



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Hansard Verbatim Report

No. 57 – April 30, 2007



Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

Twenty-fifth Legislature

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES
2007**

Ms. Judy Junor, Chair
Saskatoon Eastview

Mr. Wayne Elhard, Deputy Chair
Cypress Hills

Mr. Lon Borgerson
Saskatchewan Rivers

Ms. Joanne Crofford
Regina Rosemont

Mr. Peter Prebble
Saskatoon Greystone

Mr. Don Toth
Moosomin

Mr. Milton Wakefield
Lloydminster

[The committee met at 15:00.]

**General Revenue Fund
Advanced Education and Employment
Vote 37**

Subvote (AE01)

The Chair: — Good afternoon. The Standing Committee on Human Services today has on its agenda the consideration of estimates for the Department of Advanced Education and Employment. That's on page 29, vote 37 — 29 of your budget book. And I welcome the minister, and she can introduce her officials. And if you have a statement to give to begin the estimates.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Today I'm joined by Bonnie Durnford, the deputy minister of Advanced Education and Employment; Rob Cunningham, assistant deputy minister responsible for labour market services; and Randy Boldt, assistant deputy minister responsible for immigration. I will also introduce others as they . . . on an as-needed basis if we need to include them in our discussion. I'd like to take the opportunity to present the priorities for our department in the coming year.

First, with this year's budget, the Government of Saskatchewan created a graduate tax exemption program for post-secondary graduates who stay in or come to our province. Beginning this year any graduate of an approved post-secondary education or training program of at least six months will be eligible for a new Saskatchewan graduate tax exemption. This new initiative increases to \$20,000 per year the amount of income earned by a graduate that will be exempt from provincial income tax. That is, over a five-year period, \$100 dollars in tax-free income following graduation.

Second, as our province's economy continues to expand, we have seen unprecedented numbers of job and career opportunities and that's why we're responding by creating a large number of education and training opportunities in our province. Since 2004-05 we've created 6,164 ongoing training opportunities and 2,320 additional one-time opportunities in 2006-07. This year's investment of \$32.9 million will create 2,118 training opportunities in the areas of adult basic education, skills training, apprenticeship, work-based training, northern studies, and health-care education and training.

We're also providing \$28.4 million over three years to build our capacity to educate health care professionals. When fully implemented, this investment will create 176 new health care education and training spaces. Creating more training wherever they are needed is one way that we're making education more affordable.

The government is extending the province's post-secondary tuition freeze by providing an additional \$21.6 million in funding to our two universities. In '07-08, this will be the third consecutive year that tuition has been frozen at the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan. Again, in real terms, an average full-time student who commenced her studies in 2005-06 will have saved \$1,500 in tuition costs. That's very significant for a full-time student.

We're also making post-secondary education more affordable by investing \$4.1 million of enhancements to the provincial training allowance and student loans. The \$1.6 million increase for student financial assistance will cover a change in the parental contribution calculation, which will result in a decrease in the expected parental contribution for dependent students. This change may significantly increase the number of students eligible to receive financial assistance by reaching out to more middle- to moderate-income families.

Third, we have come to a time in our shared history when, more than ever, First Nations people across the province are playing a major role — not just in our society's cultural fabric, but also in our economic fabric. That is why the government is providing \$4.2 million to fund additional programming for First Nations and northern learners. This is extremely important news, and this funding is going to a range of programs. With it, we're continuing to establish our relationship — and it's a new relationship — with the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies by building SIIT's capacity to deliver education and training.

We're also supporting our training institutions to deliver training on-reserve, and creating new investments around on-reserve adult basic education to build individual and collective capacity within First Nations communities.

We're also funding a new undergraduate program in northern studies through a unique partnership with the University of Saskatchewan, the University of the Arctic, and Northlands College. This program will provide northern learners with administrative expertise that will ultimately aid employers in northern Saskatchewan. First Nations and Métis people are a significant part of our province's solution to our labour shortage, and this funding is designed to activate Saskatchewan's Aboriginal advantage.

Fourth, in March we created the Labour Market Commission. This group of high-level decision makers from Saskatchewan business, labour, First Nations and Métis, as well as the social economy, education and training institutions, and the province, will help to ensure that our labour market needs are being met. We've worked very closely with the chamber of commerce and the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour to develop the Labour Market Commission to ensure that the voice of Saskatchewan business and labour is heard loud and clear on labour market issues. And we will have more to say on this in the near future when we unveil the membership of this new organization.

Fifth, we continue to develop and improve our very successful SaskJobs website. In November of last year Premier Calvert promised that SaskJobs would have a major presence in Alberta's major cities, and starting on January 10 we started to spread the message across Alberta that this is no longer the Saskatchewan that Albertans thought they knew. Our SaskJobs promotion will continue both inside and outside of our borders this spring, and in fact we've taken this campaign to the Ontario . . . I guess what you would call that strip — London, Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo — where we understand that there are some significant layoffs taking place in the manufacturing industry. And we're hoping to attract and recruit skilled workers from that part of the country to our province.

And sixth, besides our initiatives to develop and retain young people within the province and develop Aboriginal people within the province, we're also inviting newcomers from around the world to share in Saskatchewan's many opportunities for innovation.

In 2005 we launched our ambitious strategy to attract 5,000 immigrants annually to our province by 2008-09 and we're already one year ahead of schedule in reaching this goal. For the '06-07 fiscal year we issued 1,255 nominations and, along with family members, we anticipate that over 3,000 people will come to our province under our immigrant nominee program. And in light of our program's remarkable success in such a short time, we have adjusted our target for '07-08 from 1,200 to 1,500 nominations. So we're one year ahead of schedule.

This year's funding of 8.5 million will enable us to continue helping Saskatchewan employers access skilled workers through our nominee program in order that we can meet our labour market needs. And we're doing this by increasing our capacity, streamlining application processes, and expanding our marketing efforts.

But attracting newcomers to our province is only one part of our strategy. Once we invite immigrants to Saskatchewan we need to ensure that we have the supports in place to help settle and integrate newcomers as quickly as possible. And that's why this year's budget, which represents a 40 per cent increase over the '06-07 budget, includes \$5.7 million to support settlement initiatives such as employment and language services, credential recognition, capacity building within various organizations that are welcoming newcomers to the province, and then of course funding supports to settlement agencies.

To conclude, a year has passed since the Department of Advanced Education and Employment was established. As you know it was established April 1, '06 and within this past year the department has worked extremely hard to improve the important connections between learners, job seekers, and employers. I believe that the efforts of our department are having an impact both within and beyond our borders, and I think that we've been able to undertake a remarkable job in one year. So I'd invite any questions that the members might have as we discuss our budget allocation for the '07-08 year.

The Chair: — Thank you. Mr. Weekes.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Welcome to the minister and your officials. As you may be aware, or you may not be aware, that the member from Weyburn has recent been named the critic for Immigration but he is unable to be here today so I'm filling in for him as a deputy critic for Immigration.

I have a number of questions; some relate to the budget items. But generally I want to ask questions and discuss your department's role and your officials' role in the Far East, mainly the Philippines and China, but elsewhere. Could you explain what is the department's role and your officials' role in those countries as far as holding meetings or seminars? And if you could also elaborate on what type of meetings you're holding and who's attending the meetings and the costs around those types of meetings that your officials are attending.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Sure. What I can speak specifically to are a trip to the Philippines and also to China. And the reasons were twofold. One, in the case of . . . Well actually there's several reasons. But in the case of the Philippines we went to speak primarily to the departmental officials within the Government of the Philippines regarding our immigrant nominee program, and entering into a memorandum of understanding with the Government of the Philippines regarding the, I guess, processing of applications out of the immigrant nominee program to expedite the process.

And as you know, in December the Minister of Labour for the Government of the Philippines came to Saskatchewan and we signed the MOU [memorandum of understanding] at E.D. Feehan Collegiate in Saskatoon where there are a number of Filipino students, Canadian Filipino students, that are attending that institution. In the Philippines we met with several government officials as well as the Minister of Labour, and we also had an opportunity to meet with the Chinese-Filipino Chamber of Commerce talking about various economic opportunities in the province. And we also met with a group of business people in the Philippines once again about opportunities here.

We also spent some time at the embassy and with the ambassador to the Philippines and the embassy staff, because part of the processing takes place at the embassy. As you know, they represent the Government of Canada and we wanted to brief them on our immigrant nominee program.

We then spent some time in China. I accompanied the president of the University of Regina on basically a mission where we were doing two things. We were entering into various relationships with universities in China, partnerships between the U of R [University of Regina] and the various universities in China, and we were also recruiting students internationally to the province of Saskatchewan. And as you may know the recruitment of international students is important to our two universities and it's also important to SIAST [Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology], which has been doing some work I think in Vietnam around providing technical training to people living in Vietnam. So we were entering into various partnerships in the People's Republic of China.

In terms of the costs, I believe that you asked for that — certainly my costs — in the written questions. I believe I've provided that.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. Could you table a copy of the MOU with the Filipino government?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — In order for . . . As you know this is a memorandum of understanding between the Government of Saskatchewan and the Government of the Philippines. Usually those kinds of documents are not, they're not made public. It's a government-to-government document. But I certainly can tell you . . . give you some content.

As I understand, the government of the Philippines has agreed that this document can be made public, and that was something that I wanted to make sure happened. Because you don't release documents unless governments agreed. So we can make that available to you and I'll table it with the Chair of the

committee.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you very much for that. But while we're on the topic, could you outline the agreement in some detail or more detail? What is the role of the Filipino government and those types of issues?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — In terms of technical detail, I'll ask Randy Boldt, who accompanied me to the Philippines, to provide you with that information.

Mr. Boldt: — Well one of the things to understand in particular with the Philippines is that recruitment of labour in the Philippines is a regulated industry in the Philippines. So part of this, a major part of the memorandum of understanding is to facilitate that. This is the first agreement that the Philippine government has signed which is for a permanent movement of people as opposed to a temporary movement. So the memorandum of understanding that we have with them basically facilitates an easier transformation or an easier transfer of people from the Philippines to Saskatchewan.

The agreement basically outlines that the Philippine government, as well as approved Philippine recruiters, will source potential employees for companies. And the agreement also specifies that the Saskatchewan government will specify the particular employers that meet the approval of the government. And so the agreement allows for the employers and the employees to come together by the two governments' agreement under the memorandum of understanding.

It's a surprisingly complex process in the Philippines. There's a large number of entities involved and in order for us, in order for employers to recruit from the Philippines, they can only recruit through approved recruiters. And I think this is an extremely important point to understand. And so that's basically how the memorandum of understanding operates.

Mr. Weekes: — If I could ask a question about the approved recruiters.

Mr. Boldt: — Yes.

Mr. Weekes: — Approved by both governments?

Mr. Boldt: — No, just by the Philippine government.

Mr. Weekes: — By the Filipino governments . . .

Mr. Boldt: — Yes.

Mr. Weekes: — Government. Approved recruiters, the definition would be Filipinos or this would be how about . . . Would that also include Canadian consultants wanting to recruit?

Mr. Boldt: — There are Canadian consultants. There was a Canadian consultant that was in the Philippines, who has a licence, at the same time we were there. And we did do a joint seminar with this particular consultant. So it does allow for Canadian consultants who do have licences in the Philippines, but they do have to have an office presence. And there are a number of Canadian consultants who do that already.

Mr. Weekes: — Did you say they have to have an office presence?

Mr. Boldt: — Yes.

Mr. Weekes: — Does your department advertise this to consultants that this is the option and this is the process in order to become a recruiter in the Philippines?

Mr. Boldt: — Do we . . .

Mr. Weekes: — I guess the question is, how do they know, how do they know that they need to become a, officially become a recruiter and apply to the Filipino government? Because there are a number of consultants that actually are just getting into the business and just to facilitate their entry into the business, how do they go about it?

Mr. Boldt: — I have to tell you that I'm sorry that I'm not an expert on becoming an approved consultant by the Philippine government. I can't answer that question.

Mr. Weekes: — Well I guess my question is concerning the department's role and to facilitate Canadian consultants in the business of consulting and immigration in the Philippines.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Our job is to expedite the process for Saskatchewan employers. And in the case of the Government of the Philippines, in order, as Mr. Boldt stated, this is the first time that the Government of the Philippines has entered into this kind of MOU where people can move permanently. They're not simply migrant workers; they can move permanently to Saskatchewan. And they have a number of requirements.

And one of the requirements is in order for people to come they have to go through these recruiters that are licensed by the Government of the Philippines. And you need to have a presence there. And as Mr. Boldt has said, there are Canadian companies that are licensed in the Philippines, and obviously they would be able to send skilled workers to Saskatchewan.

In terms of consultants in Saskatchewan, obviously they would have to go through a process with the Government of the Philippines. But that is not our mandate; that's not the mandate of the Immigration department to work with consultants and getting them licensed in the Philippines. They would have to go through their own process of the Filipino government.

Mr. Weekes: — So employers in Saskatchewan, could you explain the process? I assume they would need to get a hold of your department if they want to access immigrants from the Philippines, and what is the process around that?

Mr. Boldt: — Employers are welcome to work with whoever they wish who is a licensed practitioner in the Philippines. They can recruit directly. I believe there might be over 1,000 approved consultants in the Philippines and they can work with those approved consultants to undertake their own recruitment, and many companies over the years, right across Canada, have used these recruiters. So Saskatchewan companies are welcome to use any of these approved recruiters.

Mr. Weekes: — Thanks. I guess my point is going back to your comments that the Filipino government, Saskatchewan government are going to match potential immigrants with employers. So explain the process. How does the employer . . . Now obviously the employer has a need and is seeking immigrants. But what's the department's role in matching immigrants from the Philippines with the employers in Saskatchewan?

Mr. Boldt: — Following the signing of the MOU in December, we've undertaken one recruitment mission with four different companies last month. And the process worked with the Philippine government identifying what they called 12 gold members of their recruiting firms and asked us in the initial recruitment to work with these 12. And so for the first phase we agreed to do that. That doesn't necessarily mean that that will be ongoing in the future. That is just on the first time that we did that.

We identified specific jobs that the employers were looking to fill. These were sent to the Filipino government, who then identified these jobs to the 12 recruiters that they chose, and job fairs were held. And meetings were held with the employers and the employees and offers of jobs were made.

Mr. Weekes: — Meetings were held in the Philippines?

Mr. Boldt: — Yes.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. Could you elaborate a bit more on the department's activities in the Republic of China? Is it similar to the Philippines? Is there a possible MOU going to be signed with them? Could you . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I don't believe that there's any MOU that's going to be signed with the People's Republic of China. I should tell you that there has been some interest expressed by governments about the MOU that we entered into with the Government of the Philippines.

In the case of China, there are people certainly coming to Saskatchewan, international students that are taking graduate studies, so part of the University of Regina's recruitment mission was to recruit students internationally to the University of Regina to either participate in an undergraduate degree or in graduate work. In the case of our mission into China, we were particularly interested in speaking to the embassy in Beijing and the consulate, I believe, in Shanghai about the need to expedite the processing for international students who were coming, because I understand that there have been some delays.

We were also interested in knowing what we could be doing to expedite the process of, particularly in the Beijing office, to expedite the processing of skilled workers to the province. And I understand that there was some work . . . Maybe you could elaborate on this. Was there any work done in the business community?

Mr. Boldt: — In China?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes.

Mr. Boldt: — Yes. We hosted several seminars with approved

and licensed consultants in China. I think it was two. Yes.

Mr. Weekes: — And again, approved by whom, the Chinese government?

Mr. Boldt: — In China the approval is by the states, by the provinces in China. Each province and each municipality has their own licensing of immigration consultants. However, in addition to that, as you may be aware, in order to work with the province of Saskatchewan's nominee program you have to be licensed. You have to be either a licensed lawyer in Canada or a member of the Canadian Society of Immigration Consultants.

So the licensing requirements are that you have both, both approved by the state that you're working in or the province that you're working in in China, and you have to be either a member of the bar or a Canadian Society of Immigration Consultants member.

Mr. Weekes: — On the entrepreneurial business side of the nominee program, could you explain how it works?

Mr. Boldt: — The program requires initially that the applicant forward information to us in order to make sure that they qualify. They have to have the necessary level of experience, management skills, net worth. And following them sending us this information, we then invite them to a seminar. These seminars are for half a day. They do an exploratory visit for the balance of the week. They're interviewed on usually the last Thursday or Friday of the week. Subsequent to that, they then make a formal application to us.

If they're approved by our selection committee, they provide us with two things. One is a signed agreement specifying the level of investment that they'll undertake and the industry in which they'll invest. They also provide our trustee bank with a \$75,000 deposit.

Once that has been received, we then provide a nomination certificate to the relevant visa post and they then obtain their landed immigrant status, move to Saskatchewan, establish their business. And once they've established their business and we've obtained proof of their level of investment, we release the \$75,000 deposit.

Mr. Weekes: — Just to clarify that, so they only have to put up \$75,000 initially to . . . Well I'll explain it again. Are you saying the government gets \$75,000 initially?

Mr. Boldt: — Our trustee bank does.

Mr. Weekes: — Your trustee gets it?

Mr. Boldt: — Yes.

Mr. Weekes: — To be invested in a company in Saskatchewan?

Mr. Boldt: — Oh it could be invested in a company. It could be invested in, it could be a start-up, or it could be purchasing an existing company, yes. And one other thing. The minimum level of investment is \$150,000. The average level of proposed investment so far is in excess of \$400,000.

Mr. Weekes: — So minimum they have to invest \$150,000 in a business — buy a business or invest in an existing business, whatever. And so they put up the \$75,000 to the trustee on top of the 150?

Mr. Boldt: — Well it's not necessarily on top because, for instance, if they're purchasing a business and the \$75,000 can be released to a lawyer in trust subject to the completion of the business, so it doesn't have to be in excess of the 150; it can be part of it. But as again I want to emphasize it's more like 400,000; it would be the typical amount. So if they're buying a business say for 400,000, the 75,000 could be released in trust to a lawyer to complete the purchase.

Mr. Weekes: — So a minimum investment of 150,000?

Mr. Boldt: — Right.

Mr. Weekes: — And now what are the rules around, I mean how long do they have to own the business? How long do they have to be in the province, living? And what happens if some of the rules or some of the conditions are broken?

Mr. Boldt: — Then if they don't complete the investment, then they forfeit the \$75,000.

Mr. Weekes: — And what are some of the conditions that that . . . I don't know what the experience is, but what are some of the conditions what would trigger the loss of the \$75,000?

Mr. Boldt: — The program has not experienced any defaults because the program is too new. The program was launched late last spring and became operational in September. So at the moment no one has . . . There are two people who completed their investments prior to being nominated, but no one has provided a deposit and then completed their investment. It takes a considerable period of time to be, once you've been nominated, to obtain your visa from the post so no one has completed that to date.

Mr. Weekes: — So initially the application is made to the department, let's assume from China — it could be anywhere in the world, I assume — but they would invest or the money would be given to the trustee. That would be 150,000 minimum to the trustee or 75?

Mr. Boldt: — 75.

Mr. Weekes: — 75. Okay. Then they have to invest 150,000 into a business. They do that on their own or through the trustee?

Mr. Boldt: — On their own.

Mr. Weekes: — On their own. Okay. If they do not . . . If they default, I guess once they have invested, I mean, they're within the conditions of the agreement, is there any, is there any . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Can we keep them here? Is that what you wanted to ask?

Mr. Weekes: — Well what are the rules . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Once a person becomes a permanent resident of Canada, they can go wherever they want. They have the same mobility rights as you and I do.

Mr. Weekes: — How long does the individual have to invest in a business once the application is made?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Are you trying to understand under what circumstances a person might forfeit the \$75,000?

Mr. Weekes: — Yes, that's what I'm asking for. Yes.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay. That's what you're trying to get at. Okay. I think the circumstance that a person would forfeit the \$75,000 is if they did not invest the money in a business, or they did not meet . . . If they said they were going to invest \$400,000 and they didn't invest the money, or \$150,000 and they didn't invest the money — then they would forfeit the \$75,000.

Mr. Weekes: — So they put up the \$75,000 initially.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — That's right.

Mr. Weekes: — Then how long do they have to invest in a business?

Mr. Boldt: — They have to invest within two years. But as the minister was indicating, once you become a permanent resident, you have mobility rights anywhere in Canada, just as any citizen or permanent resident. So there is no specified ownership time that somebody has to own the business, but we are cognizant of that and we will be not looking to approve businesses which are easy to flip. That will be something that we will be very conscious of.

Mr. Weekes: — I guess what I'm getting at is, is there a possibility of an immigrant . . . or bringing in, investing or giving the \$75,000 to the trustee, and becoming a permanent resident, and not investing in a business, and still remaining a permanent resident and beginning the process of citizenship?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — That is a possibility, that a person could provide \$75,000 to the province, become a permanent resident, and at the end of the day decide not to invest and move on. That is a possibility. But I can tell you that that has not been our experience to date. And we will be monitoring this very carefully.

One of the reasons for the \$75,000 is to disincite people from not doing what they say they're going to do.

Mr. Weekes: — But at the end of the day, that's all they have to risk is \$75,000 and they can get Canadian, well, citizenship or begin the process.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Permanent resident.

Mr. Weekes: — Permanent resident.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — That is a possibility, but that has not been our experience. And I believe Manitoba has a similar provision under their entrepreneur category and they have had a

good success with people investing in Manitoba. So we kind of framed the program along the Manitoba model.

Mr. Weekes: — In China, do you have any agreements with agents, with the department, with the government?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — No.

Mr. Weekes: — When your officials do trade fairs or seminars, how is that done? Who puts those meetings together? How is it advertised?

Mr. Boldt: — In China?

Mr. Weekes: — Yes.

Mr. Boldt: — As the minister explained, we had one trip to China which was generally in support of the University of Regina. So we have not done any specific recruitment mission in China either for skilled workers or for business immigrants. So we have not done that yet.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. I have copies of ads that have ran in China — of course they're in Chinese — and I will table these. They have been interpreted but I certainly would ask you to get them interpreted as well to make sure they are what they seem to be.

The first ad states, and according to the interpreter that we have said, that this person that's running this ad is the sole agent for the Saskatchewan nominee program in China. And I will table that. And if you can comment on it now I'd appreciate it. But I would certainly like you to look into that situation and see what's going on because if that's not the case, that is really false advertising.

I also have another ad here that is ran in Chinese papers and I am told again shows the company's name and it says that a person only needs to invest \$75,000 in the nominee program, and with the intent for immigration or citizenship and that money — even the \$75,000 — would be returned. And then I have a couple of other ads that go along. So I'll table those.

I'd like you to at some point if you could get back to the committee and myself about these ads, if they're interpreted properly. And if these are false advertisements, we certainly would like you to know about it and take action.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Can I ask you how long you've had them?

Mr. Weekes: — I just received them fairly recently.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay. Like a week ago? A month ago?

Mr. Weekes: — I'm not sure. I'll have to check that.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — You don't know when you received them. Okay.

Mr. Weekes: — I assume there's dates on these ads but I'm not sure.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — No but I just wondered when they came into your possession. You don't know when they came into your possession?

Mr. Weekes: — I don't know.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay.

Mr. Weekes: — And there's been rumours coming to us in the Saskatchewan Party concerning that whole issue for quite some time. Last year I think I've asked you questions concerning that whole issue about China and Philippines in particular. And there just seems to be . . . Well I guess the ads will speak for themselves if they're false advertising.

Also in the communication and possibly in the ad, the one that's concerning the sole agent, I believe — again you'd have to check — but I believe your official that was over there was named in the ad and leaving the impression that this Chinese person was acting as the sole agent for your department for this individual who was speaking.

So certainly from my information that certainly left doubts and worries in the Chinese business community that's dealing with immigration about the credibility or the integrity of Saskatchewan's plan and department. And because the impression that's going, I understand is going around the Chinese community is that this particular individual basically has exclusivity to Saskatchewan. And whether this person is credible or not, I don't know; that's not for me to say. But it certainly should be open to everyone to be involved as an agent or dealing with the Saskatchewan government.

So if you would look into that and give us a reply about . . . Like I say, feel free to get them interpreted and if there's an error in what I am saying, I certainly appreciate the information back about if there's an error or the whole issue around that.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well it looks as though they were ads from 2006.

Mr. Weekes: — Sorry?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — So it looks as though these ads took place in 2006.

Mr. Weekes: — It's possible, yes. I'd like to just turn it over to my colleague.

The Chair: — Mr. Toth.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Madam Chair, and Madam Minister. I've got a few questions in regards to immigration programs as well. And you're probably aware of the fact that in the province a number of businesses have been put in the situation where, as they've been advertising for employees, they've been having difficulty finding people locally or in the province in certain trades. And in one case one of my local businesses, the only response he got was from a gentleman and I believe he was from the Dominican.

And the question that was asked of me at that time . . . I believe he touched base with your department as well, and I was

suggesting we touch base with your department. The question I have is in regards to individuals, businesses looking outside of the province, and more specifically outside of the country, what process would be followed and what would be the normal turnaround time?

Let's say a car dealership for example or an equipment dealer has advertised and they've got responses from people outside of the country who indicate that they're prepared to come tomorrow and yet there's immigration hurdles that need to be moved through, what would be the process that would be followed? And what would be the normal turnaround time that would allow that employer then to have that potential employee working in their business?

Mr. Boldt: — Well if they applied under the federal program, the turnaround time is about four and a half years. So the nominee program is beneficial for employers in that it reduces that time considerably. The turnaround time for an application from our program currently is approximately four to five months between the time we get the application and the time we nominate them.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — And that is if the application is complete and they have all of the accompanying documents. One of the difficulties that we have is that there are times when the applications are made to the Immigration branch under the nominee program and the application is incomplete and of course that slows down the process.

Mr. Toth: — Madam Minister, when you talk about complete applications, what would be one of the problems? The employer not understanding all the process that needs to be followed in ensuring that the application is done properly or lack of information available to employers unless the application is not filled out properly?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — One of the things that under our nominee program, we nominate. The province is the nominator so we then forward the documents to the federal government. The federal government requires documentation that is correct and accurate and so we want to make sure that the documents that we're forwarding to the federal government have all of the required documentation.

An example might be if the person was divorced, you would need a copy of their divorce decree. Birth certificates. Sometimes this is difficult in countries because they may not have, basically, institutions that we take for granted in Canada.

Another example might be if they were divorced and they had another family, another wife and family. Do they have other children that are remaining back in their home country? Are these children of the age of majority? Are they not of the age of majority? Is it possible that there could be some issues around children coming later?

If it's a case of a skilled worker, you need to have documentation around their credentials. Do they have the necessary documents from their training institution? You might need documents regarding interpretation of documents. And is it a certified interpretation or is it just someone interpreting for you?

So there's just a number of processes that go into an application to make sure that you have the necessary documents, because it would be difficult for the province to forward on applications that are not complete, and it would just simply delay the process. So we want to make sure we have all of the documentation at the front end, so that when we send the application under the nominee program to the federal government there aren't further delays.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Having listened to the list of issues that a person has to deal with — or an individual, whether it's a business person or whoever — does your department have individuals employed who can help, walk business through the steps to ensure that to the best of your ability those documents, as you indicated, are filled out correctly and as close to being correct as possible so that we don't have that?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We do, and in fact we put on seminars. Our immigration officers put on seminars for employers or family members that are bringing a worker here or a family member here so that they know as much as possible what documentation is required in order for the application to be complete.

And this is not an easy process for people. I want to say that. It's not an easy process, so getting it all right at the front end takes some precision. And if you don't have all the documentation it just further delays things. And it frustrates people. So we try and work with individuals as much as we possibly can to make sure that they have all of the information so that they have all the required documents.

And one of the delays, depending on which country you're coming from, you may need to get the documentation by mail. They have to be original documents, certified documents, and this can hold up the process.

Mr. Toth: — Well thank you, Madam Minister. And you're correct. From some of the business community I've talked to, they have found it frustrating, especially when they find that they're falling behind and they're, for a car dealership, for example, or an equipment dealership, you've got service orders and they keep piling up on you because of the lack of professionals. And you're looking at bringing someone into the country who would appear has everything you need to be an asset to your business, and yet this process takes time.

The question I would have: once you've got the documents — to the best of your knowledge authenticated and the application is moved forward — is there a process that would allow that potential employee then to come to Canada and begin employment before all the documentation is complete? Or do you have to wait until everything is complete and for the term, a long time?

Mr. Boldt: — Well once we've reviewed the file and we've nominated the individual, we do send a letter of support which will allow them to get a work permit. By nominating the individual, it dispenses with the need for labour market opinion. So they can get a temporary work permit to come into Canada, to Saskatchewan to work for that employer. And that can happen, depending on the country, some places it can happen in

weeks, some places it happens in a month or so. But yes, that can be facilitated much faster than having to wait for the permanent residency.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you. And thank you, Madam Minister. I have one other question regarding immigration — and I'm not sure whether your department is involved whatsoever — but a question has arisen on a number of occasions now regarding overseas adoption. And I'm not certain if that may fall under this immigration program or if that's a totally different area, so I thought I'd ask just in case I was sent back to . . . and asked why I didn't ask when you were before us, Madam Minister.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I have some familiarity with this because I used to be the minister of Social Services, and international adoption falls under the adoption services provided by the Department of Community Resources.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Madam Minister.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — You're welcome.

The Chair: — Mr. Weekes.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. Madam Minister, does the department have any MOUs or any other agreements with any other countries or jurisdictions in the world besides the Philippines that you had mentioned earlier?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — No.

Mr. Toth: — Are you working on any?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I would say that there's been some interest but we're working on building our capacity and processing applications and working with employers to access people whose credentials would be recognized here.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. To move on to another topic, I asked last year about, it was specifically immigrant truckers and their spouses unable to get a work permit. And there was considerable concern with those people that their spouses couldn't work until they became landed immigrants, I believe. Is there any progress done on that area with the federal government?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes, we'll ask Kirk. This is Kirk Westgard, who is the program manager under the nominee program.

Mr. Westgard: — Currently truck driving spouses, or the spouse of a truck driver, does not have to wait until they're a permanent resident, but does have the opportunity after nomination to apply for an open work permit.

Mr. Weekes: — After they're a landed immigrant, you said they . . .

Mr. Westgard: — No, after nomination by the province under the Saskatchewan immigrant nominee program.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — But if their husband is here or wife is here under the temporary worker permit, they would not be able

to work.

Mr. Weekes: — They would have to apply through the . . . but they're applying to the federal government for the work permit or through the Saskatchewan department?

Mr. Westgard: — To the federal government.

Mr. Weekes: — And what's the average length of time to get a permit once they've applied?

Mr. Westgard: — For a work permit?

Mr. Weekes: — Yes.

Mr. Westgard: — Depending on the post, but on average it doesn't take more than four to five weeks. Most individuals currently in Saskatchewan can apply at a port of entry.

Mr. Weekes: — Okay. So is that specific to spouses of truckers or other people who are going through the nominee program?

Mr. Westgard: — It's open to everyone who either is labour market exempt, which means they have a positive labour market opinion, or has been nominated by the province.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. Just on another item. There was a concern or there was problems, I believe, at an implement manufacturer out in the east part of the province and there's mainly men and they couldn't, their spouses weren't being allowed to immigrate to Saskatchewan. There was a hang-up over that. Has that been . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — That was in Tisdale?

Mr. Weekes: — Yes. So has that been resolved?

Mr. Westgard: — When you say now move, do you mean arrive as a permanent resident or come here as a temporary worker?

Mr. Weekes: — Well either way I assume they . . . No, to be a resident, I believe, and obviously most of them will want to obtain jobs once they're here.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes. I think there were a group of, there was one group of workers that came here under a temporary work permit. The wives or spouses, children did not come with them and so there was a lot of well serious hardship for the worker that was here and also the spouse and children that were back home in the Ukraine. And my understanding I believe for the most part that the spouses have now arrived, and the children.

Mr. Weekes: — And has the system been streamlined or is it just a matter of time or paperwork or what was done to resolve the issue?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well they came under, if I recall, under temporary work permits and so they would be coming under the federal system. And then once they were nominated, their person . . . And I believe they work for six months. If you come on a temporary work permit, then after a six-month period we

nominate them — I'm going from memory here — and then the spouse can come once they're nominated. Have I got that right, Kirk?

Mr. Westgard: — Right. Well anyone who's been either nominated or has a positive labour market opinion in a scaled occupation, their spouse is eligible to apply for an open work permit in Canada. So these individuals, I think, who you're questioning about, did not apply as they were told not to by either the company or the individual that was working with them. So if your question is, has it been resolved, yes they did apply and were granted work permits to come and work temporarily in Canada.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. And moving on to another topic. Is your department on, is your department's goals being met as far as the number of immigrants coming through? You made an announcement I believe last year. Where does it stand as far as your goals?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Our goal last year was 800 in the '06-07 fiscal year and we outpaced our goal. We nominated 1,255 individuals plus their families. Our goal for the '07-08 fiscal year was 1,200. Obviously we met that last year and we've moved up our number to 1,500 so we're a year ahead of schedule. We believe we'll be a year ahead of schedule in terms of meeting our goal of 1,500 people by '08-09.

Mr. Weekes: — Next question is cost. And it may be difficult to break it down but I guess the question is: what does it cost the department per immigrant to come into the nominee program?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We haven't broken that down. We certainly have increased our budget. Our approved budget is \$8.49 million but it's not just about the immigrant nominee program. In addition there are other immigrants that are coming to Saskatchewan that need support. And so we're working with, it could be refugees or it could be economic immigrants that are coming under the federal system. These folks are being helped by our various settlement agencies.

Mr. Weekes: — Is there a business plan to keep basically a budget on what it costs per immigrant to come in? And what do you expect for budgeting in the future years concerning the nominee program?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think what we may see in future years as we build our capacity, there is a possibility for the province, as has been done in Manitoba, where the province would take over some of the work that's being done through Citizenship and Immigration Canada, where we would start taking over some of the work that they do with settlement agencies.

So we think that our budget in years to come will grow. And in fact there's no question it will grow because every industrialized country in the world is facing this issue of labour shortage because baby boomers are beginning to retire. We haven't replaced ourselves, and in the case of Saskatchewan our economy is expanding. So even with a fully engaged First Nations and Métis population, even with fully engaged people from outside of the province trying to recruit people into the province within Canada, we will still, we believe, be short of

skilled workers. So we are going to see more and more people coming from across the globe to Saskatchewan to deal with our expanding economy and labour shortages.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. Just to jump around a bit the last few minutes that we have. You talked about a partnership with universities. What countries does your department have agreements with universities?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The two universities — and I'm just going from memory — certainly have a relationship with China. We have a number of Chinese students that are at both the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan. There's a relationship with Korean students that are coming. As well there are students that come from parts of Africa. There's students that come from India and students that come from Thailand, students that come from . . . I would think we're seeing more students coming from Asia than we are in other parts of the world. But I can say that both universities have international recruiters and they're recruiting students from various parts of the globe outside of Asia.

Mr. Weekes: — The students that are being recruited, is there an expectation on their part and on our part that they're going to stay, apply for immigrant status?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As you probably recall, the Government of Saskatchewan was able to enter into an agreement with the previous Government of Canada, the Liberal Government of Canada, an arrangement where students could stay two years after they graduated. And if they were employed, their employer could nominate them.

But I think most countries expect that their students may return home with the skills and education and knowledge that they've learned here. But there is an opportunity under our immigrant nominee program and our agreement with the Government of Canada to have international students have their employer nominate them.

Mr. Weekes: — You said they can work for two years after they have graduated. Are they able to work while they are going to university?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes. We were also able to negotiate an agreement with the previous Liberal Government of Canada where the students can now work off-campus and get Canadian experience and obviously money to help with their education.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. Just a couple of last questions. What is the full-time equivalent level dedicated to the immigration program?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — 57, I believe. I'll tell you that in a moment. 57. Yes.

Mr. Weekes: — What was it last year or the year before?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay, so the subvote will increase by 6.5 FTEs [full-time equivalent] to a total of 57.

Mr. Weekes: — And what areas are these people working in in the immigration program.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I can tell you that. Two FTEs for distance services, so this would be language training by distance; one FTE for foreign credential recognition; one FTE for branch operational support; point five FTEs for the immigrant internship program; and as well, three FTEs for international education strategy to promote and coordinate activities to market Saskatchewan's educational programs and services; and one FTE to support the new skills recognition fund. And we also had a reduction of two FTEs, so . . . for a total of six, I believe, point five new FTEs.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. Just one last question. The settlement agencies, there was an announcement last year they increased funding to the settlement agencies. There's always been a concern about the work, not the work that they do but the need for that type of work with new immigrants. Are you keeping basically a record or tabs on how that is working and is there a need for the department to be more engaged in the settlement area?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I don't know what you mean, more engaged.

Mr. Weekes: — Well as far as making the immigrants feel at home and that type of thing, to get them involved in the community.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Right. Well we certainly, we will spend about \$3.9 million in this budget for services for immigrants, including assessment and referral services, employment and bridging programs, language training, and then basic literacy education. We have arrangements through various service providers to do employment and language services. We have provided funding for settlement integration services for immigrants in smaller communities and urban centres.

In fact we did provide some funding to the Lloydminster School Division, which the member from Lloydminster might be interested in, because I understand we have about 40 Chilean students in the Lloydminster School Division, so we provided some funding for English language training.

We provided additional money for the Regina Open Door, Saskatoon Open Door, Moose Jaw multicultural, Prince Albert multicultural. As well we provided funding to the North Battleford Chamber of Commerce, the Ukrainian congress. And I can provide you with that information. There are a number of agencies that are providing services.

That's not what the government does. We have community organizations that provide services to newcomers. As well our regional colleges are providing English language training throughout the province because immigrants are not just going to urban Saskatchewan, they're going to rural, the rural as well.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Madam Minister, that's all the questions I have.

The Chair: — Any further questions? Seeing none, then I guess we're done with the consideration of estimates for the time being. And since we're ahead of our 5 o'clock recess, I'll entertain a motion to adjourn. Oh sorry, recessing. I do that all the time. We'll recess then until 7.

Mr. Prebble: — I move that we recess until 7.

The Chair: — Oh sorry.

Mr. Weekes: — It is my understanding that there's another item coming up.

The Chair: — Which one did you have on your agenda?

Mr. Weekes: — We believe that Advanced Education . . .

Mr. Wakefield: — Advanced Education and Employment from 4 till . . .

Mr. Weekes: — Advanced Education.

Mr. Wakefield: — Now from 4 until 5.

The Chair: — Oh, so you want to continue with this department with just a different line of questioning.

Mr. Weekes: — Yes.

The Chair: — Okay. All right.

Mr. Weekes: — But a five-minute recess would be in order.

The Chair: — Okay. A five-minute recess is fine then. All right, we'll be back in five minutes.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

The Chair: — We're ready to go again and Mr. Wakefield is going to start.

Mr. Wakefield: — Oh sorry, Madam Chair. I was worried about coffee being spilled over here. Thank you. Madam Minister, I just have a couple of opening questions. Maybe these have been addressed in earlier estimates. I wasn't here so if they are, tell me if it's redundant. I was just looking at some of the numbers under post-secondary education (AE02), and maybe you can help clarify some of these numbers. I'm looking at page 31 of the Estimates book.

There's a Innovation and Science Fund that has been increased about \$3 million. I like the idea of innovation and science. What is the increase specifically addressing, and are we focusing only on research and not trying to commercialize it in any way? Can you help me with that one?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I'm going to ask Kevin Veitenheimer — sorry Kevin — to answer your question.

Mr. Veitenheimer: — The increase relates to projects that have already been improved by the Canada Foundation for Innovation and we provide matching funding for those projects. So one of the projects that you might have heard of this year was the international vaccine centre or InterVac. So the additional money this year will go towards providing that matching contribution that's required under the federal government program.

Mr. Wakefield: — Is that the only project?

Mr. Veitenheimer: — No. That was one of the most recent ones and larger, but there was a number of projects approved this year. There was a competition that was just completed in October 2006. There was an additional beamline approved by the Canada Foundation for Innovation. There was also an aquatic toxicology centre. Both of those will require some matching money from the province.

Mr. Wakefield: — When the Canada foundation approve these, you then are sent the bill for matching grants or how does that work? Are you part of the approval process?

Mr. Veitenheimer: — We're not part of the approval process as far as the project but we work with the universities beforehand to decide the priority of projects that are submitted to the Canada foundation for approval. And then there's some, for instance at the University of Saskatchewan, this year that we said we would provide matching funding for if they were approved. There's some that we said we wouldn't be in a position to provide matching funding for if they were approved. So there is a priority-setting process.

Mr. Wakefield: — A priority and it's not then open-ended as they approve them?

Mr. Veitenheimer: — No.

Mr. Wakefield: — So you could turn down a project that the Canada council approved?

Mr. Veitenheimer: — Well typically what would happen is we would do that before the project was even submitted by the university. We would tell that these projects that are building on existing investments we'll support and so if they're successful we'll match them, but they might have another project that is an area that we're not interested in and so they might still put it forward, but we would tell them upfront that if that one was approved by the federal government that they would have to find the matching money from some other sources, not from the Innovation and Science Fund.

Mr. Wakefield: — Do you have stand-alone projects, Madam Minister, in the Innovation and Science Fund or is it matching with a federal and other provinces?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — They're all matching.

Mr. Wakefield: — They're all matching.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes, our fund basically levers other funds from other areas of other research funds.

Mr. Wakefield: — Our research funds under innovation and science does exactly that. There's nothing in there that tries to work this now into a commercialization of the research and science because that now, as you know, becomes a priority and not just research just for the sake of research.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Precisely. And in our department we do not have a venture capital fund or an entrepreneur fund that would sort of commercialize research that's going on. But there are funds that if people want to take it to the commercialization stage that people could certainly apply to. The entrepreneur

fund for instance is one such fund, and then of course there's Investment Saskatchewan, where the people could go there as a basically a venture capital fund. So there are other funds, but that's not the mandate of our department.

Mr. Wakefield: — Under the heading interprovincial agreements, there's 1.3 million budgeted for this year. What is involved in the interprovincial agreements? What is costing there?

Mr. Veitenheimer: — Those are for health programs where the positions are very critical to the health care in Saskatchewan but the need for students is very small so it's very costly; it would be very ineffective and inefficient for Saskatchewan to mount that program. So we purchase seats in other provinces for those students. And so Saskatchewan students get first chance at, well they get the only chance at those seats in those programs.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — So that would be like occupational therapy which I think is available in Alberta. And then of course there are people that learn prosthetics. That would be available at BCIT [British Columbia Institute of Technology]. And speech and language. So we do I believe that, so we purchase seats in other institutions outside the province and our students have access to those seats.

Mr. Wakefield: — And students, are they supported at all under this fund or is it just purchasing seats from a university or reserving seats at another university?

Mr. Veitenheimer: — Well we would support them in the sense that they pay the tuition fee at that institution and we pay the balance of the cost of that seat. So a seat generally costs in the 15 to \$20,000 range and they'd be paying tuition of about 4,000 so we would put in about 11 to \$16,000.

Mr. Wakefield: — I'm going to let the others ask a question but before I do I've got to get in a couple more. One of them is the post-secondary capital transfer item that has blossomed from 4.9 million to 10.4. Can you tell me what this capital transfers, post-secondary capital transfers item relates to?

Ms. Durnford: — There would be a number of items contained in that one but it would deal with the, it would include capital for post-secondary institutions like SIAST and the regional colleges, I think, would be in that particular item. In addition to this we also provide funding to the universities for sustaining capital. This year that funding was, if you like, advanced in the '06-07 budget for the '07-08 fiscal year. But these are the amounts that would allow them to carry on, sort of just keeping some basic capital improvements done. It's not for huge, new construction; it's just for basic improvements in their facilities.

Mr. Wakefield: — So the nearly five and a half or six million increase is because of . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We'll get you that.

Ms. Durnford: — There would be increases of about five and a half million dollars. The net increase, as you've noticed, is five and a half million dollars: 4.6 would be for capital projects that are related to the expansion of health education, particularly the nursing expansions at SIAST. There's \$500,000 for principal

and interest costs on the borrowing that's undertaken by the U of R, U of S [University of Saskatchewan], and about \$375,000 for inflationary increases to the sustaining capital for SIAST and regional colleges. So that explains the difference.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — An example would be that, as you know, we've been called upon to increase the number of seats in our nursing education program. In order to do that we have to put some capital into that in order to have the type of facility that would be required to educate nurses. So as Ms. Durnford has indicated, the majority of the money that is, the increase is going towards the nursing education program and expansion of their space.

Mr. Wakefield: — Is this expansion actually in capital — buildings — or is it in instruction? Or what's involved?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can tell you is that at the moment at SIAST, Kelsey Campus in Saskatoon, they simply do not have, and also at the SIAST here, Wascana, they do not have the space to increase the capacity of the nursing education program. So there will have to be some movement of programs out of their particular area and then the space will have to be built to accommodate the technology and the space that nurses require in order to be educated.

So it's not as simple as saying, let's increase the number of seats in the nursing education program by 100 or 150. Because you need to have the space to do it and you need to renovate space in order to meet the requirements of the nursing education program. And that's what we're doing.

Mr. Wakefield: — When will those renovations be available?

Ms. Durnford: — They need to be timed to meet the operational plan. And there is an increase in nursing seats for '07-08 starting in the fall, and then a larger increase for the fall of September '08. So we'll see some new seats in September '07 and a larger increase in September '08. So the capital plan has to support those seats as they come on stream.

Mr. Wakefield: — The objective then is to get all of those seats up and away in this budget here.

Ms. Durnford: — Well we'll have a couple of intake processes. There'll be some seats — I think it's about 18 — for September '07, and then the balance of the government's commitment would be for September '08.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Some of the people are going into the after-degree program, and then some people will come in in the . . . So I think that's in the spring of '08, and then some people will come in in the fall of '08.

Mr. Wakefield: — So this 10.4 million is to support that increase that you're anticipating in this budget year only.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Not all of it. I mean, I think it's 4.6 is going to the nursing education program to expand its capacity, and the rest is going to support the two universities, the regional college. And as Ms. Durnford said, there's some interest that the two universities pay on capital.

Mr. Wakefield: — There may be some questions following this, but under the heading or the line item, regional colleges, there is an increase of about two and a half million dollars there. And I want to ask about Lakeland College in Lloydminster of course. Is any of that money going to be directed to Lakeland College — any additional monies — under that line item, regional colleges?

Ms. Durnford: — Perhaps I can just speak generally to the line item and then maybe I'll ask one of our colleagues, Raman Visvanathan, to join us.

Generally the increase there is with regard to increased salary costs for the regional college system. They've recently gone through their labour negotiations and have an agreement for their next round of, their next round. And so this will allow for the increased labour costs under the collective agreement. There will be some additional programming that's found in another area in the department's budget, but essentially this piece would be for the increase in labour costs. And maybe I'll get Raman to speak to funding to Lakeland.

Mr. Visvanathan: — It's here somewhere, sorry. We're providing a total in '07-08 of \$1.125 million to Lakeland. I'm just trying to find the specific amount. We have it rolled up in a total for Lakeland. So sorry, bear with me while I see if I can find that specific amount. I believe we probably have given them about \$20,000 more over the previous year. But bear with me, see if I can find that specific detail for you.

Mr. Wakefield: — While you're doing that, I was told by the president of Lakeland College that operationally there is approximately 40 per cent of the students, Saskatchewan students, and less than 3 per cent of the operating costs of Lakeland is helped by Saskatchewan. And now there is an academic wing being constructed. And the reason I talked about the capital transfers earlier, is any of that designated to that academic expansion at Lakeland College?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Not in this budget. But I can tell you that the deputy minister will be meeting with Lakeland College in a couple of weeks. I think you made that request, and I also heard from the member of the legislature for the Alberta side asking that we meet. And we are meeting.

Mr. Wakefield: — I like the body language that goes along with that. Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Which is what?

Mr. Wakefield: — That's all I have.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We did what you requested, Mr. Wakefield.

Mr. Wakefield: — Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Toth: — Madam Minister, one of my responsibilities is Corrections and Public Safety and for a number of, well since I've been involved I've talked a lot about training programs for individuals in the correctional system. Some of the programs are upgrading of their matric, grade 12, trying to give them a grade 12 upgrade and then going beyond into specific training

programs.

And I was just wondering, Madam Minister, what involvement does your department have in these training programs as far as getting them up and running, or if there's any involvement whatsoever?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I'll ask Jan to answer that.

Ms. Morgan: — My name's Jan Morgan. I'm the executive director for career and employment services. We are working with our Corrections and Public Safety department on several fronts. In the adult corrections, we have put together a working group with representatives of the Corrections department, the director for the Regina Correctional Centre, and our local staff in the Regina career and employment office to work together to develop a program that provides for better integration back into the community by offenders as they're released.

We'd looked at some of the statistics and we've discovered that of the 100 or so that come out of the Regina Correctional Centre, for example 60 per cent of them have some construction experience. Now their education levels are, as you say, they are fairly low but they do have some skills. And so what we've been doing is working with them and I believe they've got some money in the budget to hire some vocational-planning-type people who will work with folks who are coming out.

We're going to target Regina first and see what the pitfalls are first before we implement something province-wide. But we have recognized the need to provide better career information and employment information and try and match them to some potential employers. The Community Resources department is also working on this with us, because we think it's important that they have income support in place as they're released.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — One of the challenges in terms of adult basic education or GED [general educational development] or beginning trades training in our provincial correctional institutions is that people are in those institutions for a variety of times. And so people may be there for two months, three months, four months, five months. And so we think that the notion of planning for people as they're exiting the correctional centre will go some way in terms of getting people more integrated into the community and the workplace. And that will mean working with employers, and sometimes employers can be reluctant to work with people who are just exiting basically correctional institutions, but there appears to be some interest.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Madam Minister. The reason I raise the question is because it's quite obvious that your department would have a lot of expertise when it comes to education, skills training, and some of the programs that Corrections offers. And it would appear to me that one of the failures we've had over too many years is it's a revolving door. And I believe Corrections is now realizing we need to do more to assist people, especially if there are individuals who would really like to turn their lives around.

And there're lots of, if you will, we can use the word idle time. Maybe it isn't idle time. But if there are individuals that would really like to advance themselves, give themselves some kind of training so that, as was Jan just mentioned, that when they leave

a centre that they have the potential for employment opportunity which may just mean that that individual may never go back through the door.

And I think in my discussions with Corrections — and I never really got into the real details of how they initiate some of the programming — just as I was sitting here this afternoon I was thinking, well here's the department that really does a lot of this work and by maybe working together with some of the services and the programs that you're already involved in, through the regional colleges and other avenues, we might save duplication and save some of the resources that we're maybe spinning our wheels on trying to develop, say through Corrections, to benefit people in the province. And that's one of, that's the reason I ask the question. And when we get into Corrections, I certainly will be raising this again as to what more is being done.

From one of my tours of one of the facilities, I know the comment was made that they've actually gone back a bit in some of their programming. Some of the programming isn't there that was there before which is unfortunate, because there seemed to be quite an uptake. And one other comment I wanted to make as well, I believe it's the Saskatoon Correctional Centre has found that they have had a number of inmates — if I can use that term — that have got into some of the construction fields. They have had some companies that have been willing to work with and it certainly has been advantageous to that individual when they've left the correctional facility.

So my view is, departments have expertise in certain areas. If we can coordinate our efforts we could probably do more to assist the community and society. And so I'm pleased to hear that the department is looking at and working with and exploring other avenues whereby we can address some of the needs that are being requested of by individuals who have fallen afoul with the law and want to change their lives.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Right. I think what we want from an overall government policy point of view is a plan for each inmate that's exiting the correctional facility in terms of employment or education.

Mr. Toth: — Madam Minister, another issue that has just recently come to the forefront — and I'm not exactly sure if this is an area that your department may be involved in — but you've been aware of the fact that I've been raising the issue of a dialysis unit for the Broadview area. And the Cowessess First Nation has, they've got a brand new school on the reserve. The old school, there's part of the building that's actually in pretty good shape, and they're currently putting in place a dialysis technician program.

Now I don't know, Madam Minister, if this is something that your department would be involved in whatsoever or if this is strictly an issue around health care or the Department of Health so I just thought I'd ask just, you know, where maybe I go on this issue.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Right. We can't answer this question. It could be through SIIT; they may be putting together a proposal. They may be going to broker the program through an institution outside of Saskatchewan. I know that SIIT does broker various training programs or education programs from institutions that

are outside of our provincial borders.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Another area I'd like to just ask a couple of questions on — and I know my colleagues have some questions as well — is the regional colleges and the programs that they offer. And I believe the other day, whether it was a member's statement, one of our members talked about . . . Actually it wasn't a member's statement. I believe there was an expansion in Weyburn and one of our colleagues, the member from Weyburn, was talking about receiving his first year's university through the program there at the regional college.

There's a couple of programs though that there's some concerns about and that's, number one, the adult basic education program. Is this program being cut back at all that you're aware of or are we expanding the program?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We've increased the number of seats in the adult basic education program. What may be happening is that regional colleges are flexible and nimble. I believe that they're the most flexible and nimble training institutions that we have in the province. And what they can do is move programs from, you know, town to town or, you know, site to site and it may be based on a need is taking place somewhere else. But I will ask Rick Pawliw, who is our expert when it comes to adult basic education, and he may be able to answer precisely what's happening in Estevan and the Southeast Regional College.

Mr. Pawliw: — Good afternoon. My name's Rick Pawliw, executive director of programs branch. Yes, actually the budget for adult basic education year over year has increased by about \$2.1 million. So that's intended to expand capacity in SIAST, our regional college system, Dumont Technical Institute, and with Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies.

The situation in Estevan is one where the college has done an assessment of the adult basic education needs in that region and have determined that they will likely want to redirect some of the funding that has been provided in Estevan to other areas in the region which are determined to be a higher priority. As you know, the labour market in Estevan is very strong and there is a real shortage of workers in that area and many of the potential participants there have opted for employment — which I think is good — but they are finding that the enrolments are very low and as such have decided to make a move to redirect the funding.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you. And I guess that's where the question has arisen and one of the areas that I've had a few questions asked is the Moosomin area. Most of the ABE [adult basic education] participants in around Moosomin and that area have been basically single mothers and trying to upgrade while trying to hold down a job and raise a family. And so while I'm not exactly sure of the program being cut back, I know there's been some concerns raised about the potential of it being cut back and where would these people go to continue to advance their education. And that's the reason I raise that question regarding ABE.

The minister also commented about more seats and I would like to know where specifically we're adding more seats in the ABE program.

Mr. Pawliw: — Are you interested in the location by location? Or I mean I can provide it by college in terms of what we're estimating where the seats are. Overall we're expecting that there'll be about 442 more opportunities generated with this funding over the course of the next year. We've done some estimates in terms of where we think those seats will be located. I could probably provide you a list of that. I don't know if you want me to read it out for you today.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you very much. That certainly would be helpful and . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Do you want us to provide it to you?

Mr. Toth: — Pardon me?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Do you want us to read it out or can we just provide you with the information?

Mr. Toth: — I was just going to say the information would be excellent. We'd appreciate that and we can go through it. That would be, that would be fine as well.

One other question and I know my colleagues are looking for their opportunity. Over the past few years, what have we seen for growth in both SIAST and the regional colleges as far as numbers? And that information too you probably could just get it for me. I'm going to ask for the years '04-05, '05-06, and '06-07 and in regards to the number of individual seats that have increased in the uptake in regards to those two programs in the province.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well as I said in my opening remarks, since '04-05 we've created 6,164 ongoing opportunities and an additional 2,320 one-time opportunities. So we have, we've seen a significant growth in education and training in our training institutions.

Mr. Toth: — And that's both SIAST and regional colleges?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Regional colleges, DTI [Dumont Technical Institute], SIIT, apprenticeship and trades training as well. So it's across the sector. And it also includes adult basic education. ABE is very important. As you know, if people don't have the basic skills it's difficult to get into the training.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Madam Minister.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — You're welcome.

The Chair: — Mr. Weekes.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Madam Minister, just a couple of questions concerning Prairie West Regional College. First, I attend their graduation pretty well every year, and certainly they do a great job. As you mentioned, regional colleges are very flexible and certainly serve the people of my constituency and area very well — a very good program.

My question is about the LPN [licensed practical nurse] seats that are being offered. Could you go into the program, how many seats are available? And my ultimate question is, what is the future? I understand there's only funding I believe for one

year. I want to know just what is the future for the LPN course in the Prairie West Regional College in Biggar.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes, there has been a significant growth in the number of licensed practical nurse seats in the province. And once again, those seats are moved around the province. I believe we now have 160 licensed practical nurse seats in the province at the moment, so we're educating 160 licensed practical nurses.

In the case of Biggar we, as you know, we had some one-time money, some additional money that we put into training — \$52 million — in November. And we provided regional colleges the opportunity to tell us what they would do with some one-time money. In the case of the various regional colleges, they provided us with their requests for additional funds to provide training for people in their particular region. And in the case of Biggar, I believe there are 12 . . .

Mr. Visvanathan: — 14.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — 14. There are 14 licensed practical nurse seats that people in Biggar can have access. And I understand it is very popular.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. I would agree it's very popular. It's a great course. It's a two-year program. So I guess my question is, what is the future of it for those students that are taking it in the first year? They obviously need to take the second year. And also, when the first years move into second year, is there going to be an additional 14 begin the first-year program?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well my understanding is that I believe the licensed practical nurse seats were converted to ongoing seats. Now whether it's in Biggar . . . I mean they may move it around the region.

Mr. Weekes: — So the 14 . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Maybe Raman can answer that.

Mr. Visvanathan: — Okay. Currently the program intake that started in March '07, that current cohort of students will, the college has received funding to allow that current cohort of students to finish that program in Biggar. After that we will assess the situation in terms of the total required seats of practical nursing across the province and may shift the program to another location within the Prairie West region, may leave it in Biggar. We'll reassess the situation at that time. But the current cohort of students will be allowed to complete their full program in Biggar.

Mr. Weekes: — When would that decision be made about the second group of 14 students?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Nine, because it's a two-year program.

Mr. Visvanathan: — That's correct.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Right. And as . . .

Mr. Weekes: — Well I guess there'd be an expansion of the

seats, but there could be potentially 28 students next year — 14 second-year, 14 first-year.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — No, I think as Raman was saying, we have money for two years. So they'll be able to do their first and second year. And then we will, it's possible . . . I don't believe we're looking at an intake in first year so it's not permanent. So we may move that to some other part of the province. That's the beauty of regional colleges. You look where there's a need, and there may be a need in Moosomin or there may be a need in Cypress Hills. So you move this around to meet the labour market needs of regions.

Mr. Weekes: — Well, I will encourage you to consider Biggar for the ongoing program because it's certainly. . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Kindersley?

Mr. Weekes: — It's very successful and . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — It could be Kindersley, Rosetown. It could be Unity.

Mr. Weekes: — Yes. Okay, thank you. I'll move on to another topic, apprenticeship programs. The issue that's raised with the Sask Party when, particularly our economy committee which I'm the Chair of, the issue is right now the apprenticeship is one apprentice per journeyman in all the trades.

Is it being considered to increase that two or more apprentice per journeyman? And if not, why not? And I think it may not be for each particular field, but certainly in some there seems to be a need to increase that.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think there's different ratios, depending on the trade. So the ratios may vary depending on the trade that we're speaking of. Rob has been involved in this, and so I will ask him to address this issue from a technical point of view.

Mr. Cunningham: — Hi there. Yes, currently for the four compulsory trades the ratios are existing as 1:1. There is a resolution that has been passed by the apprenticeship commission to look at exempting the final year apprentices from the calculation of that ratio. So if you had a workplace with two journey persons and two apprentices, and one of those apprentices was in the final year of their apprenticeship, then that would enable that workplace to bring on an additional apprentice so that that final year apprentice would be exempted and it would provide some more flexibility and capacity to bring more apprentices into the system.

Mr. Weekes: — So in your example you're saying it would be the additional apprentice in that particular business, but overall the plan would still be 1:1.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — First, second . . . It would be the final year where the, as I understand the resolution, the final year of your apprenticeship for the purposes of the 1:1 ratio for the compulsory trades, that would not be recognized. That's what the apprenticeship commission has been dealing with.

Mr. Weekes: — My question is that would be specific to that

one business, not to the whole plan, not to all the compulsory areas.

Mr. Cunningham: — Sorry, I just gave the example based on a particular business. But for those compulsory trades, overall in the apprenticeship system you would be able to see more apprentices move in to become registered as apprentices. Presumably in the range of 25 per cent more apprentices would come in because most of those compulsory trades are four-year programs.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — So it would be the final year of the apprenticeship that would be excluded from the ratios. Now what we need to remember is that our apprentices in the compulsory trades, as I understand it, they are red sealed. They can go across the country. So when our guys or gals get their journey person status, it's recognized. They can go anywhere. And the 1:1 ratio is very important in terms of beginner apprentices and then the second, third year. But in the case of the final year, as I understand it, they have agreed — as the employer and the journey people on the apprenticeship commission — to change the final year, exempt them from the 1:1 ratio. And that won't, as I understand it, affect the red seal.

Mr. Weekes: — But this hasn't been approved by your department yet. That's being proposed, getting back to the exemption?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The apprenticeship commission has passed a resolution.

Mr. Weekes: — Yes. And what does your department think of it?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think that's acceptable but, you know, it has to come to us.

Mr. Weekes: — Thanks. Just a question on, we'll use plumbing as the example. What are the rules around a young person working for an employer? When do they have to apply? I understand the business has to make the application. There's an agreement that has to be signed. But this young person could be working for this employer for months. What are the rules around . . . Are those hours that this young person is working for the employer go towards his apprenticeship? How does that work?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As I understand it, I mean this is one of the things that the tradespeople have said to us, that if you exempt the final year apprentice from the ratio, is what we want to make sure is that you're enforcing through the apprenticeship commission the ratios, and so that we are getting young people who are working indentured. So we want to have more skilled tradespeople in the province. So it's incumbent upon companies to indenture those young people as apprentices so that their hours go towards their journey person's status.

And then after so many hours you go to SIAST or the regional college, you take some, you know, in-class training, and then you go back and you do your second year, your third year, your fourth year, but there's classroom training that goes with it. So it's very important that we have registered apprentices and of course the companies register them.

Mr. Weekes: — So you're saying until they're indentured the hours, the clock doesn't start ticking as far as hours going towards the apprenticeship program.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As I understand, you can work for six months and the hours that you have accumulated could go towards your journey person's status, but it would only be six months and then you have to be registered.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. I'll turn it over to my colleague.

The Chair: — Mr. Bjornerud.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Madam Minister, I think you may have been lobbied on this behalf, but it's a group from Melville that are very active with the numbers dropping in the high school, Melville Comprehensive School, and there's a group out there I believe that . . . [inaudible] . . . possibly to see if SIAST courses or something of that kind couldn't be worked into the empty classrooms in the Melville school — a very good building.

As we all know, the population is dropping in centres such as Melville. Housing would be no problem, many things like this. And I think what they're trying to do is find a way to, you know, prop up their economy in the city of Melville.

Is there any chance that any of the SIAST courses could fill in spots like this? They have empty rooms and that out there.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well as you probably know, there are SIAST courses that are delivered through the regional college system. And so if the Parkland community college for instance wanted to broker programs through SIAST to provide training in the Melville Comprehensive High School, that certainly would be something that the Melville Comprehensive High School should pursue with the Parkland Regional College.

And in fact if you look at our joint-use facilities around the province in this — we began to do this in the mid-1990s or just a little before — we wanted to have joint-use facilities where regional colleges would start taking over parts of the comprehensive high schools in Estevan, Weyburn, North Battleford, I believe Tisdale, and so on, so that we could have people coming out of high school and then going into training or education in those schools.

So this is something that I would suggest that the Melville Comprehensive High School pursue with the Parkland Regional College because they're the ones that would broker the programs. Right now SIAST is physically located in Saskatoon, Regina, Moose Jaw and P.A. [Prince Albert], but the regional colleges broker programs from SIAST.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I guess the problem being, to this point that hasn't happened. And I think they've gone that route to a degree. We know that Yorkton has expanded, built a new facility, a nice facility. But I guess what I'm saying is, before we continue to build new buildings, maybe, you know, maybe we should look at utilizing the ones we already have.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I totally agree. And that's one of the

things that has been done in the province for, I think, 14 years, where regional colleges have moved into parts of comprehensive high schools. So I'm not sure why that hasn't happened in Melville, but we can certainly pursue that.

Mr. Bjornerud: — I would hate to think that it was a turf protection between the two cities and, you know, we're sitting . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — That doesn't go on, does it?

Mr. Bjornerud: — Stuck where one is looking after the other, and one isn't actually being paid attention to in this case. And I'm hoping that's not what the problem is.

Because I think that, you know, the facility is there, Madam Minister. There's so many things going for them that we could just step in, I think, with a number of possibilities — you know, whether it was electrical, plumbing, or whatever the regional college support programs would supply them out of their end. But I think they, you know, they do machinist programs and that through high school, and the facility is there. So I think you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I do.

Mr. Bjornerud: — I think we both agree on it. I guess, how do we get to that point? So I'll go back and meet with them once more, but to this point that certainly hasn't happened. So thank you; thank you, Madam Minister.

The Chair: — Ms. Draude.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you. And thank you, Madam Minister. I have a specific case I want to ask you about. And I did come to your office about two weeks ago about a young woman who was actually getting her LPN course through . . . I think it's in Tisdale. And the program was handled through Can-Sask career and employment, and I believe it was transferred, the responsibility was transferred to the Gabriel Dumont Institute. And when I spoke to people in your department they told me that there really wasn't any direct input now between your department and Gabriel Dumont.

But there is a situation that I haven't been able to get an answer for. And starting with the fact that when she signed on to this program there was an indication that the amount of money that she would be receiving, and from the time it went over to the institute there was about \$250 a month less immediately that she was given, even though she was under the understanding that her contract was grandfathered at the rate that it would have been.

It probably is wasting your time if I ask you a lot of questions about this. But I'm just wondering where to go to because in the last month, the last week in fact, the last paycheque was deposited into her account and without any information on why they came up with the amount of money. She's getting way less than half of what she had originally been expecting to get.

So my question to you is, where do I go to help out a young woman who's trying to get her LPN course out in rural Saskatchewan? She had been signed a contract. There was all

kinds of agreements made and everything was going right until there was a transfer of the agreement.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well first of all I can't discuss an individual case before the committee because of the freedom of information and personal protection Act or whatever, but I am familiar with this case. I understand you did bring it up to my office and we are dealing with it. So I can provide you with some more information but after the committee adjourns.

Ms. Draude: — I would appreciate that very much.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Thanks. I will say this, that as you probably know METSI [Métis Employment and Training of Saskatchewan Inc.] was going to be taken over by, I think it was the Manitoba Métis group, and we suggested to Service Canada that we should take it on an interim basis and then GDI [Gabriel Dumont Institute] would develop the capacity to do this. So GDI is now providing this service to Métis people. But we'll provide you with information on the details of this specific case.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you very much. I appreciate it and I know she will as well.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay, thanks.

The Chair: — Thank you. And seeing no further questions, thank you to the minister and her officials. And I'll entertain a motion to recess until 7.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Can I just thank my officials because I'm not sure if we'll be back before the committee.

The Chair: — Yes. Okay.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — But I'd like to thank the officials from Advanced Education and Employment for being here this afternoon and helping the committee members deal with issues that they're concerned about and providing the information to the committee.

The Chair: — All right. Seeing as it is 5 o'clock, we'll see ourselves back here at 7 o'clock. Thanks.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

General Revenue Fund Community Resources Vote 36

Subvote (CR01)

The Chair: — I call this committee to order. I would ask the minister to introduce his officials and make any introductory remarks.

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Immediately to my left is Duncan Fisher, deputy minister. For the rest, I will name out their names and their titles: the assistant deputy minister of policy, Shelley Whitehead; the assistant deputy minister of housing and central administration, Darrell Jones. Also attending are some of the senior department officials

which includes Don Allen, who is the executive director of finance and property management division; Larry Chaykowski, executive director of housing program operations; Gord Tweed, associate executive director, income assistance division; Wayne Phaneuf, associate executive director of the community living division; Andrea Brittin, executive director of the child and family services division; and Cathy Bulych, who's the director of the program support services.

We also have a few other additions that I want to point out. We have Bob Wihlidal, who is the assistant deputy minister for client services; Janice Krumenacker, who is the director of the post care services of the child and family services division; and — no it's not Gord Tweed's brother — but it is Doug Scott, who is the director of strategic policy and benefit design. So those are the individuals we have with us this evening as part of our senior management team and officials.

And the Saskatchewan Community Resources budget and performance plan, certainly in my opinion and many others, provides a clear picture of the department's priorities. As I mentioned from time and time again, that our top priority is to work with Saskatchewan people to help them build better lives for themselves through economic independence, through strong families, and through active involvement in the labour market and in the community.

For the committee's information, this year's budget for the department is just over 625 million and this represents a \$22 million increase over last year's budget. The budget contains an additional \$4.7 million for our income and employment support program, and for the fourth time since the Saskatchewan employment supplement was introduced, we will increase the qualifying income thresholds so that even more working families will qualify.

Madam Chair, we'll also be increasing access to the Saskatchewan rental housing supplement for those who have little choice but to rely on social assistance. We'll build upon last year's historic increase and further raise the adult basic allowance. This is the allowance paid to social assistance recipients and those in receipt of the transitional employment allowance, or TEA as we call it. This will bring the total increase over the past three years to \$60 per month or 31 per cent.

Last year we made the commitment that, following discussions with our key stakeholders, we would implement a redesigning respite program for families who have children with intellectual disabilities. This year's budget contains a \$600,000 increase to support the new model of respite for families in the greatest need of support.

We will achieve the goal of developing 2,000 additional affordable housing units primarily through the centenary affordable housing program, CAHP, which is ahead of schedule.

This year's provincial budget provides nearly \$13 million to support the inclusion of people with disabilities in the social and economic life of this province. Within Community Resources it includes \$1.575 million to increase opportunities and support the people with intellectual disability by developing

new or enhanced community-based residential or day program supports.

The number of children requiring out-of-home care is critically becoming a national issue that is putting pressure on child welfare services across Canada. In Saskatchewan the number of children needing out-of-home care has increased by 20 per cent over the past three years. This year's budget includes an additional \$14.1 million to be directed at helping children at risk and of course their families. Of that amount, \$8.9 million will be used for children requiring care away from their homes. This builds upon a \$6 million increase allocated last year. A further \$850,000 will provide for a cost-of-living adjustment for out-of-home care providers such as foster parents and treatment centres.

As more children enter the system, the workload for child welfare workers continues to grow. To help relieve this pressure we have set aside \$1.3 million to hire 20 new child welfare workers. There's no question that the additional 20 people . . . We can recognize that the Department of Community Resources has a responsibility to provide services to children and to youth who are at risk of being sexually exploited. For 2007-2008, \$2.1 million has been allocated for services and programs for the sexually exploited youth.

A positive future for all Saskatchewan people depends on a strong, collaborative relationship between the province and of course the First Nations. My department will be investing an additional \$700,000 to expand support for First Nations child and family services agencies. We will also once again be contributing to the continued development of the First Nations family and community institute.

The Department of Community Resources relies heavily upon hundreds of community-based organizations to deliver its programs and services. And in November 2005 this government announced a landmark three-year investment of just over \$30 million for human services CBOs [community-based organization]. This year's budget contains a \$5.7 million increase for the third and final instalment to help CBOs attract and retain staff.

Community Resources is a large department with about 2,000 employees spread across five regions. These individuals make up a dedicated team of staff who serve the public day in and day out with compassion, understanding, and expertise. It is not often they get recognized for the work that they do.

Last year several staff of the department received a Premier's Award for Excellence for their work as part of the Cumberland House disaster response team. The team was formed when a state of emergency was declared in that community due to excessive rainfall that caused the Saskatchewan River to overflow its banks. Staff offered the same emergency social services during last summer's northern forest fires. They are again responding to this year's flood situation and evacuation of the 632 residents from the Red Earth First Nations.

I cannot say it enough but it is because of the dedication, it is because of the hard work, and it is because of the enthusiasm of our top-notch team of employees that the achievements that I mention here along with many, many, many others were

possible.

So in closing, I hope that I provided you with a concise look at our Department of Community Resources and some of our upcoming plans. And, Madam Chair, I'll be pleased to offer answers to any questions that people may have.

The Chair: — Thank you. Mr. Weekes.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Welcome, Mr. Minister, and welcome to your officials. My topic is concerning community group homes in general but in particular the Biggar Community Group Home and their lack of funding.

The Biggar Community Group Home has been in operation for 18-plus years and the salary funding model has been the same for the last 18 years. The only changes that has occurred was the establishment of an activity program in 1998. Currently they are serving seven clients in residential services, two clients in semi-independent program, and 11-plus clients in an activity program.

They are proposing that they bring the budgets into line with the current staffing model that they have been using. The leadership budget salary dollars goes on, in their budget they are funded for a half full-time equivalent administrator, half-time full-time equivalent program coordinator, and are proposing that they receive funding for a full-time administrator and a full-time program coordinator.

At the inception of the Biggar Community Group Home, the present funding model was suitable because they were a very small organization that supported only six residents and the residents attended an outside activity program in the community. Over the last few years the agency has grown and they have established their own activity program. This program supports 11-plus clients and requires an extensive amount of time to administrate. They have another residential program that supports two clients. These clients are younger, therefore they have established a recycling program to include some of the meaningful activities.

In the beginning the focus of the Biggar Community Group Home was the seniors operation. Many of these people had retired and recreation was the focus of their activities. In the past few years they have placed younger clients in the group home, therefore shifting the focus from recreation to employment. They are moving in the direction of support employment for these young people. They're also supporting another two young adults who have moved to the Biggar community to attend the Way to Work program that is offered at the community college.

With the inception of the new programs, the administrative time is huge. With all these changes that have occurred, their executive director has been required to move away from programming for the participants and concentrate on administrative work. She also has seen expanded duties because of the shifting residential population, which include things such as behaviour and employment issues.

The executive director has also taken an active role on the provincial training committee as chairman for the whole region.

They have been approached by a woman to administer two SILP [supportive independent living programs] programs in the communities of Kerrobert, Luseland, and now possibly Unity. This individual also included and supported employment in these communities.

With the implementation of these programs, there would be the additional administrative duties to look after in communities that are located at least one hour from Biggar. They employ a full-time program coordinator, but are only receiving salary dollars based on program staff in the activity budget. Therefore the salary dollars for this position is in a very serious shortfall situation. She regularly performs duties at teaching, organizing, and directing program staff and participants.

Therefore they would like to request that they receive funding for a program coordinator's salary. They are requesting their program coordinator be funded at a level two, and same as an administrator. They would also request that these employees be funded for four weeks of holiday pay as they both have been employed with the agency for over 10 years; therefore by law they are required to provide these employees with four weeks vacation pay.

Mr. Minister, I had a meeting with this group last Friday and they quite frankly don't know what to do. They say they are basically stealing from the employees' wages in order to offset the huge increases in other costs — mainly utilities — but also other costs in programs and programming and other areas. And as what I just outlined, they're asking the government — your department — to pay full-time for an administrator and also a full-time for a program coordinator, which would go a long ways towards alleviating their financial needs. Could you respond to their needs and their requests?

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — First of all I'll just make a few opening comments, then I get my deputy to also add to the answer and, of course, Wayne Phaneuf who is to my immediate right. But I would certainly point out that I thank you for the information. And I also want to publicly thank the Biggar Group Home because a lot of our partners are all throughout Saskatchewan. And I understand that we have received the requests from the Biggar Group Home for the issue that you've raised. And all I can point out is that with some of the other issues that are out there and some of the other requests that are out there, we are certainly considering how and when we'll be able to help many, many group homes.

So that issue, to point out that we have received the requests and it's now in the process of determining in consideration of what they're asking. And so we'll certainly make a decision on that as soon as possible. But I'd like to refer the issue to my deputy and of course, Wayne who is also involved with the file.

Mr. Fisher: — I would just add that part of the budget increase that the minister referenced in his opening remarks, I think \$1.5 million for community living to deal with some of the types of issues that you've mentioned, we have requests from Biggar and from a number of other groups across the province. And we're just in the process of determining how the allocation for '07-08 is going to be used. So appreciate you bringing this up. And it is one of the group homes that is under consideration for use of those funds this year.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. Well all I can say is that it's a very serious situation for them. I mean they're a group of volunteers that work tirelessly to keep that group home open. And it's very difficult to keep employees if they can't pay them not only at the, you might say the going rate, but in today's economy going at more inflated wages which certainly the employees deserve.

And as I'd mentioned they're making up the shortfall really off the backs of the employees. And the employees are very good about it. They're putting in extra hours that they aren't getting paid for and, quite frankly, taking less pay as well than they should be receiving.

And so I again urge you and your department to consider their situation — all group homes in the province — because this group home and other group homes do such valuable work for people in the community. And quite frankly, you know, what would happen if that home closed? And where would those people go? And where would they get the help that they deserve so much — you know, the valuable help that they receive?

I met with the board members and they're really at the, kind of at what they have described as, you know, a constant year-to-year fight to get adequate budgeting and funding. And you know this year it's really come to the point where they're getting desperate, quite frankly. So I again urge you to look at their situation, other group homes, and hopefully address their needs in the future.

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Yes. Certainly I would again thank you for bringing the issue forward. And I'd point out one of the key components — and you can certainly express my appreciation for the points that you raise — but one of the key components in working with communities, and Biggar is like many other communities, is that the department relies on partnerships and we certainly recognize that many, many of these organizations have a strong, strong component of volunteerism. And many of the groups that are out there that have had success in negotiating and receiving extra government help with some of their local efforts. A huge part of the effort that they've undertaken really tends to lend itself to the credibility of the group and recognition of all the volunteerism.

So I'd point out it's a credit to the community that you have these kinds of volunteers out there. And the province in many, many ways need to make reference to the volunteerism on many occasions as possible. And I want to be able to do that today, is to thank the many volunteers out there.

I think it's important to point out that several years ago . . . It wasn't till several years ago that we had the resources to recognize the shortfall to attract and retain staff and to add services to many of these CBOs and group homes that exist. It was, I think it was a \$30 million cost, which is a significant amount of money. But what we wanted to recognize as a province and Community Resources — the department that benefited from this exercise and this commitment — that we needed to do something to help the CBOs out there.

Is it enough? Well that certainly, you know, begs the question — is \$30 million enough? And one of the things we want to do is continue to recognize the volunteerism and continue to point out that many CBOs, like the one you made reference to, do

have a problem with operating costs. And there's certain requests that have come from many quarters.

But I will point out again that we received their application. It's being assessed and a decision will be made very, very soon. So I'd like to maybe have my deputy or Wayne add anything else if they like.

Mr. Phaneuf: — Wayne Phaneuf, associate executive director, community living division. Thank you, Mr. Weekes, for your question.

We are aware of the application for funding that was made by the Biggar Community Group Home's board. The two individuals that you mentioned that have attended that community to be able to access the Way to Work program is certainly consistent with the department's goals. And we will be making, as the minister said, making decisions on the new fiscal year's budget. Our first round of decisions is scheduled for the May 17, so agencies should be able to expect to hear from us shortly after that.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you.

The Chair: — That's all? Ms. Heppner.

Ms. Heppner: — Thank you, Minister, for being here and welcome to your officials as well. I have some questions about the funding that's been allotted in the recent budget for child care spaces. I was wondering if you had a breakdown of the current structure of daycare facilities in Saskatchewan. How many or what percentage of daycares in Saskatchewan are currently not for profit and how many are private facilities?

Mr. Fisher: — The department, with some changes that occurred last year, the Department of Learning is responsible for licensing daycare. And we provide the child care subsidy, but we're not responsible for monitoring the homes or licensing them any longer.

Ms. Heppner: — Okay. I do have a question about a federal private member's Bill; it's Bill C-303. Would you be able to answer questions on that? Or that go to Learning as well?

Mr. Fisher: — I think that one would go to Learning because my understanding is that that is primarily about the federal money that may be available for additional spaces.

Ms. Heppner: — It's actually not a funding Bill. It's a licensing, I guess. It's not part of it. Okay.

Mr. Fisher: — That would be towards Learning.

Ms. Heppner: — I'm sorry. I've got nothing.

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — No. I should also perhaps clarify that the reason Learning . . . It was under DCR [Department of Community Resources] at one time. And Learning assumed the licensing aspect for daycare and Learning provides the licensing. And as our deputy indicated, we provide the subsidy for the lower-income clients that may use daycare services. It's important to make that distinction.

And the purpose there being is that the theory is that you'd go from daycare to early learning to kindergarten to K to 12 [kindergarten to grade 12]. And then of course, you'd have the support mechanisms consistent in one department. And then of course advanced education and training would then assume their role.

And so our role is primarily in the area of subsidizing the low-income people that may be using daycare. But the licensing and the daycare provisions are all under Learning.

Ms. Heppner: — Okay. I'll put these in there then.

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Yes. Thanks.

Ms. Heppner: — Thanks. Sorry.

The Chair: — Mr. Toth.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Mr. Minister, and welcome to your officials. Going back to the community-based organizations, we have a number across the province, as my colleague had indicated, and for the past number of years one of the biggest challenges CBOs have been facing is retention of employees or even attracting employees, especially in view of the fact that we have so many health organizations now that are offering much better wages, whether it's in care homes or whether it's a home care program.

You indicated that there was some additional funding. I'm still hearing however that there is still a challenge in maintaining employees. And I'm wondering, Mr. Minister, what you and your officials, as you view the situation, what you would perceive the level of your remuneration that you would have to aim for that would assist these CBOs in being able to continue to provide the services — the much needed services that they provide — in communities across the province, especially in helping meet the needs of people with disabilities.

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — And what we're going to do is I'll make some general opening comments in relation to the points that you raised. And I think it's important that people know that as a minister we certainly have a lot of briefing, we have a lot of information provided to us by the department and we certainly participate on a regular, consistent basis with cabinet and of course with budget development and raised some of the issues that you've raised.

No question that one time I think, and I could be corrected on this, that the CBO sector that you spoke of, spoke of a decent increase to some of the issues that you are facing when we talk about salary and then to retain staff. I think at one time that figure was 6 million. And then all of a sudden the figure grew to 30 million. I shouldn't say all of a sudden; there's probably a lot of research done to it, but you can see how greater the amount could increase and how much greater the demand could be out there. Certainly I think the \$30 million was a good start to attract and to retain staff in the CBO sector. We have certainly on numerous occasions tried to express to them the value that they play in Saskatchewan communities and Saskatchewan as a whole.

There's also no question that as the economy begins to take off

and there's a lot more competition for employees out there . . . And I think that's also another factor I think people need to incorporate into seeing what some of the challenges the CBO sector has.

No question that the three points that I wanted to raise is that the \$30 million commitment, again the question is, was it enough? The second point I would make is that that cost has grown over the years. We've certainly responded with a \$30 million injection to the CBO sector. They do a tremendous amount of good work; I concur with that. And the economy I think provides a lot of competition, if you like, for some of the employees that have been in the CBO sector. But nonetheless I would make those three points in relation to your question.

And I'm going to ask my deputy to give us more specific information to further support what I've indicated, then Mr. Phaneuf if he so chooses as well.

Mr. Fisher: — Just to add that as the CBO increase has been rolled out we've tried to do it in as thoughtful a manner as possible because it is . . . CBO sector is a large sector across government, and within Community Resources itself it's a fairly large piece of what we do.

The initial group that we were working with, the Saskatchewan Association of Rehabilitation Centres, came forward with a well-thought-out human resource plan that spoke to both wage levels and recruitment and retention so that when the three-year plan that the minister referenced was initially rolled out, because of the planning that SARC [Saskatchewan Association of Rehabilitation Centres] had done, in the initial year they received a 6 per cent lift for recruitment and retention for their CBOs. The balance of the sector at that time got 2 per cent in the second year again because of the plan. And because I think the SARC sector had some of the lowest-paid employees within the CBO sector, in the second year again they got in 6 per cent for recruitment and retention, and a 3 per cent wage lift. In the third year of the plan, again another 6 and 3.

We've been working with some other groups to develop similar human resource plans. For example we're working with the parent aid association across the province to try to put together a plan that will see some gains in that sector, and also with the mobile crisis programs in Regina, Saskatoon, and P.A.

So we are, as I said, trying to do this in a thoughtful manner. We know that there are some lower-paid employees in the CBO sector. We're trying to reach, through these planning exercises and funding allocations, to the lowest-paid employees and provide some structured increases for them over this three-year period. And we're hopeful that in coming years as some of these other plans, HR [human resource] planning exercises come to fruition, we'll be able to address some of the additional challenges across some of the other components of the CBO sector.

Mr. Toth: — How many employees would be currently employed in community-based organizations in the province? Would you happen to have that number?

Mr. Fisher: — I think it would be approximately about 1,700.

Mr. Toth: — With the rollout of your new plan and the wage restructuring, and I guess one of the challenges as well, given the makeup of wages and benefits — and we see it varies from one area to another and certainly interprovincially — and there's a big challenge of whether you look at the private sector or the public sector and trying to keep up with the fact that in oil-related industries they're certainly well ahead. And I don't think we'll ever see the day when you'll catch up to that type of cyclical dollar value that's placed on employees or given to employees just to hire employees.

But with what you've currently rolled out and in view of the fact that over the past few years we've gone through the 0, 0, 1 and then we've been at 1 and 2 and 3 per cent, no doubt some of these employees were substantially or lagging substantially far behind other areas such as your heavy-care homes, or your home care positions. With the rollout of the additional funds, where is that currently placing employees?

Are we at the point where the CBOs are now finding they're at least in a competitive format, a forum where they can retain their employees versus hiring someone, nicely getting them trained, and then watching them move on to a position that pays them actually much higher of than what they were currently receiving? Do you find that these CBOs now are able to retain more of their employees that they've put the time and the money and the education into for the training to work in these and provide these services?

Mr. Phaneuf: — Thank you, Mr. Toth. What we're finding from SARC and Saskatchewan Association of Rehabilitation Centres, who canvasses their membership on a regular basis, is that on the whole it's starting to stabilize, that people are staying in the sector. The funding standard that community living division and the department provide to the SARC member agencies and through the HR plan — or in response to the HR plan, pardon me — puts them within approximately \$3 of the care aids in the health sector. That's the funding standard. We don't control what agencies pay their staff and so they need room in a grid as well. So that, you know, if people aren't experiencing that, that may be one of the issues.

But certainly in our conversations with SARC, they're saying that it is starting to stabilize an environment. We just finished a comprehensive training package for the comprehensive personal planning and support policy across the province where we had 1,800 bodies that were actually trained in the new policy in the SARC agencies, and these people have been around. There are a number of individuals that are making a career. SARC has also launched a program where they are making themselves out, the agencies, as employers of choice. And so that's all been in response to the investments.

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Maybe if I can, Mr. Toth, just to add. You're absolutely correct in your assessment that the agencies out there, certainly we've supported them as best we can and obviously, you know, they're also doing a lot of things on their own as well. And we have everything from HR plans which we've helped them work their way through. We, I think in terms of the HR plans themselves, I think we have committed the \$100,000 last year for this initiative, and we're also providing an additional 100,000 in the current fiscal year as well to support them in their HR development plans, realizing

that the competition certainly is on from many sectors for employees.

Even things like, for example, of recognizing the CBOs that we work with, we have the Spirit Award for the CBOs that we introduced in 2006. And what the Spirit Award is, is just to recognize the spirit within the CBOs. It's not a large amount of money that we recognize the winners with — I think it's \$1,000 — but more it's a small gesture on our part to recognize that they do a valuable service to many communities and to many groups and many people.

And that this is our small way of we're helping them work their way through, not just the \$30 million for salaries, but to also add for helping them with their HR plans, recognize the spirit of their CBOs, meet with them continually, and support them. And some of that is paying off dividends.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I believe, Mr. Minister, just from my conversations with people in my constituency and certainly when CBOs have been and SARC's been in to have their MLA appreciation session following their or around their conference time, we have noted — you've probably noted and no doubt your department officials have noted as well — that yes, we've got some very dedicated people out there. And my hat goes off to them because personally I might have a little bit of difficulty dealing with some of the circumstances. People with disabilities can be really challenging in just some of the needs that they have. And as I observe how people provide care . . . and not just the care, it's how they work with these individuals and make them feel like they're somebody special. Even though they have a disability, that doesn't mean that they don't have abilities, and they can provide services.

I observe what takes place in the recycling depots in my area and what's somewhat gratifying is to walk into one of those depots and have everyone greeting you and glad to see you there. How many, how many places of business do you walk in and find everybody just so happy to see you walk in and want to come and meet you? And more than just that, they're kind of a loving group as well, so you can't get out of there without a hug or two so it just shows you that, that type of personnel.

And that's why I think it's certainly important for us to recognize that people who provide that care are doing a great service. They're not only helping communities; they're helping families with providing and meeting some of the needs of that child or that young adult with disabilities, but they're also helping that individual to feel important.

And anything we can do to ensure that they are properly rewarded for their time and work and efforts is certainly greatly appreciated. And I'm pleased to see that the department . . . I was going to say has finally recognized. I don't think that's quite the right term. I think through the years I've observed, there's been a desire, but there's also been some challenges. And challenges, I think the minister knows it's a matter of where you allocate your resources, and sometimes I would question where the government puts their resources.

And maybe, Mr. Minister, around the table you felt that too. And when you've lobbied for your department and some of the services that your department provides, as you're lobbying for

your share of the pie, it must get a little frustrating as well when you know that there are individuals that really should be provided for. So I'm pleased to see that we are beginning to recognize that need because — as I think it was either Wayne or yourself, Mr. Minister, mentioned — that many of these people working in these, working in these CBOs are not only there just for the money, but they're there because they enjoy what they're doing. They like their job and they like providing a service.

So I want to encourage you, Mr. Minister, and the department that whatever steps can be taken to address any concerns that are still out there, to assist providing for the needs of people with disabilities are steps that are taken . . . moving in the right direction and I thank you for that.

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Yes, I would just point out then and also ask my deputy to say a few words as well, but there's no question that the department itself needs to be recognized. There are many players within the department, of some of the commitment that they have towards working with the CBO sector and the CBO sector thus working with many people that may have disabilities.

And certainly from my perspective as a minister, we have travelled to many different facilities and different programs. We've met many people, and you're absolutely right that there's such a tremendous amount of good work being done out there in the CBO sector. That's one of the things that we try and do is to recognize that as often and as many times as possible. I wouldn't mind going from the highest hill in Saskatchewan yelling out the attributes of the CBO sector. And we need more and more people to recognize that.

And you know the old phrase, you don't miss something until it's gone, and that's one of the reasons why earlier we talked about the volunteer sector and how the communities themselves have come forward with their spirit, with their volunteerism, and so on and so forth.

The other point that I also make is that working with some of the sheltered workshops and some of the disabled people that work in these many places, you know, we've been there; we've seen some of the tremendous work that they've done. And there's no question that to me I think they're the most beautiful people in the world. They've got so many challenges, and yet their zest for life and their ability to contribute and their humanity and their treatment of each other and the recognition that many CBO sectors provide their employees, it's just a tremendous feeling. And it certainly qualifies and strengthens the human spirit that we often speak of.

So I think again of the dollars that have been generally provided — the 30 million — I think the CBO sector within my department got \$26 million of that.

So I think this government recognizes the tremendous amount of work the CBO sector has had in the communities in the province. So I think we've got the lion's share of the increase, and that's just a way of paying tribute to many of the CBOs that we work with. And it is a tremendous attribute of Saskatchewan in general when we talk about what people are doing with the CBO sector, those that operate and manage the CBO sector and

of course the many people that work with the CBO sector.

So I'm going to get my deputy to add something to this. But no question about it, I'm very proud of the department's work on this. It should be recognized time and time and time again, and certainly the partnership that we have with the many groups need to be recognized as well. So Duncan, please.

Mr. Fisher: — I would just reinforce a couple of points that you made in your comments. Certainly the community-based organization sector within Community Resources is an integral part of the service delivery model that we have in Saskatchewan. We've got many contracts with CBOs all across the province.

You pointed out that there are many, many dedicated front-line staff working in those community-based organizations. But I would add that right from the board level on down, there are many, many people giving hours and hours of volunteer time to serve on boards and to provide some direction for the CBOs across the province. So it's a combination of those dedicated board people and the staff people who we've tried to move some of this wage and benefit funding out to them to recognize the opportunities that they provide for people in the communities across the province. So they are a very, very key element of our service delivery mechanism.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, and you mentioned the volunteers, the parents, and people in the community that provide services on the boards. And as I've met with these individuals, I'm constantly struck by the fact that, yes, they do, do a lot of volunteer work. They might get some compensation for having to travel to a conference or to meet with other board members, but actually it's quite minute in comparison to the work level they do.

And I think back to . . . We used to have some of that in health care and education. But with the forced amalgamation, we've got away from a lot of that volunteer spirit, and that's maybe . . . I think we need to recognize that there are people willing to give their time. But as you move things into a larger component and start to create larger boards and funding, then all of a sudden you've got another challenge on your hands because there's a demand for resources that is not necessarily going directly to the people you're trying to assist. So CBOs certainly have through the years, they have provided a strong service to our communities.

The SARC recycling program, the town of Kipling as you're aware . . . Kipling Industries unfortunately had a major fire last fall which destroyed their recycling plant, and I know that they've been looking. At least I understand that they've been looking at another facility.

Right now they're back into the smaller facility they were in prior to finding the larger place of business. And it's unfortunate that they lost their building, but I know that where they are right now is quite cramped again. And I'm wondering if the department is involved at all in looking at a different facility which will meet the needs of the recycling program and certainly as well help that community-based organization continue to provide the services it has in the past for this community and surrounding area.

Mr. Phaneuf: — Mr. Toth, the department and community living division staff in particular are working closely with the board of directors in Kipling. They believe that they've found a suitable building and are looking to settle their insurance claim and are looking at the purchase of a new facility which will amalgamate all of their services under one roof, so they don't have the recycling in one area and the activity centre in another. They're looking at putting all of those together. So the department is working closely with that agency to come up with a solution.

Mr. Toth: — So what you've kind of indicated, Wayne, is the biggest hurdle right now is just coming to a final settlement in regards to the insurance on the previous building.

Mr. Phaneuf: — That's my understanding, yes. And I think they're very close on that.

Mr. Toth: — Okay. We're going to have to talk to either SGI [Saskatchewan Government Insurance] or whoever, you know. Circumstances of that nature . . . On one hand, you can talk to people and an insurance claim can be . . . it just seems like it's taken care of in no time, and the money's on your doorstep. And other issues it just takes an awful lot longer.

But I think at the end of the day . . . And I know what the facility that they're looking at. And you're right; if everything comes together, it certainly will be a real asset to the community and to the program and to everyone involved. They will have the space, and they won't have to be travelling back and forth between two buildings. Not only that, they've got the space outside for all the containers. And so I think the community and the board members and the folks involved are certainly looking forward to that.

I'd like to move into another area at this time. I'd like to talk about adoption services. Over the past number of years, Mr. Minister — and your officials will be aware of this — we've had a number of different agencies providing adoption services in the province of Saskatchewan. One of the agencies that I became aware of and when I was first elected was a Christian adoption agency. And unfortunately a few years back they found themselves in a position where fiscally they were unable to continue to function. And it's my understanding — and I stand to be corrected — that all of the adoption services in the province now are handled through your department.

And first of all I'm wondering if you could tell me, what is the length of time from when a couple would come forward to place themselves in a position for adoption to when they may find that they have the ability to adopt or that a child is available to meet the request that they've put forward?

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Yes. What I'll do is just provide some, again, some opening comments as a minister, and then we'll ask Janice Krumenacker who is our lead in terms of trying to work through the process of adoption.

First of all as a government, and certainly as a province, I think what we want to do is support as best we can the efforts of many families that choose adoption as a means of having a family or to complement their family. And certainly from my perspective is that what we want to do is encourage as many

people to seek adoption and to make Saskatchewan their home. So I think what I want to do is to ensure people out there know that all that we can do to support families to adopt, either from other provinces and from other countries, and make Saskatchewan their home. It is certainly within our effort to recognize them and to support them and to have them achieve their adoption as quickly as we can. That, in a nutshell, is certainly the province's position.

There's so many different developments and twists and turns to adoption, and it is a very trying and emotional filled journey. And so I think there's so many different circumstances that one could look at. Intercountry adoption for example is something that's a bit more complicated than say interprovincial. So in terms of a time frame, it would be difficult to give a time frame other than to say that my standing order as a minister is to support as many families seeking the adoption option, to support them in trying to have them resolve their process as quickly as possible so they can get their family together and make Saskatchewan their home.

That makes a lot of sense from where I sit. And many families, although they experience sometimes frustrating delays, they ought to know that we're fully supportive of their efforts. So with that I'm going to ask Ms. Krumenacker to add to some of the questions or the answers that you've asked and go from there.

Ms. Krumenacker: — Good evening. With respect to the lengths of time for the process of adoptive applicants moving through department services when they apply with our adoption program domestically, it varies somewhat. But with respect to getting a home study done, it's approximately six months once they do get released for the home study process.

I can tell you that there are approximately 450 adoptive applicants in Saskatchewan in various stages of the process. Approximately 250 are on the waiting list, and the others are in various stages, either approved or under study currently. Certainly trends have shifted with respect to generally the range that adoptive applicants are primarily considering . . . is certainly, you know, as healthy and as young as possible — the child. And certainly trends in infant adoptions and young children across not only Saskatchewan but Canada have significantly decreased with respect to more supports in, you know, communities across Saskatchewan and beyond, for birth parents — you know, considering parenting their children. So does that kind of answer a bit of what you were getting at?

Mr. Toth: — Well I guess part of the question I was looking . . . or an answer I was looking for is, and it comes from the most recent couple that have called me. And if I'm not mistaken, we're looking about six years, and they're still on a waiting list. Unfortunately in the case of this one couple when they first approached me, at that time I put them in touch with the Christian adoption agency and they were just . . . They were within a hair of having a child, and then the agency unfortunately had to close its doors, and they fell to the bottom of the list.

And they're are a couple that's not, they're not getting younger unfortunately, and they keep bringing that, raising that issue. And I think you mentioned a moment ago about looking for

younger families to provide the homes for children. And yet as the years goes by, we don't get younger; we tend to get older. And that's one of the most discouraging points that this couple is facing.

And so what I'm kind of looking for is what would be . . . Okay you talked about six months once they've had approval for the home study. And the home study, I would take it then, would be the study that would just indicate whether or not you'd qualify for adoption. And then you sit on a waiting list until the proper child comes forward or the ability to fill that role. What would that waiting list constitute? Like, what's the length of time, and does it vary from one couple to the next, or is it kind of a standard wait — 4, 5, 6 years or less?

Ms. Krumenacker: — Thank you. I just want to clarify. By young, I meant that the families want children as young and healthy as possible — not, we are looking for families as young as possible. We do place children with a range of adoptive families having a range of ages.

You know, with respect to the process again, I can tell you that the waiting list dates back to approximately 2001. And that's a reality of our situation that infants . . . Birth parents that are finding themselves in situations where they want to do voluntary planning for children, there's very, very few situations occurring.

There was only approximately four infants voluntarily placed through the department last year. So you can appreciate the balance of numbers. And I certainly acknowledge the frustrations on, you know, with respect to adoptive applicants.

Mr. Toth: — Well there's no doubt that certainly officials in your department that deal with parents that are coming forward to adopt — when you've only been able to adopt out four children in a year — must find it frustrating, especially when many of these couples would dearly love to have a child.

And until you've been there, it's hard to really understand what it is to have a child. But I know that . . . I don't think there's a couple around that wouldn't want to be a parent. And I'm fortunate now I get to be a granddad. Someone said it's . . . wish we could have the grandkids first. But no, we enjoyed our children and we're going to enjoy our grandchildren. But there are a lot of families, young couples out there who aren't going to have that privilege unfortunately.

And there's one statistic that continues to bother me — and especially when I look at the numbers you mention about the applications and people on the waiting list — is the number of abortions that continue to take place in the province of Saskatchewan. And the only issue I would mention there is whether or not some of that could be changed just through education and just letting some of these individuals know. Like, you know, those great homes . . . if you would care to carry this child through to a birth and give the opportunity for a family to adopt and provide a loving and caring home.

And I'm not sure what's taking place currently at, you know, our educational programs or family programs to let women know that there are other options available. But for people who are waiting for adoption, they see a number like that, and it

somewhat annoys them. And you and I don't have much control over that though, do we? But if we could, if there was a way to let people know that there are loving and caring homes, parents out there, it would certainly be, may provide an asset and may give you some other options which . . . However the best we can do is do our best to try and work with parents who would love to adopt a child and provide that care.

So the fact that we don't have them provincially or even on the national level brings me to another question in regards to adoptions, and that's overseas adoption. And this is the issue that's come up a number of times recently in . . . And I don't know if you can go through a day without flipping through the channel and just seeing . . . whether it's one of our — care Canada or World Vision or there's so many organizations now trying to provide for children in other parts of the world. And I know there are people that, there again, would be more than happy to provide a home for a young child from another part of the world, a child that really desperately needs a home.

And I'm wondering what steps have been taken, or are there any steps being taken to look at out-of-country adoptions? What kind of costs would that incur? And what supports, if any, does the department give in providing these types of services?

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Yes. Again I'm going to get Janice to expand on that. And what I would point out is that . . . Obviously as I mentioned in the outset, Don, the situation that I present as a minister when it comes to adoption in general is that we certainly as a province want to welcome the efforts of many, many fine families that want to adopt. We are very proud of some of the parents that have worked very hard to try and adopt. They've been co-operative with us. They've done home studies and just a wide, myriad of things that we have to be aware of when it comes to adoption. And as a minister, from my perspective, having as many adoptions done in Saskatchewan to improve the quality of life of any child, something that we think we need to do on a regular, consistent basis.

One of the things that people ought to know is when you talk about out-of-country adoption, the US is considered an out-of-country adoption even though we share the same land mass in general. It's still another country, and there's many circumstances that and many processes that we have to go through.

So one of the things I think the department is trying to do is they're trying to find the best practices and the best people possible, the best team possible to assist the many families that are trying to adopt, whether it's within Canada or out-of-country adoption.

So there's . . . I just wanted to clarify that from my perspective as a minister, we seek advice from the officials. But in trying to improve the opportunities and lessen the trauma of many families trying to adopt, we're trying to make sure they understand the rules, what is expected, the time frames, and to help them as best we can.

It is a frustrating journey — no question about that as you probably heard people express. But it is my desire to help as many adopt as possible, but not to circumvent the process to

ensure there is good protection for the child and of course good support for the family. That's the balance we have to achieve. So I'm going to ask Janice to add a bit to that if she may.

Ms. Krumenacker: — You know, in response to your question around what kind of services does the department provide, we provide home study assessment services. We assist with interaction with other agencies that the adoptive applicants are working with. We certainly . . . there are several legal requirements when working with specific countries, and we assist with a compilation of the requirements of that documentation. And we have ongoing communication with the central authorities that are involved in any particular case.

Saskatchewan was signatory to the Hague Convention in 1997. That is global law, as you likely know, governing inter-country adoption which compels us to comply with requirements of that law. Every jurisdiction in Canada now is signed on to the Hague. When we work with Hague countries across the world, the processes generally go reasonably well. There's always circumstances that are unpredictable, but we certainly appreciate working with the Hague countries.

As a jurisdiction, we work with non-Hague countries just like every other jurisdiction in Canada does. And it is a journey where you take it on a case-by-case basis and work through an understanding of the legal requirements of that particular country and our legal requirements. And we work together in support of the adoptive applicants keeping in mind ultimately that the best interests of the child prevail in every adoption plan.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. You mentioned some of your personal thoughts and also spoke very well about your department and the work and efforts they make. And I think you came close to suggesting that Saskatchewan's the best place in which to live, raise a family, which would say to me that I think — and I think I can say this from my colleagues as well — out of the families that have come and asked for our assistance, these families . . . it's not just because they live in Saskatchewan. It's the fact that they would love to be a parent. They would love to provide for a child.

And you mentioned the signing on to the Hague treaty or whatever. When I observe what's happening in some parts of the world and you look at, if I'm not mistaken, the former Soviet Union, some of the orphanages with the children that are there, just nobody really wanting them, I see what's taking place in the continent of Africa and some of the civil strife. Unfortunately it's the children that are being hurt, and children are displaced.

And you have to ask yourself, when we have so much . . . And while there certainly is a process of ensuring that we are following the laws and the laws of other countries and the guidelines that they have, what are some of the major hindrances that we are facing or as a department you're facing when people come to you? And while there are maybe not a lot of opportunities locally, but if you were to look internationally, what are some of the biggest hindrances that the department runs into in trying to provide and assist a couple if they're more than willing to adopt a person, a young child, from another country?

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Again I'm going to ask Janice to respond to this. One of the things I think, as a minister, I want to point out is that I think an astute minister will certainly defer to his department officials that have had many, many years experience to explain some of the structural problems or some of the problems in general that we have because it would be folly for a minister not to heed the advice and the information from their staff. And me stating that, you know, we see the same thing that you see on TV, Don. And yes, does the minister take a big airplane and bring back 1,000 children so they can have 1,000 more children taken care of? Well I think that certainly is part of the emotional journey many families take and many of us take in leadership positions.

But quite frankly, if you want to do it right . . . We've got to do it right to ensure that in the future maybe if we put the right policies in place, maybe we can — if we work well with the Hague countries — maybe we can make that 3 or 4,000 children, you see. And this is where I think we need to make sure that we couple the emotion and the love and the desire for people to be parents with the good reactive pro system to ensure that as many children are able to be adopted where possible . . . and in the best interests of that child to have them move to Saskatchewan, anywhere else where there is better opportunity for them, again underlying being the best interests of that child.

But as a minister, that emotion is there. The support and the compelling arguments that many potential adoptive parents have, we have to ensure that there are good measures in place to protect of course the child, to protect the parents that are hoping to adopt, and to work through the process to make sure we can streamline it and make it better so more families and more children are offered opportunity where none may exist at the place that they live.

So I'm going to ask Janice to factor in my emotional argument and your emotional point with the process that needs to be undertaken to make sure that we're not just reacting, like getting a plane to pick up 1,000 children from some of these countries, that there is a solid plan in place, and there's good protection for both the child and the parents embarking on this journey.

And it is a frustrating journey. There's no question. As a minister, I'd like to recognize that. And many families are just dying to have the opportunity to become parents, and yet you see on TV many children that should be part of the process.

So I'm going to ask Janice to elaborate a bit more on what I just said.

Ms. Krumenacker: — I certainly acknowledge what you're saying around issues of time with an inter-country adoption plan. In Saskatchewan and all jurisdictions across Canada, we acknowledge that the country who is in charge of the child and has made the child legally eligible for adoption is the driver of the case plan. We respond. We certainly do our required services on this end. We've organized services to assess adoptive applicants. We've compiled a dossier that's sometimes gets to be 2 inches thick with all the requirements that generally the country wants.

And we're largely left in waiting mode when it's sent over to

Ukraine or Ethiopia or Haiti or Brazil or wherever. And that part is really out of our control. It's common, you know, that adoptive applicants across the world will experience some frustration with some of the processes that exist.

I think that we all know that China, you know, the China Center of Adoption Affairs is largely regarded as most likely the most efficient country in the world to work with right now. They tremendously resource their adoption services over there. They have a high level of people that pay attention to detail, and they seem to be motivated to move the adoption plans along.

There are also, you know, issues with citizenship and immigration. They're involved in inter-country adoption plans, and, you know, there is requirements that have to be met there.

And as well I stress that in the end it is the individual best interest of a child that we're obligated to consider under the Hague. So while there are people out there — I certainly understand they would like to bring many children home — we have an obligation to ensure that the child is received into a family here under the context of an optimum plan and not perhaps many brought over at one time. The country wouldn't allow that. Many have specific laws, and we are simply abiding by these requirements.

Mr. Toth: — Well thank you. I appreciate that. But I guess the frustrating part for parents who would love to adopt, and when they see children suffering in other parts of the world . . . and I guess even the Hague agreement that many countries have now signed on to, the part that amazes me in that debate — and I know there's not much we can do about it — is the fact there are areas where there are literally hundreds of orphans without homes, without family, no one really caring for them except in some cases relief organizations that have gone in to help.

And you'd have to wonder why governments would not be willing to give these children an opportunity to be part of a loving and caring family. Is it because they see children as a monetary means? The financial resources, has that become a major sticking point in adoptions? Or is even the United Nations not necessarily speaking out that strongly in regards to supporting countries where there are parents who would be more than willing to adopt, and working with nations that are struggling to deal with these human issues when they have so many children, and yet they don't have the ability or the financial wherewithal to meet the needs of these children.

Like I guess that's part of the question of the hindrances that we run into. Well yes, we need to comply and work with other countries. It's just a struggle to see what's taking place there.

A question I do have in regards to that, what would be the normal cost for a family if they were to actually work through the process and find themselves being able to adopt a child from another part of the world? And secondly, how many adoptions has the province of Saskatchewan been able to oversee in regards to out-of-country adoption?

Ms. Krumenacker: — The costs vary depending on the country and the requirements. I'll give you a range of approximately 20,000 to as high as 30,000. That all depends on various fees attached to various requirements, travel costs.

Sometimes countries want adoptive applicants to make one, two, perhaps three trips over before they actually adopt the child. Adoptive applicants know what they're getting into as far as financial costs, certainly, before they agree to the plan, you know.

With respect to the numbers of inter-country adoption, in '05-06 was approximately 34 inter-country adoptions. The stats for '06-07 aren't entirely finalized yet. The reason for that, statistics on inter-country adoption are a bit difficult to count, believe it or not, because the children obtained their orders of adoption in the country. Now we know when they come back to the province, some have their orders of adoption with their family. Others countries require the orders of adoption to be obtained in the courts of Saskatchewan, and the department monitors the families. So I do not have all the stats from the regional offices here yet. So I'm not able to report on that number today, but I will provide it to you when I get it.

Mr. Toth: — I appreciate that. Of the 20 to \$30,000 cost, is there any assistance for families in overseas adoptions, or is this strictly the total cost at their . . . an expense that they must face?

Ms. Krumenacker: — The cost is entirely on the adoptive applicants. That would be consistent with any inter-country adoption program across Canada.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Minister and to your officials. Let's move on to foster families. And I believe it was last fall, Mr. Minister, or early in the fall, you were talking about a push — and I believe there was an ad campaign — seeking or trying to attract more families to come forward to provide foster care. And in view of that, Mr. Minister, a couple of questions coming from that. Have we had a number of families that have left or moved away from providing foster care? Was that one of the reasons that where your department was putting the push on? And are we finding that there is a greater need for foster families in the province of Saskatchewan at this time?

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Well thank you very much for the question. I'm going to get Andrea again to add a bit more detail as to the numbers. I just want to make an opening statement as a minister.

One of the things that I was quite pleased with when the Premier gave me the opportunity to serve in this portfolio . . . I think it's the greatest portfolio in government. There's no question about it, that it certainly has its challenges. But when you begin to work with issues such as the CBO sector, with the disabled community, with adoption, and certainly now with the foster parents option and the different people involved with that, you can see how it is very, very difficult to measure the success when much of the argument and much of the positions and the strategies and the plans and the budget we put in place is to recognize the human spirit within Saskatchewan.

I have been privy to many, many wonderful stories and many wonderful people and many wonderful examples of what the social fabric of Saskatchewan looks like. And when the Premier appointed me to this portfolio to talk about strengthening the social fabric of Saskatchewan, it really gave us the opportunity to look at many of the sectors that were hurting. And obviously everything from the amount of money that people have on

social assistance to some of the issues you've raised today with the CBO sector, to being very co-operative with many families that are struggling through dealing with people with cognitive disabilities, and foster families — the list just goes on as to some of the tremendous triumphs that people have had throughout Saskatchewan when it comes to this particular portfolio and some of the partnerships that we enjoy, certainly tremendous.

With the foster families, there's no question that we wanted to reach out to them as a minister that recently assumed the portfolio. They're more than willing. They've done a lot of good solid work. And like anything else, we wanted to make sure that they knew that we appreciated their work as the CBO sector did and that we certainly wanted to work with them to achieve greater support and recognition of some of the people that they work for and we work with.

There's no question that the foster home situation . . . On a national basis, there is a pressing need, and Saskatchewan is not immune to that. The fact is nationally that there is a dramatic increase. I point dramatic out with a bit of reservation, but certainly from the perspective of having more and more children that are in care — and I don't know the reasons for all the changes in these numbers, Don, I don't — all that I know is that nationally the number of children in care is going up.

And so obviously as a province and as a government what we want to do is respond. How best can we respond to the amount of children coming in care? And obviously foster homes support . . . and place them in foster homes is one of the options that we value. And we are trying our very darnedest to see what would help us meet the needs better of some of the children coming in care. And some of the examples we're talking about is keeping sibling groups together. You know, the old days of separating the children, not having them together, well, is that the best interests of that child? We hear from numerous stories that having them stay together is pretty important.

We're also working with the First Nations and Métis organizations to try and recruit more Aboriginal families to become foster families. There are a number of people in the Aboriginal community that are excellent parents and could offer a good supportive home for many children that are Native fostering.

We're also strengthening the foster care system by introducing what they call PRIDE, and PRIDE of course, the acronym stands for parent resources for information, development and education. It's really a new model of practice that'll enhance training and supports to foster families. And some of that work is being done, and it's on a continual basis that that work is being done.

So I'm going to get Andrea again to give you the detail as to how many foster families we started with, how many we have lost through things like . . . some of them simply are aging, so they can't continue being foster parents. So we need to find new and more foster parents. And we've had success. But there's no question that there's some compelling arguments and some compelling values of being foster parents, and we've certainly seen Saskatchewan rise to the call for more foster families.

So again I want to point out at the outset that I'm very, very pleased with the work that's being done by the foster families. We try our best to appreciate them more and more. We have a very good working relationship with the Foster Families Association. Certainly as a minister I'm very proud of that. And we need to do more work, and we shall get that work done. But no question, our thanks go to the foster families that are out there doing the things that needed to be done to provide homes for some of the foster children in care. So maybe Andrea will give you the numbers now. Thank you.

Ms. Brittin: — Andrea Brittin. In answer to the question around how many foster families we have recruited, at the end of the fiscal year '06-07 we had recruited 77 additional foster families. You had asked also the question, how many foster families were lost during that time? And so, end of year '06-07, there were 29 foster families that we had lost during that time period.

Mr. Toth: — So how many foster families do we now have in the province of Saskatchewan?

Ms. Brittin: — As at January 2007, that number was 799 foster families.

Mr. Toth: — The minister indicated that there's a growing number of children in need and that are entering or in need of care. And I'm wondering if you can tell me where we are today with the number of children in need of care and what are some of the circumstances that you are finding in your department that you're dealing with as to issues that are placing children in need of care through foster family services.

Ms. Brittin: — Thank you. There are approximately 3,200 children right now, children in care in Saskatchewan, and there's an additional approximately 950 children that are with extended family through persons of sufficient interest orders. And so they're not technically in care but still were in need of protection and were placed with extended family to address their needs. Minister Belanger has indicated that this is a national trend that we're seeing and indeed it is.

All across the jurisdictions you're seeing this increase. There's an increased number of child protection investigations occurring and an increased number of children requiring out-of-home care as a result of those investigations. We're also seeing, for those number of children coming into care, the children have higher needs than we've seen in the past as well. Some of the factors that are leading to this increase in the numbers, there's an increase in violent crimes reported that have been occurring. There's also increase in the prevalence of mental health disorders both in children and in adults. We're seeing higher numbers of family struggling with addictions, alcohol addictions and drug addictions.

And so those are some of the factors that we see leading to higher numbers of children in care. Gang activity is another factor when it comes to some of our youth.

Mr. Toth: — I guess obviously there is quite a wide range of issues that are creating this — can I use the word phenomena? — phenomenon, the fact that we have more children in care and, as the minister indicated, a growing number.

Well I look at 3,200, if all the foster families . . . to put them in the families you have right now, 799, that's four children per family. If the families already have two or three, that actually can get to be a fair burden for some of these foster families. And no doubt, that's getting to be a fairly large expense for the department, not only in caring for the children, but what do you do with family issues like mental health or addictions if a child is removed from a home because of an addictions problem, that child isn't receiving the proper care, or there's mental health issues?

What is the department doing or what are you asked or forced to do to try and stabilize the family home environment, because there's no doubt when a child is taken into care the birth parents, regardless of the struggles they're having, want to have that child back. And yet it's quite obvious there are situations where it's very difficult just to put the child back in that environment without addressing some of the needs of the environment. So what is the department doing to try and address or get a handle on some of the major issues that you brought to our attention?

Ms. Brittin: — Thank you. I think first of all it's important to note that not all of the children, not all of those 3,000 children that are placed in out-of-home care are placed in foster families. So we have a whole range of resources where children could be placed. So they could be placed in therapeutic foster care settings. They could be placed in group homes, CBO group homes throughout the province. We also have children placed with extended family, and so not all children are placed in foster homes.

To address your questions around how we deal with some of these, you know, issues that lead children to be in need of protection, we certainly need to work closely and do work closely with our partners in health. Community Resources does not offer drug addiction treatment or alcohol treatment, and so we work closely with our partners in health to offer those services both to youth and to parents who may be struggling with those issues, and also with those that are providing mental health services in the province, so working closely with those mental health professionals. Oftentimes mental health problems can be addressed quite well through various methods. And you know, some of the protection concerns that were as a result of those mental health problems can be addressed just by addressing those mental health problems — so again working closely with our health partners on those particular factors.

Mr. Toth: — You mentioned, just one case, parents with addictions. When a concern is raised and the department responds and finds that the home they've been called to there's . . . they're dealing with parents with addictions, what process would you or what would be the form you would take in dealing with that home?

Number one, you'd remove the child if you felt the child was facing a difficult, maybe a violent situation in the home. But secondly, when that child is removed from the home to be placed in foster care for a while, do you offer and suggest to those parents that they need to deal with their addictions, and here are some options; here are some programs; and that if you can get your addictions under control, we can work with you to help put your family back together? Or is that dialogue there or

entered into to assist people in helping deal with their addictions?

Ms. Brittin: — Yes thank you. Certainly we do everything we can to assist parents in addressing the issues that have come to our attention. In terms of addictions specifically, I think it's important to note that there's a whole range of risk factors that we consider when we do a child protection investigation. So addictions alone is not necessarily a reason to find a child in need of protection. But if those addictions issues are leading to child neglect or other child abuse or other, you know, such things that would put a child at risk, then we would intervene in that case.

It's important to note that there are people that have addictions problems that never need the assistance of child protection services. So they would be, you know, reaching out to their extended family to care for kids until, you know, perhaps they go through treatment or whatever. So I just wanted to make that point, that addictions alone isn't the only factor that would lead a family to our child protection door.

In answer to your question around, you know, whether we would support families, certainly we would have conversations with families about anything that would lead them to put their child at risk. And so whether it be addictions, whether it be any other factor that's leading their child to be in need of protection, we would certainly have those discussions with them. We would develop clear plans with the families in terms of what steps they would need to take to remedy the problems in order to reduce the risk to their children.

If the children have been taken into care, certainly there's always a plan in place to ensure that the parents can follow through, get the help they need so that we can return kids as quickly as possible. Best interest of the child is always paramount in these situations as well.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you. I understand as well that there are emergency shelters available to provide care for children in need if you don't have enough foster families. And I'm wondering how many children would be provided care for — whether it's, I think you mentioned, CBOs, and maybe I'm using the wrong term, but agencies outside of the 799 foster families — if there's more, a greater need than you've got the ability to place them in foster care or in the care of foster families. How many children would be receiving care at any one time outside of foster families?

Ms. Brittin: — In answer to your question around emergency care, we do have some foster homes that respond to emergency placements. And in Regina we also have Dales House that responds for emergency placements for youth. I don't have the number with me offhand around the number of foster families that are open to emergency-type placements but we do have them available.

I'm sorry; I missed the second part of your question.

Mr. Toth: — I mentioned community-based organizations as well that you may place children with in care for a time if needed.

Ms. Brittin: — The CBO group homes . . .

Mr. Toth: — Yes.

Ms. Brittin: — . . . that we place older youth with, yes.

Mr. Toth: — Okay. How much funding is provided in this budget to the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association this year?

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Okay, it'll just take a couple of minutes to get the answer. We do have the answer to that.

Just to preface before we get the figure, the relationship we've had with the Foster Families Association has been excellent. They have been doing a lot of initiatives on their own, which I applaud, and they certainly have been reaching out to the community, and they've been co-operating with the department. So I think a lot of the co-operation, the goodwill, and certainly some of the responsibility that they have assumed in supporting their foster families throughout the province has just been tremendous, and it speaks volumes of the relationship that we have with them and the success that we've shared.

So I just want to point out at the very outset that I'm very, very — as I mentioned — very happy with the relationship we have with the Foster Families Association and their respect for some of the work that we have to do, their initiative. That has gone a long ways in ensuring that our department continues reaching out to them and support them with different programs. I think some of the work that Deb Davies and her board have done is just a tremendous gesture of goodwill. And it's appreciated by many of the families.

But we do have the information in terms of what we afford them. And I can say to the foster families out there that are doing this kind of work, it is really the human factor we look at because the costs are always part of the equation of course. But we need to thank them time and time again.

Ms. Brittin: — In '07-08 we will be providing \$445,780 to the Foster Families Association.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Minister, and to your officials. Mr. Minister, in dealing with DCRE [Department of Community Resources and Employment] tonight, some of the questions I'm asking here also come from my colleague, who you may or may not be aware lost his sister, and is in Toronto at this time with his family. So in view of where the clock's going, I'm going to have get to moving a bit on some of these. I trust that my colleague will be back to maybe at least get in some of the questions that he would have liked to have asked and may not have given me all the information prior to the closure of the spring session.

But I want to talk a little bit about vulnerable children and in Children's Advocate *Beyond 'at Risk' Children: Systemic Issues Report*, there are a number of issues, and I think this report came out following the issue of surrounding the Oyate Safe House and a number of concerns that were raised at that time. And I'm wondering, Mr. Minister, can you indicate what measures the department is taking in response to the report, of the Children's Advocate report beyond risk?

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Again I'm going to ask my deputy, and there's other officials that may be adding to the mix, that we certainly appreciated the information and the collaboration of many players and many organizations that certainly have had a significant impact on the Oyate Safe House issue. And certainly I think today now we see that, as we've indicated in the past, as a minister that we wanted to fix the problems at Oyate, that we wanted to make sure that the services were comprehensive in nature, to make sure that the services were very effective.

And as a result of some of the investigations into the Oyate — which again as a minister I welcome the scrutiny — there's also talk that the Children's Advocate spoke about this systemic problems with the *Beyond 'at Risk' Children* saying that these children are no longer at risk; they're beyond at risk. So we needed to talk about some of the issues that he's addressed in his supplementary findings as a result of the Oyate investigation.

I can tell you that the department takes the matters very seriously. The child advocate has given us some invaluable advice and has certainly participated in critiquing the department on many fronts. But I would point out that from his perspective, he certainly has his job to do and he has his role to play, and I respect that as a minister. However it's important to note that the advocate certainly has fulfilled his role. But I really want to point out as a minister that the department itself has done a tremendous amount of work.

The responsibility, as I've mentioned at the outset, is tremendous. And while the advocate can give us some good advice, it is really the staff and the officials that have worked over the many years, dedicating their professional lives to making sure that they're able to provide as comprehensive and as humane as possible a system of supports to many families and children that they deal with.

There's probably nothing more traumatic to a child than being apprehended. It's probably very tough on the whole family, and then where does the care go from there? One mustn't forget that in the scheme of all of this, the social workers and the department's professional staff are all actively involved in this team of support. And over the years as I mentioned we see the increase of children in care. It forces the department certainly to get ready for the greater numbers and to certainly anticipate a higher workload.

So I would point out that we certainly value the child's advocate advice on many issues on many fronts, and we don't suspect the child's advocate is going to go away. We certainly want to point that out, that it's important to respect his role which we totally do. But I want to point out, as a minister, that Saskatchewan is well served, well served by the many professionals within the department and the social workers in trying their darnedest to look at the system itself, to think about the child's best interest, and to try and build a better Saskatchewan through working with some of the most traumatized children and some of the most impacted and affected families. And that's a huge calling; that's a huge amount of work.

So again I would point out while we value the Children's Advocate's advice on many fronts, the department clearly is the

department that's held responsible for many of these activities that do occur under its responsibilities, and that one mustn't forget that. And I just wanted to point that out. So with that I'm going to ask Duncan to elaborate a bit on what we have done to respond to the report that the advocate has presented on the systemic changes. Thanks.

Mr. Fisher: — As you know, the advocate made a number of recommendations within his systemic report. Those ranged from government re-establishing its commitment or restating its commitment on the provincial strategy that was announced several years ago for sexually exploited youth, working with the interdepartmental steering committee in the development and delivery of service to sexually exploited youth. He also made some recommendations regarding permanency planning and revisions to The Child and Family Services Act.

We have begun work in reviewing the issues surrounding permanency planning, so we are following up on the recommendation made by the Children's Advocate in that regard. And we have committed to the advocate that we'll be doing a consultation on the Act itself to address not only the specific recommendations regarding the legislation that he made, but any other changes that stakeholders may bring to our attention that would need some consideration to bring the Act up to date and make it as effective as possible.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I quickly glanced through the report. While I didn't get through it in detail, there are a couple things that I noted. I'm just going to quote a couple comments by the child advocate. He makes the comment that:

The Department of Community Resources and the Oyate Board were aware of the concerns and issues at the Oyate Safe House during the period from March 26, 2003 to March 31, 2006.

That seems to be quite a long period of time that there were some major issues surrounding the care that the Oyate Safe House was providing. And the child advocate indicates that:

During the course of interviews, file reviews and through documentation provided to ... [his] investigators, numerous documents described the situation at Oyate as having ongoing and unhealthy personnel concerns, questionable caseworker practices, reports that training was provided but not implemented, and a perceived resistance to offers of assistance.

I think, Mr. Minister, given that time period — and I know we've had a fair bit of debate in regards to the Oyate Safe House — one would wonder, in view of the fact that a lot of this information obviously was available even before the child advocate started his work in addressing the concerns that were being raised, why did it take the department so long to respond to some of these concerns?

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Well one of the things I think is important is ... You're absolutely right; we did have a prolonged debate on the issue. And one of the important points that I wanted to raise is that, when it came to the Oyate issue, that we as a ministry are committed to fixing the problems around Oyate. And I believe we have fixed them. We have

presented a series of proposals. We have presented plans to increase, as I mentioned at the outset of my opening comments, to outreach to more children, and to make sure we had assessment and stabilization, and to make sure that there was this continuum of care put in place to provide as much support to many of the children that may have been exploited on the streets for sexual purposes.

There's no question that when we began this process, the all-party committee indicated that it be proper and probably fair to have First Nations involvement because the vast majority — I think the number I used at the time was 80 per cent — of children involved in this particular activity were of First Nations or Aboriginal ancestry.

So the all-party recommended that we look at having an organization that had cultural sensitivities and thus have connections with the First Nations community. So when the effort began to try and reach out to the First Nations community and the Aboriginal organizations in general to try and help, have them help us in this regard ... is that this problem went on in Saskatchewan for years. It went on during the '70s, the '80s, the '90s. It went on for a long time. We as a government tried to address it. And we used the all-party committee as a process to help us achieve consensus, so it doesn't become a political issue. And that consensus basically said there should be First Nations involvement.

And I fundamentally believe that when it comes to First Nations children that we've got to have First Nations involvement in any exercise we do — in any exercise we do. And I'll point out to many people out there in Saskatchewan that may say well that's an odd position to take given the amount of trouble we've been having with First Nations. Well the bottom line is whenever you try and do something for the betterment of Aboriginal people without their involvement, you end up creating more problems. And I'll give you the example of the residential schools. Was that a glaring success for Saskatchewan or for any part of Canada? Absolutely not. That was not a success story in any way, shape, or form.

So when we talk about a new era of responding to young children being sexually exploited on our street, we reached out to the First Nations, of which your party agreed we should do. And we did. Now in the process we understood and anticipated that the capacity building within the First Nations was not there. They did not have the support. They did not have the trained staff. They didn't have much other than their concern and their care for these children.

So we embarked on the journey. And as I said in the Assembly, many hard lessons have been learned, and perhaps we're reaching too far. Perhaps we're reaching too far. And we had to admit that when it came to the Oyate home.

Nonetheless as a minister and certainly from the provincial government perspective, I probably would have been a pretty popular minister with the media and with many people had I simply said, the relationship is over. But sometimes being a leader doesn't always mean you're going to do the most popular things. Sometimes leadership is also doing some unpopular things in the name of a philosophical position.

And at that time we stuck with the First Nations group under a vastly improved program, under a continuum of care model, and building a relationship and building capacity. And at the end of the day, as I mentioned, did we learn lessons? The obvious answer is yes. We absolutely learned lessons as a result of Oyate.

And what I'm not going to do is rehash all the debates we had in the Assembly. We removed the children from the home. We made fundamental changes to it. We respected the advocate's advice, and dramatic changes and dramatic improvements to the program were undertaken. We've had this argument.

What I'm looking forward to now is where we go from here. And I see a vastly improved program with First Nations involvement and, quite frankly, with probably the proper resources that we should have had in the beginning.

So I have no problem getting into debates. In fact I relish some of the debates we have. But I can point out that from the pragmatic perspective, we have made much progress. And I want to build on that success while learning from the mistakes. And that's where I want to spend my energy. I don't want to rehash old debates, but if you wish to go there, I can go there. I want to talk about where we go from here.

I'll kindly ask my deputy to elaborate on the progress that we have made thus far and to point out that there is a good system in place now.

The Chair: — The committee, some committee people have asked for a break. So we could have a five minute break and return back in five minutes to resume this line of questioning and answering.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

The Chair: — Mr. Fisher, you were going to speak.

Mr. Fisher: — I was just going to provide a few brief comments on the status of the work with Oyate. As you know, both the Provincial Auditor and the Children's Advocate made recommendations regarding the program. The Oyate board has agreed to meet all the recommendations of both the auditor and the Children's Advocate, and those recommendations will be met prior to the program reopening. They are working well along the path to having all of those done. We're hopeful that we can have all the recommendations met and the program begin to reopen in June.

I can report that we have Oyate working in a mentor-consultant relationship with Ranch Ehrlo, and they are providing their expertise on residential services as we try to rebuild the Oyate program into the new model that we've talked about. They have hired an executive director now, and they will be soon beginning the hiring process for the staff which will allow them to work on the final components of meeting all of the recommendations which is to ensure that the staff understand all of the policies that go along with providing a good residential care service. So as I said, progress has been made, and we are hopeful that the program will reopen in its new configuration later this summer.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you and thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, as we look at Oyate and the Children's Advocate's office report, the child advocate did note a number of concerns. And as I indicated earlier, when we look at that period of '03 to '06, he said his office concluded that DCR was aware that Oyate was not in compliance with the service agreement, more importantly knew that children being placed in Oyate were not receiving the services they deserved or to which they were entitled.

And you indicated a moment ago that you've learned from the concerns that were brought forward. I trust, Mr. Minister, that certainly you have. I have no doubt in my mind that your officials have. We're quite concerned about what was taken place, and we're looking at ways of addressing the issues. And there's no doubt that this report brought forward by the child advocate have caused us all to sit back and take even a more in-depth look at how we provide care. You talked about the recommendations of the all-party committee. I happen to be of . . . been on that committee, and I agree and I agree quite strongly with the fact that, in view of the fact we were dealing with a large group of First Nations young people, that every effort should be made to work with the First Nations community in providing a program where they're involved as well.

Mr. Minister, you also mentioned about the residential schools. And while I realize that yes, there were a lot of hurts that have come out of the residential schools, Mr. Minister, I should . . . And I just don't remember the lady's name, but I was at a school opening about four years ago. This lady is an elder in her community, was 85 at the time, and this is the comment she made. And her comment was, it's time we . . . we can always find the wrong or the bad things, but I want you to know that I received my education in a residential school. And this lady is well admired and well thought of in her community.

And while there have been a number of problems and those problems have come forward, and we trust that they've been dealt with; however I think, there's some issues that are still being dealt with that will be ongoing. But to, on one hand, blame one avenue of providing an education . . . And I'm not advocating residential schools. They've . . . Certainly in some cases, people received the education they were looking for, and they moved on and they built their lives.

And as this elderly lady indicated, she did get her education, she moved on, and she's a well-thought-of person in her community — well respected. And she went through the residential school system. So there was some areas where people were helped, but unfortunately there were more hurtful situations in the residential schools.

We see the same thing happen here. Oyate, I think, had a very . . . there was a sound purpose in moving forward and what the child advocate is raising with us and brings, raises a number of concerns and certainly we've had the debate, the debate in the House. And what I see from the child advocate's report, a lot of the concerns that was raised by Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition were just reinforced. And I trust, as you've indicated already, Mr. Minister, that we have truly learned from what's happened in the past, and we've been able to take the recommendations that have come out of this report.

And as has already been indicated, there's a talk of reopening the program in June. I trust in reopening the program now, first of all the question is, is it at the Oyate Safe House or is it another program in another location? And what is being done in reopening the program to ensure that we have the leadership in place that we will not have another Oyate affair to deal with down the road?

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Yes, thanks very much for the points you've raised. And I would point out that my officials will certainly brief you on in more detail as to what the situation is in terms of the improved Oyate. And I'll point out that all of the recommendations of the child advocate and the auditor, as we pointed out, must be met in order for Oyate to reopen.

The department itself — while we certainly appreciate the recommendations and the involvement of the high profile office of the child advocate and the Provincial Auditor — the department itself has a huge role to play. These are independent agencies that are offering advice. But clearly the leadership and the dedication and the staff and the resources to have put the solutions in to satisfy an independent officer is the work that the department has to do. And I'll point out that there is professional people that are working very, very hard to put a good system in place, and they're the ones that have the responsibility.

And quite frankly we indicate out of respect for the independent officers — as the auditor is independent of the Assembly, as is the child's advocate; they report to the Assembly as a whole — that we respect their role. But we know we as a department has to put in a good system to replace a much well-intention program that didn't have the desired outcomes that we wished.

So I will ask my officials to respond to some of the questions you have and to also elaborate a bit on the children in care in terms of this systemic report because that's also a valued piece of the child's advocate work, and work that we have to do as a department.

I would point out that a lot of people don't know this, but I was in a residential school as well, and my experience was good. My two brothers were in there as well. And others did not have a good experience. And we hear the stories as well. We're one of the fortunate people that did not have the bad experience. But there's a lot of hurt out there, and I think it's important for people to know. And I should go on the record that I don't want any compensation. There are other people that were hurt. They should get that compensation, not me. I don't want that compensation.

I think the important thing is people ought to know is that we can't put another society's view on children that come from a different background, different beliefs, different traditions, different customs, different language. It's just not right to do. It's just not proper to do. So that's why I think it's important that we reassert what the all-party committee spoke of and what we need to do to bring some solution to the First Nations children that are out there on the street.

So I think it's important that we work on the solutions. And I concur to not only what we have done to improve Oyate, but to improve accountability and to certainly approve the go-forward

plan from the department's perspective of the dealing with children beyond at risk. Many values, many input, and many opinions are out there. Ultimately it's the department that has to put these solutions in place on behalf of the government. And that's why I take every opportunity as a minister to recognize the men and women that work in this department and the fine work they do and the troublesome issues that they have to deal with. We have to recognize that as well. And that's one of the points, I think, I wanted to stress.

And finally I would say that the relationship we have with many of the Aboriginal people, the Indian Child and Family Services agencies that are out there . . . To me, people ask me what have I learned from Oyate. I tell them that the solutions that we found for Oyate could be multiplied by 18 times — that's the number of agencies we have out there — on how we can improve the relationship for on-reserve First Nations Child and Family Services that people have been asking us for years to do.

And guess what? If we want a good system there, if we want accountability, we want dynamic position put in place, what both the federal government and provincial government have to recognize, the proper resources have to be attached to that argument as we learned through Oyate. So on a positive note, Oyate taught us many hard lessons. And now the truth is out. And where we go from here is a fundamental question.

So again I'm going to ask the officials here to explain a bit more of what we're doing to improve Oyate as we speak and fundamentally how we respond to this systemic report that the auditor attached to his findings on Oyate.

Mr. Fisher: — I'll attempt to respond to your questions regarding what model of service will be in place when Oyate reopens and then secondly how we'll ensure that that service is a quality service.

First off, when Oyate was previously opened, it was providing an assessment stabilization service. That model will not be in place when it reopens. In terms of the continuum of care for children, it ranges all the way from some of the things that we've talked about this evening — from extended family care or alternate care through foster care, therapeutic foster care, the group homes that we've mentioned, assessment and stabilization, private treatment, and also the component that we're going to be introducing into the system with Oyate when it reopens which is a transitional care model.

Once a child comes into assessment and stabilization, or stabilization and assessment, the child — as those names suggest — is stabilized. Whatever problems the child presents when they come into that type of service would be addressed. And then an assessment would be conducted to try to determine what the child's actual needs are and what type of service subsequent to assessment and stabilization they would require. In some cases, they may need further treatment. In some cases, they would need placement in out-of-home care. And in other cases, they may transition back to their family or their community.

And I think that's one of the lessons that we learned, that one of the strengths of the Oyate program was that the board and the staff at Oyate could reach out into the First Nations community

with these young people that were involved in the program and make connections back into the community. So what we're trying to do with the new transitional care model at Oyate is to build on that strength and insert a component into the continuum of care that will add value right along the continuum so that these kids have the best chance that we can provide for them.

In terms of ensuring the quality of the service, there were a number of recommendations coming out of the reports related to Oyate as I mentioned earlier. The board is committed to meeting all of those recommendations and in fact a condition of reopening is that those recommendations are met prior to reopening.

The board has gone through a process which we participated in in terms of board training. There has been governance training. There has been training around a board's financial responsibilities, for example. They're working on some of the specific things that are mentioned in the report in terms of conflict of interest policies, personnel policies, making sure that not only are those policies in place but board members understand the intent of those policies and the impact those policies have on the operation of the facility.

In addition — I think I may have mentioned this earlier as well — we have Oyate partnered with Ranch Ehrlo which is a highly respected child welfare organization in Saskatchewan located here in Regina and Saskatoon. They have provided an on-site mentor to work with the new executive director to ensure that the residential component of this service is developed in a quality manner. And that person will work with Oyate as the program reopens and probably over the first year of operation again to ensure that not only are the correct policies developed and communicated to the staff but are understood and actually acted upon by the staff, so that there is no disconnect between policy and practice at the facility because those were some of the issues that were identified at Oyate when it experienced some of the problems that it did experience.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you. As we've been discussing this tonight, we've talked about the child's advocate report and the minister has also indicated that, yes it's been a steep learning curve. No doubt the department's been well aware of a number of issues. In fact from the report, there were probably a number of concerns and red flags that were already appearing within the department about the program. And I'm not exactly sure what process may have been followed or the attempts to address some of those concerns, but I would take it from our discussion here tonight that certainly the department and the minister have been very cognizant of the recommendations from the child advocate and moving in directions to address those concerns.

The question I do have: in view of the fact that we're working with the First Nations community, Mr. Minister, can you tell me have you felt a sense of willingness on the part of the First Nations leadership to also accept the recommendations from the child advocate and to move forward and to give strong support to build a much better place for young people to address their needs and provide the secure environment whereby they might be able to overcome the addictions and the sexual exploitation that they've faced?

And I ask that question, Mr. Minister, because as we've already discussed this evening, we talked about the importance of that First Nations involvement. And I think in the long run if we're going to succeed in providing that place of security and moving forward, we need the support of and the commitment from the First Nations community and their leadership to recognize, yes, there were failures, but like let's acknowledge the fact that it doesn't . . . Whether it's First Nations or White, it doesn't really matter. We all make mistakes, and we need to learn from those mistakes. But are we prepared to move on?

You've already indicated you and your department recognize that there were some shortfalls, and you're going to move on because of these recommendations. Do we have that support from the First Nations community and their leadership to ensure that when this safe house reopens that indeed it's going to be actually on a fairly positive footing to ensure that it is actually meeting the needs and the purposes that it was intended to meet?

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — That's a very fair question. There is a partnership that we want to build on when it comes to First Nations people. We know that many chiefs have taken a very, very strong position. And they have advocated, as was the case in the past week when we shut down Four D, the talk about the improvements that needed to be made. The chiefs were very, very supportive. And they certainly expressed the, you know, the safety of the children being paramount to them. And so all the chiefs that were engaged, I think we want to point out that we very much appreciated their leadership on this because without their leadership we would certainly have, you know, other issues to deal with.

On the Oyate specific file, Chief Daywalker has also indicated that she would support fulfilling and meeting all of the recommendations that were identified. She said that she would support that.

And I guess the message I would say to people that the First Nations, I think we're on the, I think we're on the verge of developing a very solid relationship with many First Nations organizations. And we in this world have the child advocate. We have the Provincial Auditor. We have the media. We have the court of public opinion — all these factors that we have to incorporate in our lives as a provincial government. Now the First Nations have seen, you know, some of the pitfalls of that particular exercise, but they also recognize that it may be helpful and useful to them to understand the roles that we have to . . . or the scrutiny that we have to be under because it makes their organization and their understanding better and stronger, I think.

I guess the message I would have when you talk about First Nations leaders . . . are they ready? Are they being good partners? The answer is absolutely yes. They're very respectful to what we are asking them to do. They are very patient. How many years have some of these things been going on? And the only message I think I would give to anybody in relation to the First Nations leadership is, we'll work with you if you are serious. That's their message, and I think that's a good message for all levels of governments be it municipal, regional, provincial, and national. If you are serious, that's the bottom line.

Mr. Toth: — Mr. Minister, I'd like to move onto another issue, and it's dealing with, continuing the debate on group homes. Last week you announced that operations had been temporarily suspended at Four Directions Stabilization and Assessment group home, and the reasons you cited for the closure is that more progress is needed around quality of care and other issues. And I'm wondering, Mr. Minister, if you can provide us with more information about this temporary closure.

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — One of the things that I would point out is that on Thursday last, we announced that, as a minister, that we're going to be suspending operations at the Four Directions. And just for the rest of the committee's note, it's the Muskowekwan First Nations, and it's roughly about an hour, hour and a half north of here. I think its closest community is Lestock.

And so we announced that we are temporarily suspending operations at Four Directions. And what Four Directions is, is it is a culturally sensitive facility that works with children that, you know, that have come in to our care and First Nations care.

And the reasons that we have suspended operations is that we have been working closely with this particular board of directors and the First Nations and the staff of Four D for the past several years. We certainly have been patient, and there was some progress being made. But the four areas that were of concern to us — and the reason we shut it down — one was the lack of recreational activity. We think it's really important from our perspective that there be a good, solid recreational and cultural program that many of these children that are placed there could benefit from.

We felt that the educational needs that were supposed to be part of any plan for some of these young children, that it was deficient, that there wasn't enough hours spent in the school program.

We also had some concerns around the physical structure itself. It's a old residential school and often . . . Some of the reports that came back that the fire escapes were cluttered and crowded. We needed to make sure that the doors were on, properly placed, on some of the rooms. And some of the bathrooms needed doors, like this . . . physical plant problems.

And as well as the discipline issues . . . we clearly explained to the media one of the concerns was they'd often phone the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] when there's some discipline problems. And I'm sure in this world some parents do that even though there are young children involved. We just felt that there ought to be a more comprehensive plan as opposed to phoning the RCMP when some of the children act out.

The other issue of course is the being restrained. And we're not talking straightjacket or cuffs. We're talking the staff physically restraining the children. We felt that there may have been a bit too much reliance on restraint, and we wanted to see a better disciplinary plan of action for some of the children as opposed to being sent to their room or physically restrained or phoning in the RCMP.

Those were the four areas of concern that we had. And while there was some progress made, we felt that greater progress had

to be made. And we were getting advice. We were getting advice from a lot of different quarters. And again I would point out that at the end of the day, the department recommended that we shut it down.

And there was discussion on how we can improve the facility. But in discussions on how many children should be left at the facility, at the end of the day we felt that it would be best that there would be no children and that all the deficiencies we have identified in our report be addressed. And until the deficiencies are addressed, we couldn't place any children in there.

Mr. Toth: — A couple of questions. I know my colleague wants to give a couple of questions before we recess this evening. In regards to this, when were these issues first brought to the department's attention, and when did the department begin working with Four Directions to address these issues?

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — The department first brought these issues forward and identified the issues two years ago. And there was a lot of discussion and a lot of meetings went on to begin to address some of the deficiencies. And I think again there was some issues that I think we were a bit patient. We kept on prodding and pushing and asking the board of directors and the staff to make the necessary changes. And there was assurances that changes were made. And again you know, it's all a matter of interpretation, and so I think we began the process.

And the vast majority of some of our earlier concerns was around the physical plant, like the actual facility itself. And that was where the whole process, where we began to have our concerns expressed. And gradually over time as we spent more time there, the educational component, the behavioural management component as well as the recreational plan, those came in as we learned more and more of what was going on.

And so again it seemed to be a long time, but through that time there was a series of meetings and discussions and steps, and my department was actively engaged. They are the first ones . . . the department were the ones that were out in the field on a regular basis, and at the end of the day the department recommended we suspend operations just to make sure they knew we were quite serious about addressing some of the problems that we identified over that period of time.

But initially it was the physical plant, and that was two years ago. And it gradually expanded into some of these more areas. And again progress was being made but not to the satisfaction of the officials and thus the minister. So therefore we made a recommendation to send the right signal.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I probably have a few more questions here, but I want to give my colleague an opportunity. He's got an issue he'd like to get in before we adjourn this evening. And so I'm just going to say at this time I've certainly enjoyed the debate we've had in estimates this evening, and maybe I'm going to hope my colleague doesn't get back and I can get into some of the other issues and address the whole department before we adjourn for the spring. But I want to certainly thank you, Mr. Minister, and your officials, for your presence here tonight and your response to the issues as we've been raising them.

The Chair: — Mr. Elhard.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Mr. Minister, just late last week my office spoke with somebody in your office about a case that had arisen. A gentleman who is a constituent had a stroke, spent some time in the Swift Current Hospital, and was later referred to Medicine Hat where they have a state-of-the-art stroke unit there. This was a reference made by his medical practitioner. This gentleman is in a tough way financially, and he's going to need some assistance. When his family called the Swift Current office, the initial indication was that no assistance would be available to him because he's now an Alberta resident. He is not an Alberta resident; he's a patient in an Alberta hospital. He's very much my constituent.

And I need to know why that kind of assessment could possibly have been made and what we can do about this.

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Thank you very much for that particular issue. I just want to point out that I want to express to the opposition, we often get inquiries on specific cases. And as a minister, as you know, it's very, very clear that ministers cannot make any comment on an individual, specific case. Confidentiality is really something that the minister is bound by law to respect. And so I'm not going to make any specific comments on this particular case.

And what I would like you to do on my behalf, if you can, to explain to your caucus colleagues that when Minister Belanger turns back an inquiry to your office to say, look, I need a release of information form signed by the person that you're trying to represent and advocate for before I can share any information with you. It is not us in any way, shape, or form, trying to delay information back to you. It is that we need to protect the confidentiality of some of the clients that we work with. It is very, very important that we do that.

And I have instructed my staff — it has been the practice for years — is that we do not share any private, confidential information on any case unless the proper forms are signed by the person you're advocating for. It is by law we have to do that, and it is only right. So when people have issues that they express to the minister or they confide in a social worker that is representing the minister, that we keep their issues and their matters and their circumstances confidential. That is very important.

So I'm not going to make any specific case in relation to this particular gentleman. I'll ask Doug here, sorry not Doug, Gord, to make sure that he gives you a general response in a situation where a patient is transferred out-of-province, what could happen in that instance. But on a private basis, we could perhaps get Mr. Tweed's card after this, and with the proper forms we'll get signed, we'll get the information back to you on this specific case. But in general policy and general theory, we can share that information. And the reason why I'm sharing this confidentiality issue with you is so you understand why we don't get specific in some of our responses here this evening. So Gord, please . . .

Mr. Tweed: — Gord Tweed from the income assistance division. Thank you for the question. As the minister suggests, the process for application for social assistance and the inquiry

that was made to the Swift Current office, any application for benefits, actually, in the province should be initiated with our contact centre here in Regina. The response that an individual receives, however, should be consistent either from the point of contact centre or a local office. So the information should be common and should be well explained at the point.

With respect to the individual from Swift Current or from the Swift Current area who had moved temporarily into a hospital circumstance in Medicine Hat, there are provisions under our program in some circumstances to provide financial relief depending on the circumstances of the individual. Without having a little more colour around what those circumstances might have been in this particular matter, it's difficult to respond.

So as the minister suggested, if you're open to this, I'm certainly prepared to take the information this evening and provide a response to you.

Mr. Elhard: — I don't want to get into the specifics of the case, obviously, for the same reasons the minister indicated. It just seemed bizarre to me that an individual, who was in the hospital and was transferred on medical grounds to another facility out-of-province, could be deemed an Alberta resident on inquiry about assistance. That just seems completely out of the scope of reality and expectation.

And there are other difficulties. I'm advocating for this individual because he has no one else to advocate for him. And a stroke patient isn't likely to sign a consent form, and so I think there are unique circumstances about this particular case that I felt I had to raise here tonight. And that's as far as I want to go with it. I think it's important though that we get answers to these kinds of issues when they arise.

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Again I'll defer to the official to respond. And obviously there's a sensitivity issue, like in terms of not being aware of the condition of the person you're advocating for, as to how extreme his stroke was. It may have been insensitive of me to say he needed to sign forms. I don't know the condition of the person you're trying to respond. So I apologize if there's a misinterpretation.

Obviously there are some circumstances that may prevent an individual from signing the proper consent forms; maybe the family could do this — I'm not sure of the circumstance. Mr. Tweed can obviously elaborate on that.

But just to point out, one of the things that I learned quickly as a Minister of Community Resources is that there is . . . We have a framework and — as much as the department likes to indicate to me — the role of Social Services is to prevent destitution so that there's nobody going hungry in Saskatchewan. Well my view of Social Services is radically different in terms of the basic prevention of destitution as a place of last resort to get some support.

But in the event the family is struggling, be it for a variety of reasons, shouldn't we be there to help them on many fronts? That's you know . . . and I think the department certainly has avenues that they could employ and become very flexible.

And it came to a head when the auditor pointed out some of the flexibility that the department has had over the years. Well the Ombudsman said, well in terms of flexibility, the Department of Community Resources has to have that flexibility to be able to respond to people's needs as quickly and as compassionately as possible. Well that's absolutely correct. You had to be accountable, but you have to be nimble as well and you have to respond.

So the department itself — even though they have their, kind of, bottom line to avoid destitution — I think, you've seen that there's a lot of different avenues of support that's from general belief that they're trying to help people, and they do all they can. And they do this through a myriad of offices and programs and staff. And so when you talk about somebody being deemed a Alberta resident, I wouldn't mind saying, who done that? You know, in terms of . . . and the logic behind why that was done. But again we can't get into specifics. But we want to avoid the impression that there's excuses to prevent or to deny benefits to people in their most vulnerable state. That's not what we're trying to do. There's ways and means that we can assist. There will be ways and means we can assist. So I think that's important to point that out.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. We'll pursue this discussion after the close of the session here tonight, and thank you for your assurance in that regard. On behalf of my colleague who spent most of the time tonight quizzing the minister and his officials, and on behalf of the official opposition members and the rest of the committee as well, I'd like to thank everybody here that attended. We appreciate your patience and your willingness to share the information with us, and we do look forward to another opportunity in the next few weeks to continue this discussion. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Thank you very much for your questions.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Minister, and his officials. And we now need a motion to adjourn. Ms. Crofford, thank you. All in favour? We are now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 21:39.]