report will be made public.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay. As soon as you've received it?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Yes.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, MPP Sattler and Minister.

Government members, you have 10 minutes. MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Minister, I'd like to continue the conversation about how the government is adapting to address workforce needs. You spoke earlier about the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant and how the government has launched this new and innovative grant that provides upfront funding for post-secondary students who enroll in the first year of an eligible nursing, paramedic or medical laboratory technologist program in a priority community and then agree to work back in that community for a term of service after they graduate, and then have their tuition, books and living costs fully reimbursed.

Then you also spoke about the expansion of medical undergraduate and post-graduate seats as well as the creation of a new medical school in Brampton.

I'm curious about veterinary colleges and what the government is doing to help with animal health care. I'm wondering if you could just take a couple of minutes and talk about that.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you, MPP Pierre, for that question. It is very exciting. We're not only increasing health care opportunities for humans, but also for our fuzzy and feathered friends too.

I look back to 2021, when I was appointed to this ministry, and I was at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay. I also have a Lakehead campus in Orillia, but we were in Thunder Bay and we were sitting in the big boardroom and they said, "We want to bring a vet school to Lakehead. What do we do?" At the time, it seemed like an exciting, great opportunity. I said, "I don't know how we do it, but let's do it, because this is important."

Working with the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and hearing the need for vets in northern Ontario—when I was at AMO last year, I was talking with a mayor from Red Lake and he was telling me that people in his area were driving up to two hours to access veterinary needs for their animals. That's just dogs and cats, let alone large-animal vets who are travelling a couple of hours and have literally hundreds of farms on their roster. The need for that is so huge in northern Ontario.

The program that we are doing is a combination with Lakehead University and University of Guelph. It will be

two years at Lakehead in Thunder Bay, followed by two years at University of Guelph, with a return to northern Ontario after graduation. It's kind of a hybrid model where these students will be working together with the students at Guelph at the same time for their first two years, and then coming together for the third and fourth years. People, I've heard, were having to travel to—students were going to Ireland to become vets and not necessarily returning home. We want to ensure that the students here in Ontario have adequate access to veterinary medicine but also that we're graduating more vets who are going to stay here in Ontario in some of those priority communities.

This is almost a \$15-million investment to veterinary medicine in Ontario, so it's very exciting for new vet students. For the universities themselves to have this collaboration, I think, is fantastic, but also for the agriculture community to ensure that we have healthy animals on farms. I think, if you look at the spinoff from that as well, colleges are going to be looking at offering vet tech programs. You can't have vets without having the staff that go in those offices as well, but it's going to be a win-win for all. I'm very excited about it.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Jordan, you have five minutes.

Mr. John Jordan: Minister, I want to congratulate your ministry on working with other ministries: Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Long-Term Care.

Health care resources, as you know, have been a huge challenge. What I have found, going around the province and visiting long-term-care homes as PA, is staffing levels are greatly improved. In fact, a lot of long-term-care homes are no longer relying on agencies to fill their regular shifts. I want to congratulate you on that.

I'm wondering if you could comment on your ministry's plan, going forward, for health care resources.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you for the question MPP Jordan. Thank you for the comment too, it's nice—since we hear doom and gloom all the time—to hear that you are actually seeing positive changes in staffing at long-term care is quite exciting, because here we look back at the past couple of years and what long-term-care homes had to face during COVID was a difficult time and, you know, all of our communities needing more PSWs, more RPNs and more registered nurses. There is this renewed energy around students wanting to enter into health human resources in this province. We're seeing a record number of students who are registering for nursing programs at Ontario's colleges and universities.

I was very excited—this is prior to my time in the ministry—when they announced the new stand-alone degrees for nurses at colleges. There was a time where students had to do two years at a college then two years at a university to complete their degree before they graduated.

I can tell you, in my own community, students would attend Georgian College for two years. Then, they would leave and go to York University for two years, they would do their clinical placements in the big city, and they never

came back or very few of them came back. We face those shortages in our area.

With the announcement, it was exciting for me to be able to announce at Georgian College, when they were able to offer the new stand-alone degree, that this was going to be great for students to be able to access education closer to home and to complete that education in the same area where they started, but also, for our long-term-care homes, our hospitals, our community organisations to have access to staffing in their area.

The work that we've done with the stand-alone degrees, I think, has been instrumental across the province. Literally, every college is always there to offer the stand-alone degrees, so, very exciting.

The work we did with the PSW challenge—I mentioned that earlier when I was talking about the private career colleges and how they were able to accelerate training for PSWs. We had a challenge fund a couple of years ago where we challenged the publicly funded colleges as well as the private colleges to train 8,000 PSWs. Our sector really stepped up, trained students and helped fill those needs.

I had a chance to talk with some of the students who were in the program. Students who—I remember one gentleman in particular. He was a bylaw officer and was taking the program at Six Nations Polytechnic. He wanted a career change. He said, "I came here to do the PSW program, because it was free"—free education. But not only for that reason: He said there were other opportunities to then move into being an RPN or a registered nurse as well.

That stepping stone in the health care field has been very important. The work that we have done with the Ministry of Health—you know, the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant: to think back when we were having those initial discussions about what this program would look like, and then to see the actual excitement of the students come through and having more than double the students that we projected in the beginning signing up for this program—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: I also mentioned earlier, one of our colleagues told me his daughter applied. She was accepted at U Windsor. I said, "Okay, well, the next step is she needs to apply for Learn and Stay," and she did. She and over 4,000 other students will be filling those needs in our communities, but it will be a very fluid program.

We'll work with other ministries on where the demands are, working with the communities, colleges and universities to ensure that the training is possible to help in some of those underserved areas in some of those high-demand programs that are coming. So I think we're doing lots of great work in the Ministry of Colleges and Universities. I love it when the Premier talks about all these companies that are coming to Ontario. They're coming here because of the skilled workers that we have here and the world-class education that we can offer to employees and future employees.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): This concludes the committee's consideration for the 2023-34

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

Shall vote 3001, ministry administration program, carry? Carried.

Shall vote 3002, post-secondary education program, carry? Carried.

Shall vote 3005, research program, carry? Carried.

Shall the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Colleges and Universities carry? Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to the House? Carried.

We will now have recess to 4:15, as Minister Cho and they come.

The committee recessed from 1602 to 1617.

MINISTRY FOR SENIORS AND ACCESSIBILITY

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Good afternoon, everyone. The committee is meeting to begin consideration of the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility for a total of two hours. The ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. I trust that the deputy minister has arranged to have the hearings closely monitored with respect to questions raised so that the ministry can respond accordingly. If you wish, you may verify the questions and issues being tracked by the research officer at the end of your appearance.

Are there any questions before we start? Seeing none, I am now required to call vote 3501, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin a statement no longer than 20 minutes from the Minister for Seniors and Accessibility, who is joining us virtually, so I direct you to the screens. The remaining time will be allotted for questions and answers in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition members, 10 minutes for the independent member and 20 minutes for the government members of the committee.

Minister, the floor is yours. Please.

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): You're on mute, Minister. There we go.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: [*Inaudible*] their very important work.

I would like to introduce our new deputy Melissa Thomson, who joined the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility in June. She is a strong leader, and I appreciate her and the whole MSAA leadership team. Our ministry staff are working so hard every day to achieve our goals for seniors and people with disabilities.

It is under the leadership of this government, in 2018, that the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility was created. This is the first time in Ontario history that we have a cabinet position dedicated to helping seniors and people with disabilities stay active, healthy and socially connected in their communities. Premier Ford chose me as the minister

because he knows I have a disability and because I'm a super senior. He wanted to make sure someone with lived experience is advocating for Ontarians. That is why this role is so important to me personally.

At the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, we are focused on helping seniors and people with disabilities stay active and socially connected. We want to make sure seniors can connect to the local services they need to support happy and healthy lifestyles in their communities. Ontario should be a place where people with disabilities can develop their skills, potential and enjoy life without barriers. That is what we are working towards.

1620

We also oversee the Retirement Homes Act, 2010, which is administered by the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority, or RHRA. Through overseeing the RHRA, we protect the choice and safety of seniors in retirement homes. We also oversee the compliance and enforcement of accessibility laws. Together with the accessibility community, we create and update standards under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, or AODA. Accessibility is evolving, and we are collaborating with our partners to make Ontario inclusive for people of all ages and abilities.

I believe that Ontario is the best province in the best country in the world, Canada. Seniors are the backbone of this province. They helped build Ontario. Social isolation is enemy number one for seniors. That is why the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility is committed to fighting social isolation. Every year, hundreds of local organizations receive senior community grants, up to \$25,000, to run local projects for seniors.

In 2023-24, our government invested \$6 million to support the delivery of over 280 local projects. These grants help local organizations put together activities like cooking classes, educational courses, yoga, Zumba, painting, pickleball and so much more. By providing local organizations the tools and resources to keep older adults and people with disabilities active and socially connected, we are fighting social isolation and ageism.

We also invested in the creation of seniors active living centres. These centres are vibrant places where people of all abilities attend to get socially connected, be active and stay fit and healthy. They deliver fitness programs, social events, classes, day trips and so much more to seniors all across Ontario. Programs like this are key to keeping seniors safe in their communities and to fighting against elder abuse.

I want to tell you something about the seniors in Ontario. In June, as a part of celebrating Seniors' Month, I had the chance to tour seniors active living centres and community programs all around the province. I went all around the GTA, from Newmarket to Markham, Scarborough, Mississauga and Etobicoke. I met seniors in Durham, in Whitby, in Pickering and all the way out in Thunder Bay. I was so happy to see them painting, playing music, playing games, sports and, most importantly, with a big smile. I got to laugh and be together with them, and I was so inspired.

Seniors in Ontario really know how to live. When I talked with them, they told me how happy they are to have community activities to join to meet new friends and learn new skills. The organizations working for seniors are making a big difference in their community. As a super senior myself, I know that one of the best ways to live a long and happy life is building relationships and getting connected in your community. That is why I'm so proud to celebrate all the efforts for seniors.

Earlier this year, we also celebrated the accomplishments of outstanding seniors through our annual senior achievement awards, presented by the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario. One of the previous recipients from Ottawa actually set a world record for completing a marathon at 96 years old. I'm already looking forward to the next awards ceremony.

Another program I'm proud of in our ministry is our Inclusive Community Grant. This supports age-friendly and accessible activities. Communities can receive up to \$60,000 to create inclusive environments where people of all ages and abilities can be independent and stay active. This includes accessible beaches in London, accessible beaches in Kenora, refresher driving courses for seniors in Chatham-Kent and an inclusive waterfront in Collingwood.

In March, I was proud to award \$30,000 toward an Inclusive Community Grant project in the city of Burlington. Through this project, the city of Burlington will be able to purchase and install portable beach mats to provide a barrier-free path of travel to the edge of Lake Ontario at Beachway Park. This will help older adults and persons with disabilities experience and enjoy Lake Ontario. Projects like this strengthen local communities to promote healthy, active lifestyles for people of all ages and abilities.

Now, I would like to speak more about the programs and services specifically for people with disabilities. I strongly believe that all Ontarians should have equal opportunity, regardless of their ability. This is something I used to talk about with my dear friend the former Lieutenant Governor David Onley. He was a leader and a champion when it came to making Ontario more accessible. We spoke regularly about the importance of accessibility for all Ontarians. He told me, "Raymond, the number one thing you can do for people with a disability is help them find meaningful jobs." This is why the Skills Development Fund launched under the government matters so greatly. We are continuing his legacy by expanding and creating new programs and services for people with disabilities.

1630

This year, thanks to the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, we announced over \$4 million towards local organizations that are supporting skills development for people with disabilities. I was honoured to visit some of the recipients this summer and see the marvellous work they do to make sure that people with disabilities have the right programs and training to find meaningful jobs. I went to the Geneva Centre for Autism in Toronto to visit their excellent classrooms and facilities. They received funding for their

Autism Workforce Development Hub to develop new curriculum for pre-employment training for individuals with autism. I toured PTP—Pathway to Possibilities—Adult Learning and Employment Programs in Etobicoke, who are creating enhanced pathways to work with youth with intellectual disabilities. I spoke with the staff and participants in these programs. They are so happy and working so hard to develop their skills. These marvellous organizations are part of advancing accessibility.

We want to build a better Ontario where people of all abilities can develop skills, find meaningful jobs and live barrier-free.

When it comes to accessibility, we believe in a whole-of-government approach. The AODA exists to create standards and regulations as a guide for how to make aspects of everyday life accessible. The AODA requires municipalities to develop accessibility plans that include designs of public spaces and transit. Our government has equipped all 444 municipalities with the tools and supports to live up to the AODA. With every dollar this government invests, we are advocating for accessibility. We are accelerating infrastructure investment so that construction complies with the AODA. New schools, new hospitals, new provincial buildings and public transit are working to be fully accessible. We are modernizing existing buildings and removing barriers when we find them.

Thanks to the marvellous leadership of the Minister of Transportation, right now, all GO Transit bus routes, trains and GO stations are becoming fully accessible. But we know there is so much more to be done. Accessibility and inclusion require collaboration. That's why we're working with the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, Ontario Building Officials Association, Ontario Trucking Association, the March of Dimes, the Retail Council of Canada, the University of Waterloo and OCAD to deliver on accessible solutions for the province.

These are just a few of the partners we are working with to improve accessibility in communities across Ontario. We also welcome feedback from our accessibility community. The more voices we have advocating for accessibility, the better.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute, Minister.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: That is why our government has created multiple committees to bring together the voices for those from across the province. There are five committees, including design of public spaces, customer services standards, kindergarten to grade 12 education standards, college and university education standards and health care standards. Each one of these committees has people with disabilities at the table, sharing their personal experiences. Their feedback guides the design, evaluation and evolution of programs and service delivery here in Ontario.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister. Time is up.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Just one more line for overview of all the work we are doing in this ministry. I would like to close by thanking the committee members

and ministry leaders who are here to support today's discussion. I appreciate all your contributions to our government's work.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister Cho.

We will now begin question and answers in a rotation of 20 minutes for the official opposition members, 10 minutes for the independent member and 20 minutes for the government members for the remainder of the allotted time.

For the deputy minister, assistant deputy ministers and ministry staff, please state your name and title each time you are called on to speak so that the proceedings can be accurately recorded in Hansard. For the virtual participants on Zoom, after I have recognized you, there may be a brief delay before your audio and video are ready. Please take a brief pause before you begin speaking. In order to ensure optimal sound quality, virtual participants are encouraged to use headphones or microphones, if possible.

As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair. I will start with the official opposition members for 20 minutes.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you. I'll begin. I'm glad that there is a ministry that was created, but I do think it's highly problematic that the government has lumped seniors and accessibility into one poorly funded ministry. It shows the low priority given to older adults and to people of all ages living with disabilities.

You have quite an ambitious strategic plan that makes a lot of promises, but you were only able to achieve a very small number of promises last year with the budget that you had. I really ask if the government seriously thinks that you can fulfill all of these commitments with a budget cut of \$50 million. It wasn't even increased to meet inflation; it has been cut. There's a desperate need to address the abuse of older adults, the growing levels of poverty amongst seniors, the legislated poverty of people living on ODSP and the lack of implementation of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

1640

As you know, the final report on the AODA issued February 6, 2023, was scathing and stated that outcomes are poor, enforcement does not exist, data and research does not exist, basic leadership does not exist—no one in government is taking responsibility for meeting the recommendations of the Act. In other words, while the ministry is responsible for taking the lead to implement the AODA, which is supposed to be fully implemented by 2025, the government is supporting this ministry with even less money than before, so we will continue to see older adults and people living with disabilities struggling to get by without supports.

I have a two-part question: Can you tell us what the rationale is for cutting funding to this dual ministry by \$50 million? And can you tell us what you will be doing to make sure that people with disabilities will no longer be excluded from full participation in society? Because it's a massive job and it's been neglected for years.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much for the question. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we acted quickly to increase funding to keep seniors healthy and safe. We have moved the \$8 million worth of COVID-19 programs and services to their permanent home in the Ministry of Health. This funding is now part of a permanent infection prevention and control funding, and is now part of our government's \$1-billion commitment to home and community support services.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay, thank you very much, Minister. I may take the question time back. To me, it's moving the deck chairs on the Titanic. It's less money than you had before, which leaves a tremendous number of gaps in service.

Although Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario laid out a very clear case for increasing their funding—funding that had not increased in 20 years and which had, in fact, been cut during the pandemic—Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario received a tiny, tiny increase to their budget. The government rejected their business case for more funding without providing any rationalizations for the refusal to adequately fund this important organization. Worse, the contract was up April 1; a new contract wasn't put in place until June 29 and the first instalment of funds didn't arrive until the middle of July.

It is clear that addressing the enormous increase in elder abuse—a 250% increase since COVID—is not a priority of this government. Otherwise, the ministry would not make it impossible to pay and therefore keep staff by delaying the EAPO grant by three and a half months.

This ministry loves to say that the primary problem for seniors is social isolation, but that does not magically make abuse go away. I can tell you, there are people trapped in their homes, sometimes by their own relatives, who have no possibility of participating in a seniors' club. Perhaps if the government stopped wasting money fighting workers in court or fighting the release of mandate letters, they could use that money to support the work of the EAPO. That would be serving seniors—and allowing PSWs and RNs, frankly, to negotiate better wages.

My question is, will you acknowledge that elder abuse is a very serious issue and commit to funding the Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario so that they can do the necessary work of reaching out to older Ontarians experiencing abuse?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much for raising that important question.

I'm a super senior, as I said in my opening remark. Whenever I hear a story about a senior getting abused, my heart is broken, and that is why I will work so hard to say that social isolation is enemy number one for seniors. When seniors are isolated, they are more likely to be abused. [*Inaudible*] the social isolation is the root cause of abuse—of many problems.

This Premier understands that. Thanks to his leadership, our government invested \$6 million this year to support the delivery of 280 local projects. This summer, I had a chance to tour seniors active living centre community programs all around the province. When I talk with them,

they told me how happy they are to have a community activity to join, to meet new friends and—

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Vaugeois? Go ahead.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you—

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: By providing—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Sorry, Minister. The member has the floor.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I'm taking my time back for further questions.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: There is abuse perpetrated by individuals, but there is also institutional abuse that this government absolutely refuses to address, and that is the misuse of the Trespass to Property Act, incorrectly used to ban friends and family members from accessing their loved ones in care.

As you know, in 2021, the House unanimously supported motion 129, known as Voula's Law, that clarified what already exists in law: Only the occupier of a unit or apartment has the right to decide who can and cannot enter their home. Despite the passage of this motion, however, the abuse of the Trespass to Property Act continues unabated. People across the province are being illegally trespassed every single day by misinformed police officers, yet your government has refused to act.

These are acts of cruelty that leave seniors isolated, without their advocates, who have been illegally banned because of their advocacy for the person in care. Before you point to the Residents' Bill of Rights, let me state the obvious: The Residents' Bill of Rights does not in any way address the abuse of the Trespass to Property Act.

Police are also leaving themselves open to charges being brought against them because of their misuse of the Trespass to Property Act.

I have a two-part question: (1) Will the minister follow through on the commitments made in 2021, which are to provide clear directions posted in a public place that state that operators of retirement, long-term-care and group homes cannot use the Trespass to Property Act to ban family members who speak out about their loved ones' living conditions; and (2) ensure that all police forces across Ontario receive the necessary training so that they are no longer incorrectly and illegally using the Trespass to Property Act to deny families visitation rights?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: There is no greater advocate for seniors than this Premier. In 2018, he made me the first minister with a cabinet position dedicated to seniors and accessibility. He knows I'm a super senior and have lived experience. We have made historic investments of close to \$30 million towards over 1,500 programs to keep seniors active, healthy and socially connected in their communities—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I'm sorry, Minister. This isn't actually answering my question about the misuse of the Trespass to Property Act.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Vaugeois.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I'm going to move on.

Instead of getting better, this government has made it harder for seniors to access health care. We know that seniors' eye care, you can no longer get it annually. You need to wait for 18 months to get an eye exam now, unless you have a very specific condition.

Seniors' dental: We keep hearing from seniors who have been disqualified from accessing public dental care because of increases in GAINS, CPP and OAS. Seniors on fixed incomes need access to dental coverage, and the minor gains are not enough for people to afford the dental care they need. One dentist in Waterloo region who services seniors has a wait-list of a year and a half to two years before anyone can be seen. One older adult with a heart condition needed to have dental work done to prevent infection. The dentist said they could not see her through the program, so she had to go to another dentist and pay out of pocket, and the ministry is refusing to pay her coverage.

People are having to reapply for dental coverage before they have even been seen by a dentist through this program. Seniors need immediate dental work, such as partial plates and dentures, so they can eat and live with dignity, and they can't get an appointment. People that receive the federal one-time seniors' payment now do not qualify, and the ministry refuses to change the income threshold to accommodate the federal program.

Again, I have a two-part question: (1) What is the ministry doing to increase the number of dentists willing and eligible to provide service through the seniors' dental program; and (2) will you immediately increase the threshold so that seniors who have received slightly increased federal benefits can continue to receive the dental care they need? To refuse to do this is callous and, frankly, a very poor way. It's a way of saying the ministry is doing one thing when it's actually doing the opposite.

1650

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much for raising the important question. Now, I'd like to defer your question to our Deputy Minister Thomson. Deputy Minister, could you respond to the question, please?

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Thanks so much, Minister. I'd actually like to ask Jacqueline Cureton, the former assistant deputy minister of our policy, programs and strategic partnerships division. She can expand on this MOH program.

Ms. Jacqueline Cureton: Good afternoon. My name is Jacqueline Cureton. I'm the former ADM of programs and policies.

The ministry acknowledges that the population is aging, and with this increase in older adults comes the demand for more programs and services. Certainly, we help to contribute to the goal of promoting better quality of life and care for seniors across the province. We want to ensure older adults keep fit, active and socially connected to their communities so they can live life to the fullest. We know from feedback from surveys and consultations that older adults want to age at home and for as long as they can—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Can you please address the dental program and the threshold cut-off?

Mrs. Robin Martin: I think she's doing that.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: She's not there yet. She's talking about all kinds of other things.

Ms. Jacqueline Cureton: So the seniors' dental program is administered by the Ministry of Health. Excuse me for just one moment, please—my apologies.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): You can ask another question.

Ms. Jacqueline Cureton: Great—sorry, go ahead, please.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: All right. I'm going to go on, because I know that people have received letters from the ministry and, in fact, the Minister of Health said that she was not willing to move that threshold. So you have cases where seniors are getting a little bit more money from the federal government and all of a sudden, they're no longer eligible to access provincial programs, and that's really hurting them. When you're talking about dental care, they're much worse off, in fact, than they were before. I will move on from there.

People living with disabilities: As you know, there are many overlaps in various departments, but people living with disabilities have been relegated to live under the poverty line because this government refuses to increase ODSP rates to meet the cost of living. The last increase added just \$80 to recipients' basic payment. People are living with \$1,300, and as each of us must know very well, it's not possible to get housing, food, clothing and so on for that amount of money.

Researchers have found that being on social assistance in Ontario is correlated with a higher likelihood of poor health outcomes, homelessness and food insecurity, among other things. People on ODSP are dying by suicide and applying for state-sanctioned suicide through MAID because they can't afford to live. This should never be happening in a province as wealthy as Ontario.

I'd like to ask the minister: Will you stop the cruelty and join with us in demanding that ODSP and OW rates be doubled?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): I will remind the members that they are to ask questions related to the estimates and to the ministries responsible for the minister who is in front of us.

Mrs. Robin Martin: Yes, that's not the right ministry.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: That may be the case, but we are talking about people with disabilities not having the money to live on. I would hope that this ministry would be, in fact, advocating for people with disabilities so that they have their means to live.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Martin has a point of order, I believe.

Mrs. Robin Martin: On a point of order, Chair—I'm trying not to interrupt, but this doesn't even seem to be within the ministry that we're speaking of. I don't think seniors are eligible for ODSP, and I'm sure there are lots of—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: No, but people with disabilities are, and disabilities—

Mrs. Robin Martin: Right, some, but—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: —are part of this ministry.

Mrs. Robin Martin: I'm sure there are lots of other things that are relevant to this ministry that you could ask this minister. We already had a session with the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Yes, but this ministry, in its plan, has said that it is talking about a multidisciplinary, multi-ministerial approach, so it is relevant, because when you are dealing with people with disabilities, everybody needs to be on board and advocating, so that they can have a decent life. But I take your point.

Mrs. Robin Martin: It's not in their budget.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): You still have the floor. You've got three minutes and 30.

Mr. Wayne Gates: We're good?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Yes, MPP Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I'll try to make it a little easier for everybody. Minister, how are you? I'm going to ask a question and I'm going to do some other things. You said that it breaks your heart when you see seniors abused, and I agree with you, and I believe you; I've watched you in the House for a long time. But we saw seniors be abused in long-term-care homes—incredible. We also saw close to 6,000 of them die. My question to you, Minister: Why did you not speak up?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): I'll remind members to ask questions related to the estimates, MPP Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: It's senior abuse.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Gates, I'm going to rule it out of order.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Of course.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Do you have another question?

Mr. Wayne Gates: Oh, yes, I've got lots of questions. You'll probably rule them all out—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): No, no.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I'll get them on.

Minister, again, I'll ask you a question that I think is fair and reasonable, as a minister for seniors, just using the fact that you said some of this stuff breaks your heart—like it does mine, quite frankly. I'm very proud to be a younger senior; I know you're a senior senior, but I'm a younger senior.

Does the minister believe that our current health care system is working for seniors in this province? Do you believe that the closures of the hospitals in towns like Fort Erie, which I represent; Port Colborne, which Jeff represents; and Minden are beneficial to the health care needs of seniors in Ontario?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Martin?

Mrs. Robin Martin: Thank you, Chair. On a point of order, this is out of order, in the sense that it has nothing to do with estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, which is why we're here today.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, MPP Martin.

MPP Gates, it's out of order.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Well, I'm going to continue to ask the questions, because I believe it does deal with seniors. If you're going to be the minister of seniors, I think seniors who are having to go to a hospital that can't get service is a real problem.

Maybe you can answer this one. Maybe MPP Martin will allow this to go; who knows? Many students with disabilities and their families have felt anxiety when working with their school to find appropriate accommodations within the classroom.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute.

Mr. Wayne Gates: We know that students with disabilities continue to face significant challenges in our school system. What type of work has your ministry done with the Minister of Education to help address these concerns?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Minister, you have less than a minute.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much for the question. The AODA is driving change here in Ontario and has been for almost 20 years. Project by project, community by community, we are making Ontario more accessible, investment by investment. All 444 municipalities are partners in making Ontario more accessible for everyone.

We believe that accessibility should require more partnerships—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister. My apologies.

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): I have to cut you off there, Minister.

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Minister, sorry. You can answer more questions in a second.

I'll go to the government side. MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. Before I have my question, I'd like to give Minister Cho an opportunity to continue with his response.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): You can continue with your response, Minister.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Minister Cho, would you like to continue with your current response before I ask my question?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: No, I'm okay.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Pierre, you can ask your question.

1700

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Minister, one of the recent programs launched by our government since 2018 is the Inclusive Community Grants. Accessibility is a key focus that ensures people of all abilities can live to their fullest potential. This government recognizes that. Thanks to this program, my riding of Burlington has taken steps towards creating a more inclusive environment. One example was the installation of hearing loops at the Burlington Seniors' Centre. This helps seniors in my community by reducing barriers in programs and at service counters for those seniors with hearing loss.

We hear from Ontarians across our province that they face barriers in the physical environment, whether it's

barriers to accessing public spaces, enjoying the outdoors or just having the opportunities like everyone else. When I talk to people in Burlington, I want to be able to share more about how our government is prioritizing inclusion for people of all abilities. Could you please explain how the Inclusive Community Grants help promote accessibility in communities like Burlington and across Ontario?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you to MPP Pierre for such an important question. I truly believe that all Ontarians should have equal opportunity regardless of ability. Our Inclusive Community Grants Program is one of the ways we are supporting local organizations and advocating to promote accessibility based on the needs of the community. Through this program, community organizations receive up to \$60,000 towards projects that make it possible for people of all ages and abilities to get active and stay socially connected. Our government has funded over 60 community-based projects through it since 2018.

I was lucky enough to visit MPP Pierre's riding of Burlington this past year. I went to announce and celebrate the Inclusive Community Grants funding they received towards installing accessible beach mats so that persons with wheelchairs can enjoy the waterfront of Lake Ontario. These are people who wanted to enjoy our beaches but who faced a physical barrier that made it tough—something that many of us take for granted.

The mats installed through this project are one example of how, under the leadership of my colleague Minister Piccini, many Ontario parks have now become more accessible. By expanding the number of accessible parks and beaches, we are helping to make sure that as many Ontarians as possible can enjoy the marvellous beauty of our province.

I'm honoured as minister to get to visit and meet with many people from the accessibility community. I learn so much, and it motivates me to keep working hard for people with disabilities. I hope to visit Burlington again soon, but this is not the only place in Ontario that is becoming more accessible.

Through the Inclusive Community Grants, we are making waterfronts and parks accessible all across this province, from accessible beaches in Kenora to the accessible park benches in London and accessible waterfronts in Collingwood. Each of these projects is part of breaking down barriers for people with disabilities. For me, this is not just a matter of government policy; it is personal. I know what it's like to deal with a disability and to need extra support. I'm so grateful for the efforts that are made by advocates for accessibility.

Through local community projects and partnerships, we can achieve the vision of an inclusive Ontario. Projects like this strengthen local communities to promote healthy, active lifestyles for people of all ages and abilities. Project by project, community by community, we are advancing accessibility.

We know that there's still much more to be done to ensure that all Ontarians can fully participate in our province. Through programs like the Inclusive Community Grants, we are breaking down the barriers.

I want to thank all of our local partners who have continued to work with us.

Thank you for the question.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Further questions? MPP Martin.

Mrs. Robin Martin: Thank you, Minister, for telling us all about the Inclusive Community Grants. That was quite interesting. I'm delighted to hear that people can get to the waterfronts and all of those areas. It's kind of a great thing that makes it accessible to them.

My question is about the Seniors Community Grants Program. The Seniors Community Grants Program, under your leadership, is bigger than it has ever been before.

In my riding of Eglinton–Lawrence, we have a lot of very active seniors, and they're looking for opportunities to stay connected in the community. Like everybody else, they felt the weight and the impact of COVID, which stole time from people in a sense. They couldn't get out, and now they badly want to re-engage with the local community.

I know that you're a super senior and you're out there every day.

Can you please explain how our Seniors Community Grants are helping Ontario's seniors reconnect with their local communities?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much for the very important question.

In 2018, the Premier made me the first cabinet minister dedicated to advocating for seniors, as the Minister for Seniors and Accessibility. He knows that I'm a super senior, and he knows how important it is to have someone with lived experience representing people.

The population of seniors in Ontario is growing fast. A report by Statistics Canada suggests that by 2051, one quarter of our population will be seniors. We know it is more important than ever to have a plan for aging communities so that seniors can live and thrive at home in their communities as long as they want.

Thanks to the leadership of Premier Doug Ford, we have invested over \$22 million into 1,200 Seniors Community Grants projects. These projects support local community organizations to deliver activities and programs that are tailored to the needs of local seniors. These grants support educational activities, improve mental health, and support seniors to live a better life in their communities.

This summer, I was so busy visiting seniors all across this province to see how they live in their communities. I was able to go to many of the recipients of the Seniors Community Grants. I saw the smiling faces of active seniors—healthy and enjoying their community. I shared the gift of laughter with people in Scarborough, Durham, Whitby, Newmarket, Thunder Bay, Mississauga and Etobicoke, just to name a few. Everywhere, the response was the same. People love to be together and keep busy. They love to connect with other seniors and to find meaningful ways to stay connected in our communities. It is so important to thank and celebrate the people working in these local communities who care so much about

seniors. They know the local needs. They deserve our continued support.

1710

I have so many seniors come up to tell me how happy they were to have activities, whether it's playing pickleball, painting classes, learning about finances and healthy eating, Zumba or Ping-Pong. These projects are really making a difference in the lives of older adults in Ontario. Through this marvellous Seniors Community Grants Program, we are creating the best programs and services to fight social isolation and to keep our seniors healthy and happy.

Thank you for the question.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Further questions? MPP Martin.

Mrs. Robin Martin: I just wanted to say thank you to the minister for your response. I had the pleasure this past weekend of being at the tomato-sauce-making activity at Villa Colombo with a whole bunch of seniors, and it was so much fun. We all got covered in tomato sauce—very happy, active seniors enjoying their time there.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, MPP Martin.

You have seven minutes and 45 seconds, MPP Jordan, for your question.

Mr. John Jordan: I just want to say, you're also a super minister, Minister Cho, and I want to congratulate you on the expansion of the seniors active living centres in Ontario. Seniors in my riding, Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston, are always looking for things to do, social interaction things, and we all know that social interaction is a very important determinant of health. So I'm wondering if you could explain a little more about the seniors active living centres and the advantage that they place in communities where we are able to have them.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much to MPP John Jordan for raising that important question. Seniors are the backbone of this province. They worked so hard to build this province and raised families to make Ontario what it is today. Our seniors have given their blood, sweat and tears to help build our marvellous province. We would not have such a beautiful Ontario without their contributions.

As I mentioned before, in 2018, the Premier chose me as Minister for Seniors and Accessibility to make sure that somebody with lived experience can represent the people we are serving. Our government recognizes how much our seniors mean to their families and our communities. That is why we have invested over \$70 million since 2018 to fund nearly 200 seniors active living centres across the province. These centres provide an area for people to gather and feel support close to their homes. They are vibrant places for people to attend, stay socially connected, get active, stay fit and healthy. They're also an important place for people to get information about how to stay healthy, financial literacy and about how to stay involved in their communities.

When I get to go out across the province and spend time with other seniors, I see the important role these centres

have. They are so important for bringing people together and preventing loneliness. Social isolation is enemy number one for seniors. As a senior myself, I know what a difference it makes to be surrounded by people and to have activities to look forward to. My work motivates me to keep going and make Ontario a better place for all seniors. That is why we will continue to make sure that people of all ages and abilities are protected and can have a safer, healthy lifestyle.

Our investment promotes life in the community and supports the health and well-being of seniors across Ontario. Under this government, we are creating safe spaces for older adults to stay active, healthy, socially connected within their communities.

This June was Seniors Month. I had the pleasure of visiting so many of the marvellous seniors organizations and saw how seniors thrive. They are building friendships, playing music, being physically active. We also have seniors fairs throughout the year to help the seniors connect to local organizations and each other across Ontario. By investing in these many programs, we are building networks for seniors and promoting active living.

Thank you again for raising that important question.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Barnes, you have two minutes and 30 seconds roughly.

Ms. Patrice Barnes: Thank you, Minister. It was a pleasure having you out to my riding. Our seniors were excited to do activities with you and with those announcements that you made.

Minister, through the EnAbling Change program, your ministry provided eight grants to organizations across Ontario. Your ministry stated that the goal of these grants is to educate stakeholders about the value and benefit of accessibility, help support compliance and promote a culture of inclusion.

Minister, could you please explain why this program is important and how it links with other efforts to help people with disabilities?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much, MPP Barnes, for the very important question. The more voices we have supporting accessibility the better. This question is very important to this government and to me personally.

I want to talk about my dear friend, the former Lieutenant Governor, David Onley. He was a leader and a champion when it came to making Ontario more accessible. We spoke regularly about the importance of accessibility for all Ontarians, and he told me, “Raymond, the number one thing you can do for people with a disability is to help them find meaningful skills training and get jobs.”

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute remaining.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: This was part of the third legislative review of the AODA, and this is the legacy we carry forward through the EnAbling Change program. Since 2018, our government has invested over \$7 million to the EnAbling Change program to promote the values and benefits of accessibility. Whether it’s through the Ontario Tourism Education Corp., the Retail Council

of Canada, Peel Career Assessment Services, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind or the Carassauga Festival—all of these organizations are working together towards making accessibility—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister—my apologies. That is time.

We now turn, for the next round of 20 minutes of questioning, to the official opposition. MPP Gates?

Mr. Wayne Gates: I think I’m going to start off—before I get into some questions—on maybe some of the things we may agree with, which doesn’t happen a lot with myself with the government. But I certainly agree that we have to take better care of our seniors—I think we can all agree to that—and how some of our communities are doing it and how our ridings are doing it.

1720

In my community of Niagara Falls, the Niagara Falls council, once the YMCA closed in Niagara Falls, made that the community hub and allowed seniors to go there. Now, it’s incredibly busy. It’s got a pool. Our seniors go in and they swim the best they can or they do exercising. They’ve got pickleball, which has become an incredible sport for seniors to stay in shape. I haven’t tried it yet. I still think I’m going to play in the NHL, so I’m still trying to play goal in hockey. I haven’t tried pickleball, but I’ve seen it and it looks like a lot of fun.

When you go there, they play crib. They’re having lots of fun. There’s not a lot of exercise playing crib, but they’re there, playing crib, enjoying each other’s company, and that means just as much to seniors as well—to get out of the house, come there and meet their friends and have a good game of crib or sometimes euchre. Euchre is extremely popular with seniors as well.

When I take a look at my entire riding, we have the same thing: a community centre at Niagara-on-the-Lake where the seniors will go. It’s a little different in Niagara-on-the-Lake. They do play crib and pickleball, but they’ve got a library there, so they will go in and get a book. They will read the book and then they will meet their friends. They’ve got a little restaurant in there where people can get food and enjoy themselves. The reason why I’m telling these stories—and I should mention Ridgeway, because Beachcombers have got an incredible following, not only from my riding but right from Port Colborne to Welland, who come to the Beachcombers.

The reason why I’m saying that is, yes, it’s important to make sure that our retirees are getting out. They did build our country. I agree with—they built our country. Then you say, “Okay, what are we doing around our communities when we need volunteers?” We know there’s a real challenge around volunteers, particularly with young people, who are running two jobs. They’ve got their kids. Some are picking up extra classes in school. They don’t have the same amount of time that a senior would do that might be retired. We see our seniors volunteering—again, giving them an opportunity to do something really good in our communities and having some fun doing it.

The Lions Clubs in our areas are very, very active. I don’t know about your areas, but in Niagara, our Lions

Clubs do fish fries. This Friday, they're doing hamburgers for \$11 with fries and a pop or a water, whatever you want. The Lions Club up in Ridgeway does an incredible job. They have a lot of volunteers, a lot of seniors. During COVID, they were actually having meals and they were delivering the meals to the homes that couldn't get out of the house. They prepared the meal at the Lions and then they'd take it to the address, put it on the doorstep, and then when it's safe, they come and get them. So, there are lots of things that our seniors are doing.

Having said that, we have an obligation, I believe, to make sure that when our seniors get sick, we take care of them. That may mean that they go into a retirement home. That may mean they go to a long-term-care facility. It may mean, and hopefully, because I think most seniors, including myself—if I happen to get sick as I get older, I would want to stay at home. Put me by the TV and I'll be happy. I'll watch Blue Jays in Thirty for the 47th time that day.

We've got to do a better job, quite frankly, on taking care of our seniors, making sure they can stay in their homes, making sure that if they go to a retirement home that they have the staffing—staffing in these facilities, same like long-term care.

I know it's a bit of a long kind of talk, but I wanted everybody to understand that seniors play an incredible part in our community, even after they finish their—I'll use GM, because I come out of GM. They retire from GM and they're out volunteering. They're grandparenting all the time, making sure the kids get to school, as long as they're healthy. I believe that our seniors need to get the exercise. I believe our seniors should go and play pickleball. In Niagara-on-the-Lake, a big sport—even in Niagara Falls—is lawn bowling. I've done that a few times. When I was a kid, I used to bowl five pin, because I was so small. I couldn't lift a 10-pin ball, so I just bowled five pin.

All these things are fun things that our seniors are doing, and we've got an obligation that, when they're not able to do that any longer—unfortunately, as you get older, and obviously the minister is a super senior, but at the end of the day, at some point in time you might get sick. They need to make sure that they go into a place where they're going to be taken care of.

I'm going to ask you this question. I don't know where it's going to go, but I wanted everybody to understand that we have an obligation to take care of our seniors. They play an incredible role in our communities, in volunteering, as grandparents. I know our family, obviously, has done a lot of grandparenting, making sure that they don't have to pay daycare costs, because at one point in time daycare costs were through the roof.

So I'll ask this question, and we'll go from here. Does that sound all right, Minister?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for raising that important question—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Let me get my question in. Can I just get my question in there, Minister? Sound good? And it's a serious question, so I'm going to turn it to a serious point. I'm listening to you when you say you have a heart. That's what I've been saying in my critic role with my

ministry that I'm doing, long-term care: I want somebody who has a heart, and that we can work together to make it better for our moms, our dads, our aunts, our uncles and our grandparents. The fact that you led with that touched me a bit. I believe that you're one of the ones who do have a heart—not that the other ones don't, but I believe you when you say that and you say it passionately.

So I'm going to ask this question, and you can decide what you want to do with it: We have seen 6,000 seniors and those with disabilities in long-term care die during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ombudsman's report showed that this government completely failed seniors in long-term care, with no plan for inspection or protocols in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. What work has your ministry done with the Minister of Long-Term Care to address your government's continuing neglect of our long-term-care system? And when I'm talking about that, I'm talking about shared resources, shared income within your budgets.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for raising the question. First of all, it was a pandemic, COVID-19. Because of that, the seniors became the worst victims. One death is too many, as far as I can see.

Raising the important question—I'd like to defer that question to my deputy, but before I do that, thank you; good points. I'm a super senior myself. I know that one of the best ways to live a long and happy life is building relationships and *[inaudible]* communities. This is why we invested in programs that help seniors find the comfort and care that they need in their homes.

Thanks to the leadership of the Minister of Finance, our government has doubled the Ontario Guaranteed Annual Income System, giving seniors in need nearly \$2,000 a year. We are working hard to make sure seniors can connect to the local services they need to support happy and healthy lifestyles in their own communities.

Thanks for raising that question, and I defer that question to our deputy.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Can you hear me okay?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Please go ahead.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Thank you very much. I know the minister has already covered a bit about supports during the pandemic. There are just a few I wanted to supplement, if I may, for the committee.

First of all, just a reminder: I'm not sure whether the minister mentioned earlier the \$177 million into the sector during the pandemic. I also wanted to remind the committee around the almost 8,500 HEPA purifiers that the government provided, as well as helping residents through an emergency fund in terms of those having difficulties with affordability. Also, there were additional supports that we funded through the Red Cross during the pandemic, which I don't believe the minister has mentioned already.

I did want to flag for the member that, more recently, we've been working with the Chief Medical Officer of Health in terms of revising retirement home guidelines this past June, just to make sure that while some of the requirements are being modified, we're also continuing to provide

free rapid antigen tests for homes as well as prioritizing residents and staff for booster vaccinations.

1730

Also, as I'm sure the member is aware, we have made legislative and regulatory changes based on recommendations on this ministry's side from the AG and lessons learned from that time, so those were pieces that I wanted to flag as well, in addition to comments that the minister has made earlier.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I'm good. Thank you very much. I appreciate it. I will tell you on the HEPA filters, I work with a local company out of Fort Erie. They're owned by the Harber family. It's called Abatement. During the height of COVID, they donated the HEPA filters to the homes that had the outbreaks in Fort Erie and really stepped up. It's my understanding from that situation that Vic Fedeli and the company have gotten together. They've expanded their facility. They're creating some more jobs in Fort Erie. So it was a good-news story for the people that were in these facilities where they're getting COVID. Unfortunately, a lot of them passed away. But without this company stepping up in Fort Erie, a lot more would have passed away, so I certainly understand the importance of those machines.

I do want to say to the minister on home care: We're not doing enough for home care. We aren't. And the way to do that—I'll be very clear on how I feel we can fix it: We need to make sure that we have the staffing. A lot of times, people are in home care, they don't have enough staff and they don't show up to change their bandages or whatever they need to do or give them a bath. We've got to make sure we have the staffing. How do we do that? We make sure that we pay the PSWs, make them full-time jobs with real wages, real benefits and, in some cases, pensions, depending on who may or may not be representing them. I think if you want to fix home care, that's how you do it.

Hopefully, you can get with the long-term-care minister and say, "Look, we've got to fix home care," because most people want to stay in their homes. I don't know of anybody that's saying, "Hey, please, can I go to a long-term-care home, or can I go to a retirement home?" They want to stay home; they want to stay with their families. As a matter of fact, in most cases, they want to die with their families at home if it's possible. You mentioned home care, so I thought I'd give you some ideas around that as well.

I'm going to do another question. I feel very strongly about this. I think we need to do some things here to show that we care about our seniors and we care about the ones that we lost during COVID. So I'll ask the question and, again, you can choose on how you want to handle it or how the government wants to choose it.

This morning, we had the opportunity to speak with the new Minister of Long-Term Care about the recent Ombudsman's report. The minister didn't take the accountability from the findings of that report, nor did he agree that the government made mistakes, which I think is a big problem here. We all make mistakes, and this was a big

mistake. As minister responsible for seniors, do you have any remorse for the nearly 6,000 lives lost in our long-term-care homes?

I'm going to tell you—I'll be honest—I feel that I could have done better as an MPP. I mean, I'm screaming from the top of my lungs. But I always sometimes blame myself, if I did this or I did that: "If I did this better, maybe I could have saved some lives at Oakwood or Gilmore Lodge." I might have given it all the effort, but maybe if I did something different, I might have been able to save somebody's life that didn't have to die. I really would like somebody from the government to say the same thing, and I'm asking you as the minister for seniors that question.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Martin.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much—

Mrs. Robin Martin: Sorry, Minister. I'm just going to object to the question because it is not within the scope of this committee. This committee is about estimates and financial planning for the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility for the year 2023-24, so those are what the questions should be directed at. I think this question is not directed at that.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): It is out of order, MPP Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: What's that?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): It is out of order, MPP Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I'll leave that in the hands of the minister. He knows how I feel and what I said. I understand that MPP Martin does what she does and I'll live with the decision of the Chair on that particular question. I appreciate you all listening to me, although you probably wanted to cut me off a lot sooner.

Maybe this will work for you, Minister, and maybe MPP Martin and your side will at least give you the opportunity to answer this, because I think it's important: The death rate per 100 beds in long-term care in the first year of COVID for a publicly owned home was 1.35. And I'm sure, Minister, you know what a publicly owned home is, right? It's publicly owned, publicly delivered; some are owned by the municipality themselves, and the rate was 1.35. For a private, for-profit corporation home, it was 5.2—a big difference in the number of people that were dying in a private home compared to a not-for-profit home.

I've been arguing about this since I was appointed as the critic and tried to work with your government in saying, "We can fix this; these are some of the things we can do collectively together," because I think the ultimate goal from all of this is that when my mom or my dad or my aunt or uncle goes into these long-term-care facilities, they're going to be taken care of. They're going to be safe. They're not going in there to die.

Do you think that the private long-term-care homes are a safe place for our seniors? What are you doing as minister to ensure our seniors or those with disabilities are safe in long-term care and—I'll add this—not dying?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Martin?

Mrs. Robin Martin: On a point of order again, this is not directed to the estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility. It's not even directed to the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility. So I think it's inappropriate and out of order.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Gates, the question is out of order. You still have three minutes.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Well, I'm going to probably turn it back over to my colleague, but—and I may get called out of order, and you can do that; I'm fine with that.

My goal today, Minister, is to heighten the awareness as sincerely as I can that we still have a crisis in long-term care and retirement homes. We still have seniors who are getting sick with COVID, who are ending up in the hospital, who are dying of COVID. We still have that problem. What I'm saying to this government is we need to do better, and I'm giving you some solutions.

There isn't enough staff in these places. These places do not have enough staff, and I've heard that some of the places aren't using agency employees. For some, it could be because they can't afford to pay for them because they're \$300 to \$350 an hour. I believe we've got to do better. I think we may be in the early part of a new wave, quite frankly. We've got six or seven long-term-care facilities that have COVID outbreaks now. We've had one of our hospitals have a COVID outbreak. We need to fix this problem. We need to do it quickly. And I'm saying: Hire more PSWs; pay them full-time wages so they take some pride in going to work.

But I'll tell you this, and I'm going to be clear: I've been to a lot of long-term-care homes during COVID and before, and I spoke at a lot of them, the PSWs, the RNs, the employees that work in these facilities love to work there. They love their patients, and in some cases—and I know everybody on that side—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute.

Mr. Wayne Gates: —knows that sometimes that's the only person that that person may see in long-term care, maybe it's the PSW or the RN or the dietary person that comes to their bed.

So I'm saying to the minister: You've been around a long time. I don't know about "super senior" or whatever they call you in your caucus, but you have an opportunity to help fix this, because I believe you. I don't think you think that anybody should die because of staffing, because they didn't have enough staff to get basic needs, water. So I'm asking you to please be a voice, and say, we've got to do this right. We've got to protect more seniors before more seniors die this fall with the next wave that's coming.

I appreciate you listening to me. Thank you very much.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): We'll now move to the next round of questioning for 20 minutes on the government side. MPP Wai.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: I just want to say thank you to our minister. I have been working together with him, and I really see it with my own eyes: When he goes from one place to the next place, all the seniors really coming out to say thank you to him. And the result speaks for a lot of

things. However, I still have some questions that I would love to have my minister to let us know more.

1740

We have the pleasure of hearing you rise many times in the House to talk about seniors and the important role that they play in our society. I see first-hand, as I say, in my riding of Richmond Hill, our seniors provide needed sources of energy and wisdom, and they are critical to continue the growth of our communities. We have also heard often about the devastating impacts of social isolation. Yes, social isolation is the thing that you have been mentioning to us. It is their need, both for physical and mental health. You yourself have often been heard to say that social isolation is enemy number one for us.

Minister, why is it important for us to combat social isolation and how are you helping seniors to stay connected in our communities?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. I'd like to thank MPP Daisy Wai for the most important question. I often remind my team that, when we talk about supporting our seniors, social isolation is enemy number one. This is because the effects of social isolation are awful. When our seniors are isolated, not only does their physical health suffer, their mental health suffers, too. When seniors are isolated, they are more at risk of being abused. Social isolation is an underlying cause for so many of the things we are trying to fix for our seniors. We know that when we help seniors stay connected in their communities, they can be more active, fit and safe and healthy. When we help our seniors stay connected, they can access the health they need earlier, helping to reduce lengthy hospital stays. Not only is it good for our health care system, but it also offers our seniors a better quality of life.

I have already spoken today about the importance of our Seniors Community Grants. By supporting local organizations, those closest to the seniors we are serving, we can try and help our seniors have quality activities that best fit their needs. This is an important way of helping to strengthen the support network our seniors have.

As I spoke about in response to MPP Jordan's question, it is also about senior active living centres. This is why my ministry is working hard to expand the number of our centres across Ontario. These centres provide a municipality-focused response to support for our seniors. By working in partnership with the municipalities and other community partners, we are helping to lead with stronger locally based [inaudible] support that is matched to where our seniors live.

We are strengthening the social supports for our seniors, removing barriers that might lead to isolation. These barriers aren't just based on geography. They can also be based around the language. As an immigrant to Canada from Korea, I understand the importance of helping to support our seniors in as many languages as possible. That is why I am honoured to be part of a government which offers access to 211 Ontario and the Seniors Safety Line in nearly 200 languages. When we meet our seniors in the language of their choosing, we can help to further break down barriers that make them isolated.

We need to keep reminding ourselves that social isolation is the root cause of so many of the problems we see. When we do this, we can stay focused on keeping our seniors connected. By keeping them connected, we are not only helping to protect their physical and mental health; we can also help strengthen our communities as a whole. When our seniors stay connected, we can help ensure that the wisdom and energy which they offer is helping the community.

I spoke earlier about the importance of supporting our seniors and that our society can be judged based upon how it treats its seniors. This is why I'm always talking about the importance of keeping our seniors connected. It is our Premier who often speaks about the need to support our seniors. It is why our government has introduced so many programs and supports to keep seniors fit, active, connected and safe. It is why we doubled the GAINS for low-income seniors. It is why we introduced new services and strengthened existing programs to help seniors live in their homes and communities as long as they wish. This is why social isolation is enemy number one, and I will keep fighting until every senior can live a life of dignity and respect, which they deserve.

Thank you for that important question, MPP Daisy Wai.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you, Minister.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Further questions? MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Minister, our Premier has often talked about the importance of the Ontario dream and how it should be available to everyone in the province. At the same time, we know there are substantial barriers that some Ontarians face, especially people with disabilities. These important members of our province are facing barriers in accessing services and being able to fully experience the promise our province offers. How are you reducing barriers to help make the province more inclusive and accessible, helping everyone to live the Ontario dream?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for the question. Creating a more open, accessible Ontario is a priority for our government. We thank all advocates of accessibility, who are working to make Ontario more accessible. The more voices we have supporting accessibility the better. When we include the feedback of people with disabilities, we can make sure that the programs and services being developed align with their needs. When their voices are included, we can also ensure the supports provided continue to evolve to meet today's priorities.

We believe that accessibility requires a whole-of-government approach. Together with other ministries across this government, we're working to build a better Ontario. This work also involves partners at other levels of government, along with businesses, community organizations and interested individuals. With every dollar this government invests, we are advocating for accessibility. With every dollar invested, we are creating a more accessible Ontario.

1750

It is under the leadership of Premier Ford that we are accelerating infrastructure investments in critical areas

like transit and public buildings. Every new school, new hospital, new [inaudible] building and public transit are required to comply with the AODA. This means that we are increasing the amount of accessible infrastructure with every dollar invested.

As you may know, accessibility is a part of the Ontario building code. Our government signed a memorandum of understanding with the federal government to begin the process of developing national standards in the national building code using the AODA as a benchmark. We are modernizing existing buildings and removing existing barriers when we find them. This is what the AODA meant for us to do—to work towards a more open and accessible province.

Thanks to the Minister of Transportation, we are reducing barriers when it comes to transit. Every dollar spent on transit is a dollar spent on making Ontario more accessible. Right now, GO Transit has 39 bus routes that are 100% accessible. We have 57 fully accessible trains. Over [inaudible] GO Transit stations are fully accessible. And with every investment in updating our stations, we are increasing the accessible footprint across our province.

But accessibility is about so much more. Accessibility and inclusion require collaboration. We need more partnerships and more conversations. That is why we are working with the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, home building officials' association, Ontario [inaudible], March of Dimes, the Retail Council of Canada, the University of Waterloo and OCAD to deliver an accessible solution for the province. These are just a few of the partners we are working with to improve accessibility in communities across Ontario.

Although the AODA deadline for developing standards is 2025, our government will never stop looking for ways to make Ontario more inclusive and accessible to everyone.

For example, automatic doors are now part of our society. Everybody can push a button or wave their hand and a door automatically opens in major buildings, large or small. These are things we now take for granted. No one considers an automatic door to be a burden; as a matter of fact, it is now considered a convenience. This is one of many examples of how Ontario is becoming more accessible. Project by project, community by community, we are making Ontario more accessible, and with the support of our incredible partners and the continued leadership of Premier Doug Ford, we will continue to move forward.

Thank you for the question.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): MPP Quinn, you have four minutes.

Mr. Nolan Quinn: Minister, I've heard from many seniors across my riding of Stormont-Dundas-South Glengarry and across the province about how they want to live at home and in their communities as long as they wish, especially in rural Ontario. They have also shared the concerns they have about the cost of living and worry about how they will be able to afford to continue to live at home in the face of steep inflation that is impacting everything in their daily lives. How are you helping seniors to live more comfortably at home and to be able to afford their daily costs?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much, MPP Nolan Quinn, for that most important question. Our seniors deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. They have given so much already to build this province, Ontario, the best province in the best country in the world, Canada. They continue to give so much to our communities today. Seniors offer more volunteer hours than almost anyone else. They continue to share their wisdom and their energy to keep our province growing.

It has been said that the measure of our society is how we treat seniors. I totally agree with that. I am honoured to be part of a government which, under the leadership of Premier Ford, has made tangible investments in our seniors. We have doubled the GAINS payments for low-income seniors, helping to put more money in the pockets of those who are most affected by the rising cost of living. And starting next year, we'll be indexing GAINS to inflation, ensuring that as costs continue to go up, the government will stand with our seniors. We have also introduced the Seniors Care at Home Tax Credit, providing up to 25% refundable rebates on care costs, up to \$6,000 per senior. Our government also boosted the funding for the Home and Vehicle Modifications Program by 50%—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute, Minister.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: [*Inaudible*] years. This is \$15 million in extra funding that provides grants to help seniors and people with disabilities live at home and in their communities. These grants help them adapt their homes and vehicles so that as their needs evolve and change they can still stay involved in their communities.

As a senior myself, I know the stress that affordability can place on seniors. This is why I am excited to be part of a government which is delivering on a promise the Premier made in 2018 to launch a seniors' dental program.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Minister. We have to go—

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: We are actively—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you. Sorry.

The opposition member, you have 20 minutes.

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MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you very much—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Sorry—17 minutes, 40 seconds. Go ahead.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Seventeen minutes and 40 seconds? All right.

Minister, you talked about that we heard during AMO how many municipalities are struggling to pay for services. Many have had to increase their tax rate up to 10%, some even more. I know in my home community, there's talk of cutting most of the hockey rinks for kids because the city doesn't have the budget to maintain them. I'm just wondering what funding is being provided to municipalities to fulfill their AODA requirements.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for raising that question. I'd like to refer that question to our deputy. Deputy Minister Thomson, could you respond to that question, please?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Go ahead, Deputy Minister.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Can you hear me okay? Thank you very much, Minister. I'll ask the Meenu Sikand, who is the assistant deputy minister for accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities division, to provide a bit more detail in terms of funding to municipalities and how we're working closely with municipalities on AODA implementation.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Assistant Deputy Minister Sikand, go ahead.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: My name is Meenu Sikand. I am the assistant deputy minister for accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities division.

As you know, when the legislation was created, it was expected for municipalities to find funding to improve their accessibility initiatives. However, there are provisions in the accessibility legislation, such as proactively creating accessibility plans, that allow municipalities to plan for resources in advance and identify the barriers in advance, and then creating a long- and short-term plan to address those barriers. And that has been in effect for the past 15 years. In addition, we do have the EnAbling Change program, as well as the Inclusive Community Grants, where smaller municipalities or others may apply to find funding for the projects that may improve accessibility within their municipalities.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Great. Thank you very much. I'm glad to hear that there are at least some financial resources allocated.

I still have a lot of concern. I wonder what is being lost through the \$50-million cut to seniors and accessibility. I don't know whether you can answer that question, but I have a suggestion of something that would not cost money, and that is a bill of right for seniors. Unlike children, where professionals are legally required to report abuse and to move children into safer settings, we have nothing like this to protect older adults, many of whom are quite vulnerable. British Columbia has a model that does exactly this. So there is, in fact, a model in place.

So I'd like to ask you, Minister, if you will commit to bringing in a bill to protect seniors from abuse that also funds support for them so that they have the means to escape their abusers.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for those questions. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we acted quickly to increase funding to keep seniors healthy and safe. We have moved \$58-million worth of COVID-19 programs and services to a permanent home in the Ministry of Health. This funding is now part of permanent infection-prevention-and-control funding. It is now part of our government's \$1-billion commitment to home and community support services. Within my ministry, we are increasing our programs and services with the seniors community grant, seniors active living centres, seniors—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I'm going to interrupt you, Minister. I really was just asking about whether you would support creating a seniors' bill of rights.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Well, I'd like to refer the question to our deputy minister.

Mrs. Robin Martin: Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Sorry, Deputy Minister. One moment.

MPP Martin.

Mrs. Robin Martin: Just on a point of order: I don't think this is a policy discussion. There's a suggestion about a bill of rights for seniors. It's probably more appropriate to bring that up in the Legislature or through a private member's bill or something. I think we're here to talk about the estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, MPP Martin.

I'll remind the member to ask questions related to estimates. If you would like the deputy minister to answer, she is in her rights.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you. I will move on.

I'm going to move back to Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario. I'm wondering if there's an explanation as to why they weren't met with face to face, why it was left until the last possible moment. In fact, their grant had run out and they were not able to—you can't keep staff if you can't pay them. Why were they put in the position of having to wait for well over three months to even see the first penny, and really, why is there not more funding being put into supporting Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario? These are front-line workers. Many are involved as volunteers. The people who are working are working around the clock for very, very low pay.

If the government really wants to address the epidemic of the abuse of elders, it needs to be working with this organization and helping them get the funding so that they can do their work. Not all seniors are able to go dancing or get tomato sauce. There are many seniors who are trapped in different situations. I can tell you, this is also in seniors' residences, when their family members have been trespassed and seniors are stuck alone in their units, not able to see any of their family members.

There are many places where abuse is taking place; they need to be identified, and this particular organization is ready and willing to do that work. They were started 20 years ago, but they haven't received an increase, really—any kind of substantive increase in 20 years and that hasn't even met the rate of inflation.

My question is, will you look seriously at supporting Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario so that they can do the work they have set out to do?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you so much for raising that important question. Now, I'd like to refer the question to our deputy. Would you please respond?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Deputy Minister Thomson.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Thank you, Minister, for the opportunity to weigh in.

I did just want to highlight for the member that, actually, we are increasing funding close to \$1 million over three years to expand the Seniors Safety Line, as well as partnering with Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario, EAPO—as you were referring to earlier—to deliver almost a million dollars in programming to further protect seniors, specifically related to public awareness but also educating first responders and others.

Just a quick note for the member: Since 2018, the government has helped over 125,000 seniors through that program. As well, over 150,000 have accessed the safety line. Just a quick footnote for the member, as well, that we do provide over \$600,000 in funding to two francophone organizations specifically related to elder abuse. I just wanted to highlight those pieces for the member.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you.

I know that a million was what EAPO already had, so there really has been only a very, very minor increase to their funding. I know that they also were behind the Seniors Safety Line, although that has now passed into other hands. They have been very clear with me that they do not have the resources they need to do the work, so I hope that that will be taken seriously.

Now, this may be a question that, again, may not fit exactly here, but I'm sure you'll tell me if it doesn't: housing for seniors. Of course, we've got these responsibilities. They're broken up—I think I can think better without it—they're broken up amongst different ministries, so then it's often very hard to talk about or address the issues in a really fulsome way when we're talking about housing for seniors but you don't have funding for housing for seniors. I was actually hoping I would see something like that in your budget. I was hoping to see a substantial increase in your budget so that you could be looking at things like that.

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The situation in my riding, in Thunder Bay—Superior North, is that there's a five-to-seven-year wait-list to get into any of the affordable seniors' residences. It's no problem if you've got \$5,000, \$6,000 a month to spend on Chartwell or Revera. Lots and lots of people do not have that kind of money, so what do they do? There is, in fact, a project in my riding that I've been trying to get support for that would create 60 new seniors' residences. They're beautiful; it's a great place. I would live there myself. But there's no program to support these not-for-profit community-led projects. So I know it's not in this budget, but I am hoping that you will advocate so that this issue—because, again, you talk about a whole-of-government approach to try to address the issues.

I must say also, people with disabilities—so there are people in my riding, again, on the third floor of St. Joseph's Heritage, with disabilities. Some of them have been there for three years because there's no safe housing for them. There's nowhere for them to go. There are some safe housing units—they're full. It's a very long lineup. So housing is a huge issue. We know it's a huge issue everywhere. But for these populations and the senior population, of course, it's getting bigger minute by minute. So I hope you will find yourself in a position to be able to advocate. Yes, if you wanted to respond, that would be lovely.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much for raising that important question. I'd like to defer this question to the deputy but, as you know, housing is a big issue for seniors and the younger generation and new Canadians. That is why our Premier, our government, is working so hard to build 1.5 million homes. Housing is a big problem.

That is why we're working so hard. But for a specific answer, I'd like to defer your question to my deputy minister.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Deputy Minister Thomson.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Thanks. Can you hear me okay?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Yes. Go ahead.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Great, thank you so much, Chair. Thank you very much for the question and thank you, Minister, for the opportunity to weigh in. I know, member, we've chatted a lot about seniors' affordability already today. The only thing I thought might be helpful to add is that you mentioned a cross-government approach, and I just wanted to reassure the member that we do work very closely with our colleagues in the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing on the housing supply action plan, specifically related to seniors' housing and prioritizing seniors' housing within that context. So I just wanted to make that additional point to the points that have been made earlier today around affordability. Thanks very much.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you for that answer. I hope that the supports are also there for not-for-profit and community-based housing. We see mostly money going into for-profit housing. But thank you, and I appreciate that there is a cross-government conversation about these issues. That's very important.

What have I got, three minutes?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Yes.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: All right. I'm going to close—I want to go back to this issue about the illegal use of the trespass act because it is causing so much harm to people in any kind of—well, there are people who are being isolated in institutional settings, and then there are also people who are being isolated within their homes when sometimes a family member decides that other family members are not welcome to come. The person living in a house, whether they pay rent or not, has the right and is the only one—they are the occupant—who has the right to say yes or no, to say “I want to see this person” or “I don't.” That is also true in institutional settings, but that is not how the law is being applied.

What I would like to see—and I'd be happy to make the first draft—is a letter that goes out to every single congregate living space that says, explicitly, “This is the appropriate and inappropriate use of the Trespass to Property Act,” because people are abusing it. I think some know that it's wrong. Some don't. We also know that police officers actually don't know. They think that the owner of the residence has the right to say who comes or goes, but that's not true. It is the occupant of the unit who has that right.

This is going to continue—I could take another 20 minutes just to read you stories of people who have been blocked from seeing their family members, sometimes until they've died. It's so unnecessary. This is something we can all agree on, and in fact, we did in 2021. There was

an all-of-government agreement to that motion, so I'd like to see us follow through. It's a simple win for so many people, and it's not hard to bring about.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): One minute remaining.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for raising that. Today, MPP, you've raised so many important questions. As I said in my speech earlier, social isolation is probably number one, and yet, we're encouraging to keep the distance. This is a very difficult situation.

I'd like to refer your question to my deputy.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Deputy Minister Thomson. Sorry, we're unmuting you. Go ahead.

Ms. Melissa Thomson: Thanks very much, Chair. I know we don't have much time, but Assistant Deputy Minister Jacqueline Cureton is teed up and ready to speak specifically to the trespass piece.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thirty seconds—not even.

Ms. Jacqueline Cureton: Okay. As you know, retirement homes are governed by the Retirement Homes Act, and the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority has responsibility for oversight of the retirement home sector. What I want to share with you very quickly: In July 2021, the RHRA, in consultation with our ministry, issued a memo under the retirement home sector to address situations in which operators issued a trespass order under the Trespass to Property Act. The memo emphasized tenants' rights under the Residential Tenancies Act, 2006, and homes' obligations under the RHA. It also reminded homes that the RHA prohibits retaliatory actions, including bans against individuals who report concerns to the RHRA.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): Thank you, Assistant Deputy Minister. My apologies, time is up.

This concludes the committee's consideration for the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry for—

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Matthew Rae): —I need to read it into the record, MPP Martin—Seniors and Accessibility.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates.

Are the members ready to vote? Shall vote 3501, ministry administration programs, carry? Carried.

Shall vote 3502, policy program and strategic partnerships, carry? Carried.

Shall vote 3503, accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities, carry? Carried.

Shall the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility carry? Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility to the House? Carried.

Thank you. There is no further business. This committee stands adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1820.

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