



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Hansard Verbatim Report

No. 21 – April 6, 2009



Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

Twenty-sixth Legislature

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Mr. Glen Hart, Chair
Last Mountain-Touchwood

Ms. Judy Junor, Deputy Chair
Saskatoon Eastview

Mr. Denis Allchurch
Rosthern-Shellbrook

Mr. Cam Broten
Saskatoon Massey Place

Ms. Doreen Eagles
Estevan

Mr. Serge LeClerc
Saskatoon Northwest

Mr. Greg Ottenbreit
Yorkton

[The committee met at 15:08.]

The Chair: — Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the Monday sitting of the Human Services Standing Committee. We have a busy agenda once again today. This afternoon we will be considering estimates for the Ministry of Corrections, Public Safety and Policing. This evening at 7 o'clock, we will consider the estimates for the Ministry of Social Services. And then at 9 o'clock we will break, and we will then consider the estimates for the Ministry of Education.

Before I call on the Minister for Corrections, Public Safety and Policing, I'd just make one announcement. We have a substitution today. We have Ms. Wilson substituting for Ms. Eagles. Also I might just make a couple of comments before I call on the minister, just to explain for those people who are perhaps tuning in for the first time, just to explain what it is we are doing here. We are examining the spending estimates for the various ministries that the House has asked us to examine. The minister and his officials appear before the committee as witnesses. Committee members will question the minister and his officials on various aspects of the spending estimates within the ministry. And at a future meeting, we will be voting on the spending estimates.

**General Revenue Fund
Corrections, Public Safety and Policing
Vote 73**

Subvote (CP01)

The Chair: — So with those preliminary remarks, I will call on Minister Hickie at this time to introduce his officials, and if he has an opening statement that is not too overly lengthy. We do allow the minister some latitude, but we would like to preserve as much time for questions and so on as possible. So, Minister Hickie, would you please introduce your officials and make your opening statement if you have one.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Great. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have a short statement so I'll get to that as quickly as I can. And I'm pleased to be here today of course to talk about our estimates for Corrections, Public Safety and Policing for our 2009-2010 financial plan, and to answer your questions as we move forward.

With me today is my deputy minister, Al Hilton, to my left. To my right is Mae Boa, acting assistant deputy minister, corporate services. Tammy Kirkland, executive director, adult corrections, is in the back along with Bob Kary, executive director, young offender programs; Murray Sawatsky, executive director of policing services; Tom Young, executive director, protection and emergency services; Brian Krasiun, executive director, licensing and inspections; and Marlys Tafelmeyer, executive director of human resource services.

So just to go on now, my focus today will be mostly on the funding out of the 2009-10 provincial budget that's been allocated to Corrections. This priority placed on Corrections is done out of necessity to respond to the recommendations from the external investigation team report into the August escape from the Regina Provincial Correctional Centre, and to remedy

long-standing infrastructure and systemic issues that threaten the safety and security of adult corrections facilities.

Before I speak to that however, I want to spend a few minutes on pointing out where our vulnerabilities in our role in public safety exist, and what we are intending to do about them.

We've been aware for some time of an increasingly widening gap between the needs of communities to provide emergency response and the province's ability to support them. It was recognized that concerns being voiced about Saskatchewan's emergency and protective services required a coordinated approach to all aspects of public safety in which government is involved.

These concerns prompted the establishment of the public safety review committee in late 2008. It was charged with the task of developing a cohesive and sustainable provincial public safety strategy. The committee continues its work and it's anticipated that will be reporting to us in the next year on a number of initiatives coming out of the review's recommendations.

I'd also like to briefly mention the senior citizen safety initiative. Although this plan to provide low-income senior citizens with free home security devices and home safety audits did not receive budget funding, research into how the program should be structured continues and it remains part of my ministry's mandate.

I'd now like to move to a brief explanation of the programs and initiatives that received funding under the 2009-10 provincial budget. The budget items for my ministry are part of this government's stronger, safer communities agenda which underscores an overarching commitment to the safety of Saskatchewan citizens. The ministry will work toward fulfilling the commitment with an additional 32.1 million for CPSP [Corrections, Public Safety and Policing] programs and services, 43.6 million for capital projects, and 62 additional FTEs [full-time equivalent] in this fiscal year.

Let me describe where some of that funding will be going in more detail — first and briefly, to support Saskatchewan's community-based organizations. CBO funding, CPSP will provide an additional \$233,000 to community-based organizations who deliver ministry programs and services in the community. This is an increase of 3 per cent from last year's budget.

Now we'll turn to policing. This budget year will see significant expenditures made on supporting the work of municipal police and the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police], particularly as it relates to this government's commitment to address violent crime and crimes perpetrated by organized crime and gang members.

One of my mandates as Minister of Corrections, Public Safety and Policing is to deliver on our government's commitment to add 120 new police officers over the next four years. I'm please to advise that we're halfway to fulfilling that promise with funding for 30 new police officers announced last year and 1.6 million in funding for 30 new police officer positions in this fiscal year.

Here's how this year's allocation breaks down: four new police officers in each of Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert for a total of 12; two new police officers will be hired under Yorkton city municipal police agreement with the RCMP. The remaining 16 positions will be allocated to the RCMP.

The RCMP will also receive additional new funding from the province to assist them in their role in law enforcement here in Saskatchewan. 3.8 million will be provided to the RCMP to support its national backup policy. This policy is intended to ensure RCMP members working in remote locations have an accessible member as backup when required.

2.1 million has been allocated to increased RCMP salary and operating costs. And 2 million has been allocated for RCMP capital requirements, including small and maintenance projects and upgrades to equipment and telecommunications for local detachments. Municipal police services will also see increased funding provided to them with an additional 910,000 in grants for municipalities to provide those policing services.

[15:15]

An additional measure to secure this government's commitment to reduce the influence of organized crime and gang activity in our communities will see 481,000 for Saskatchewan's participation in the Western Canadian gang member database. This funding will provide additional RCMP resources to support and enhance timely collection, analysis, and distribution of intelligence related to organized crime and gang activity across Western Canada.

An amount of 500,000 is ready to be directed towards activities related to the passage of Saskatchewan's proposed witness protection legislation. When enacted, this legislation will provide provincial resources to protect witnesses who may face retribution because they are testifying against an individual involved in organized crime. Funding will enable the province to provide short-term witness protection, their associates, and their family members until the threat no longer exists. Protection under this legislation would include escorts or short stays in a safe place. These are the most common circumstances that we see and ones that are not now covered in federal legislation which deals with more extreme protective measures.

I'm also pleased to advise that the work of the safer communities and neighbourhoods or SCAN program will be enhanced as a result of new funding — 600,000 and seven new FTEs. Out of that allocation, we will have new investigator positions that will be assigned to expand SCAN's efforts in securing evictions from residences where it has been proven that criminal activity is taking place.

An investigator position whose duties will be shared with the Ministry of Justice will also be assigned to activities related to the proposed seizure of criminal property Act. Under this legislative proposal, the Crown can apply directly for forfeiture of property that's either the proceeds of unlawful activity or that is being actively used for an unlawful activity. Because the work of this investigator is a natural fit with SCAN, it becomes part of that program's staff complement.

Public safety telecommunications network — next I'd like to

speaking to the involvement of my ministry in development and implementation of a consolidated provincial public safety telecommunications network. As you know, CPSP officials are partnering with SaskPower and the RCMP to enhance the current radio system so that public safety users can be consolidated on to a single telecommunications network. SaskTel has told us they cannot guarantee the viability of the FleetNet system beyond 2010, and so we are targeting December 2010 for public safety users to migrate on to the new consolidated network.

In this, the third year of the project, funding in the amount of \$22.4 million has been allocated for construction of the network, with 2.3 million budgeted for fiscal year 2010-11. As part of this important initiative, 1.8 million has been committed for the first year of a two-year program to purchase radios for emergency response agencies. CPSP will receive an additional \$310,000 in year 1 of a two-year program to acquire radios so that ministry emergency responders and facility staff in adult and youth facilities can access the new system when the time comes.

Corrections, as I mentioned at the outset, has been a significant focus for the ministry this fiscal year, and that's being reflected in the types of funding commitments being made and the amounts allocated to support them.

I should point out that much of what you're seeing here today represents funding that speaks to the response by the government to the external investigation team's recommendations in their report on the August escape from Regina Provincial Correctional Centre. The investigation team's report and recommendations gave us the opportunity to take a look, a good close look at the state of adult corrections in Saskatchewan and also gave us the opportunity to advance a detailed plan of action to make the system safer.

The team's report spoke time and again to issues affecting remanded inmates — lack of appropriate programming, difficulty segregating the most violent remand offenders from the rest of the inmate population, overcrowding in general.

To work toward resolving the situation that has been so troubling for so long, the province has committed \$87 million over four years — 8.7 million for this fiscal year — to construct a new facility located in Saskatoon dedicated to housing remanded offenders. Of particular importance is that fact that this remand centre's cell space will be built with security measures specific to remanded offenders accused of violent crimes. I shall also point out that this is the first addition to increase cell space in adult male corrections in 20 years.

Second action being undertaken this fiscal year is a \$9.4 million allocation from the provincial budget is for upgrading various security systems in adult facilities. These upgrades include reinforcing exterior walls, installing intercom systems and surveillance cameras, introducing metal and drug scanners, and setting up telephone monitoring equipment. All these measures in one way or another will contribute to the safety of our adult facilities while reducing opportunities for inmates to engage in illegal or dangerous activities.

The external investigation team also observed that safety in

facilities is undermined because of the lack of management presence after hours and on weekends. I'm pleased that this budget will provide funding of 4.9 million and 18 FTEs for increased managerial and operational capacity in facilities so that necessary management oversight is available 24-7.

Two recommendations out of the external investigation team's report spoke to the need for either enhancing or replacing the current corrections management information system. This is for good reason. Not only is the system old and outdated, it is also currently not the only way operational information inside facilities is recorded. To that end, planning for a system that integrates corrections information with information collected by the Ministry of Justice receives 400,000 out of the provincial budget this year.

Other items out of corrections are 3.3 million and an increase of 20 FTEs to cover off projected increase in inmate counts. As well, another 750,000 will upgrade the young offenders automated case management information system, known as SYOCAMS [Saskatchewan young offender case administration and management system]. And finally in corrections, 724,000 has been allocated for year 2 of the project to implement a shift scheduling system for facilities, with another 119,000 for system operating costs.

What I've just described is a parcel of funding that for the most part is connected to the comprehensive action plan detailed in the government's response to the external investigation team's recommendations. I am confident that successfully achieving these actions will accomplish the necessary end of a safer correctional system for the people of Saskatchewan.

Those are the highlights from CPSP's 2009-2010 financial plan. And now I'll thank you for that time, and I'll be pleased to answer any questions.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. Before I call for questions, I would just inform the committee that we have an additional substitution. Mr. Yates is substituting for Ms. Junor. So with that I recognize Mr. Yates.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. My first questions have to do with central management and services in (CP01). We see an increase of about \$11 million in accommodation services. Could you update us on what that would be for?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Okay. We'll start with the capital, \$8 million for safety and security, and infrastructure upgrades — capital upgrades for adult and youth custody facilities; 1.404 million for security equipment for adult and youth custody facilities; 750,000 financial interface of SYOCAMS youth case management program; 124,000 for staff work for scheduling system; incremental funding for year 2 final for a total base of 724,000; 400,000 for the criminal justice information management system, planning for replacement of the courts and corrections legacy system. This is a joint effort with Justice. Three hundred and ten thousand for CPSP replacement radios for provincial public safety telecommunications network project in year 1. Okay, that's it.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. We also see

an increase of a virtually doubling of the central services budget in the central management and services. Could you outline for us what that would entail?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Sure. For the operating part of this, we see 122,000 for salary increases for in-scope and out-of-scope per Finance guidelines; 121,000 for general inflationary and miscellaneous operating costs; 119,000 for operating costs for staff workforce scheduling system; 1.886 million funding for the Information Technology Office partnership; 1.236 million for lease accommodation costs.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much, Mr. Minister. So among these particular costs are increases for standard management increases in the department, executive of the department. Could you outline for us what that is this year, what percentage it is, the increases?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — If it's for salary increases you're talking about, we're following the Finance guidelines, what they've established.

Mr. Yates: — 4.5 per cent then?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Whatever the standard established by them is, yes.

Mr. Yates: — Okay. Thank you very much. Could you give us any more detail? You talked about \$8 million for security upgrades. Could you give us any greater detail as to what that entails?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — I'll just start off with a preliminary discussion on that, is that we have a list of needs that the union's identified, that everyone here is very much aware. I spoke about that. And moving forward, we'll be using some of that — or most of that, if not all — of that material along with consulting within our adult corrections, youth correctional facilities to give us a comprehensive list.

The ballpark figure for 8 million should be . . . [inaudible] . . . We have it broken down here. If I can have a little bit of time and latitude, I can go this way.

Projects identified for young offenders facilities include additional security fencing, construction of four secure wet cells, a two-room wet cell conversion, and non-contact visiting at Kilburn Hall youth centre. Also installation of backup generators was identified at the Prince Albert Youth Residence, Yarrow Youth Farm and Echo Valley Youth Centre.

The Regina Provincial Correctional Centre upgrading requirements include structural reinforcement of exterior walls, intercom, fire alarm system, security lighting, additional institutional steel inmate furniture, upgraded electrical panels, toilet, sink, and lock replacements.

Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre upgrade requirements include facility fencing and cameras, control room upgrades, video court enhancement, non-contact visiting, sally port doors, lock, and cell door replacement.

Pine Grove Provincial Correctional Centre upgrade

requirements include a secure loading dock for deliveries, additional fencing, an electrically operated delivery access gate, lighting, as well as non-contact visiting.

The Prince Albert Provincial Correctional Centre upgrade requirements include renovations to the kitchen such as installation of a secure ceiling, addition of holding cells in the admission area, secure lighting, intercom lock, and cell door replacement in non-contact visiting.

The 1.4 million . . . Later on, if you want to know about that now?

Mr. Yates: — Sure.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Is for new security equipment, so it's distributed between adult and young offender facilities with 382,000 for young offenders facilities and 1.022 million for adult correctional facilities.

Security equipment for acquisition includes walk-through metal detector scanners, body orifice scanner, security scanners, B.O.S.S. [body orifice security scanner] chairs, ion scanners for drug detection, telephone monitor equipment, video visiting, and additional surveillance monitoring and security cameras and recording equipment.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much, Mr. Minister. With that I'd like to move on now to (CP06), public safety. Could we get an update as to where we are in regards to provincial disaster assistance program benefits being paid out, how many claims we have, how many are current, and how many are . . .

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Sure I think what I'll do, if I can — that's a great question — I'll let my executive director of protection and emergency services, Tom Young, answer that because it's such a detailed intricate number — where we've been, where we're going.

Mr. Young: — Okay. The provincial disaster assistance program is broken down when we provide assistance to people that have incurred some damage through a natural disaster. It's broken down into municipalities and into private claims that could include individuals, businesses, agriculture, etc. So perhaps I'll start off with the municipalities.

In 2005 there were 91 municipalities that were designated eligible under the disaster assistance program. In 2006 there were 63 municipalities; and in 2007 there were 117 municipalities; 2008 there were 16 municipalities.

As of February 28, for the 2005 disasters, we made 53 payments to municipalities. In 2006 we made 98 payments. 2007 we made 131 payments for two municipalities for disaster assistance.

As of end of February this year, we paid out \$20.1 million to municipalities for events between 2005-2008, and that total number includes approximately 282 payments.

[15:30]

In total, under the disaster assistance program, we received

approximately 5,238 claims. Estimated total damage over the period of 2005-2008 is about \$54 million. In terms of the total payments, we made 3,260 payments and we process about, anywhere between about 110 to as high as maybe about 150 payments a month. And those payments can range anywhere between 750,000 to a little over 1 million.

In February this year, just as an example, we processed 139 payments for a value of about \$1.3 million.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. My next question has to do, how many outstanding claims are there from municipalities, and how many outstanding unpaid claims are there still from individuals?

Mr. Young: — I can give you percentages. Will that work? Or do you want . . .

Mr. Yates: — Sure, that's fine.

Mr. Young: — Okay, 2005-06, we've completed about a little over 99 per cent of the claims. There's just about two or three claims left from that year. 2006-2007, we're about 95 per cent completed. And in 2007-2008, we completed about 54 per cent.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. Does that include both the municipalities and the individual?

Mr. Young: — Yes.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you. For those claims, particularly those that are back '05-06 and '06-07, is there any particular reason why that 5 per cent in '06-07 or the 1 per cent in '05-06 are outstanding?

Mr. Young: — The reasons for that could be several in nature actually. First of all, let me say that there's only about, I believe there's three or four claims in that '05-06 bunch, and there's about another three or four claims in the '06-07. I don't have the exact data or the information on why those claims are outstanding. But typically what occurs is sometimes people may move and we're trying to track down addresses and things like that. Other situations, damage may not occur and actually be visible for sometime after the event, in which case we end up with looking at a claim a second time through or third time through when additional damage is . . . we become aware of that damage.

There may be several other reasons as well, maybe lack of information on a particular claim from an individual that we're seeking additional information on. It could be where they couldn't get a contractor out on-site, and there's a problem with getting that particular kind of work done. So we do offer extensions to some of those. And it's not unusual to have that. A very small number of claims continue on for a few years after.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. Could you give as an update where we are in regards to claims in the Fishing Lake area?

Mr. Young: — The overall estimated damage in claims in the Fishing Lake area, I believe, is about \$16 million to

communities and property owners. Now that includes several millions of dollars that may not be eligible under our program, so it's not the total amount that we would see under our particular program.

In terms of the payments to municipalities, we've paid approximately 8.9 . . . We paid out . . . I'm just looking for the number here. The amount that PDAP [provincial disaster assistance program], the damage that we expect for that particular program could be as high as \$7 million. And that may still fluctuate because we're still looking at that in terms of what is eligible and what isn't. And we paid out currently approximately 1.6 million from those claims in the five designated communities. So that's all for the 2007 flood there.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. When do you anticipate finalization of the claims in the Fishing Lakes area?

Mr. Young: — We're working through a process now where we're still looking at getting some information back from some of the municipalities there. It's hard to estimate exactly when we would see an end to those claims, but we're hoping to wrap up most of them over the course of this year, depending on again, as I mentioned earlier, that some of these claims and some of the damage that does occur may not show up for a year or two or three afterwards. So it'll be difficult to sort of pin it down to a specific date.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. What is the status of the long-term solution to the issue of flooding in the Fishing Lakes, and could you give us an update on what we're doing and what the communities' response is.

Mr. Young: — Yes. We've been working very closely with the communities out there, and we put in process whereby municipalities would look at long-term flood protection. And four of the five municipalities, I'm including Fishing Lake and Waldsea Lake, have pretty well finished and completed their flood-protection initiatives. For the most part, those initiatives call for raising of properties and land to a level that would add significantly more flood protection to the properties. And that would involve moving some of the structures off the lots for a time and then raising the properties up to a level that is acceptable by the residents there and the decision makers out there.

We provided a number of technical and professional services to them in assisting them to make the kinds of decisions that are needed out there. So at this point in time, four of the five communities or areas have basically completed their flood protection plans. We know that approximately 103 of the 308 properties in the areas that have indicated they wanted to raise their properties have already done so and have received some funding for that. We know that the fifth community out there, we're actively working with them and their consultants in finishing a flood-protection initiative for that fifth community. That was the community of the resort village of Chorney Beach.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. Could you outline for us what the province's participation was in the raising of those land levels or locks, and what funding the province provided to those landowners?

Mr. Young: — Our role in it was basically to guide them through a process of completing their flood protection plans. The municipalities were given the option of deciding and determining what they felt was the best strategy to put together so that they would be protected in the future.

And our role was to provide them with advice and to encourage them to put into their plans the right kinds of measures that would include both physical kinds of improvements, such as raising their properties and things like that, to also building and putting together a emergency plan. And those have been incorporated into the situation at Fishing Lake, where all of the municipalities have put something together in terms of an emergency plan.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. I take it from that answer that there was no provincial funding assistance provided to them?

Mr. Young: — No. Pardon me, there was. The way we used the funding was that we looked at providing them with \$4.2 million initially for implementing their flood protection plans. Another \$4.7 million has also been allocated for a total of \$8.9 million. And they provide us with a schedule of the kind of work that is involved in that to make up that level of funding, and we advise them that if there are any issues with that — there haven't been — and so we've provided that level of funding for them. They disperse that funding locally as they determine best fits their plan.

So the municipality, if there's, for example, an individual lot owner that wanted to raise his property, they would determine what level of funding would be provided to that property owner for that kind of work.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. Are we in any way, or is the province, ensuring that the levels that we're raising the properties to are sufficient to avoid further reoccurrences of the same problem?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Yes, I can touch that quickly. We've moved forward in consultation, working with Saskatchewan Watershed Authority of course, to give us the best projected height as they did in the past, moving forward to a larger year. I think this is a 100-year average worst- case scenario. So that's where they set the limits from now, so that's where the standard is. So when they're going to raise their lots, they have to have that standard met before the government would in fact release funding to them to offset the costs.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. I think it's good to have that extra accountability.

Now for a considerable period of time, the province has been looking for the federal government to share, cost-share preventative disaster work and disaster prevention work. It's been an issue at ministers' meetings for a number of years. Could you give us an update where that particular issue is.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Yes, in fact just a week ago, maybe a week and a half ago, we received funding from . . . or word that the federal government will provide \$100 million as part of the DFAA [disaster financial assistance arrangements], disaster

financial assistance Act, to offset our costs in the applications put forward by the government. For the entire province, there's 100 municipalities that will be covered within that. So unless there's anything else you want to add, Tom, on that one?

Mr. Young: — I could just add that that is primarily to offset our expenditures and costs as it related to the disasters that we've just been speaking of. The mitigation piece that I think you were asking about as well, we've made some inroads in that. The federal government has changed some of the regulations under the disaster financial assistance arrangement, whereby if a municipality incurs some damage to some of its infrastructure, it can apply for some assistance for up to 15 per cent to improve the situation, whereas before it was just up to the pre-disaster state. So as an example, if a road or a culvert was needed, they could replace that to the existing state that it was at prior to the disaster.

Now what the federal government has put together, as a part of a mitigation initiative, is to allow that 15 per cent improvement on that. So that could raise the level of the road or improve the diameter of the culvert to a degree where it would correct some of the problems and issues so that there wouldn't be as great a risk of a reoccurring nature.

There is also the Building Canada fund that the federal government had indicated could be used for mitigation purposes as well. So they've come out with the two.

[15:45]

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. But they haven't gone as far as to allow for costs such as a community having to put a dike around their community to prevent flooding, the types of things that we've seen communities have to do that in fact, because it was preventative in nature, was not fundable in the past from the federal government. Have they moved in that direction at all?

Mr. Young: — No, they haven't come quite that far yet. And we are still working with them nationally on this particular area. But it wouldn't allow a community, as an example if they were building a road and that road could be used for the purposes of a dike in essence, they could, if you improve the level of that road by the 15 per cent that I spoke about earlier, than that would be something that would fit into the kind of thing that you were talking about. But it has some limited applications there. So we are talking with them further, and we'll continue to talk with them about further changes and improvements to mitigation strategy.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. I do appreciate those conversations continuing on. As you're well aware, that was a significant issue to a number of communities during flooding over the last number of years. Many of them don't have the resources to deal with the preventative measures they would need to take in order to prevent some of the flooding, which in the end would potentially save a great deal of money being paid out on the back end.

Thank you very much. If we make progress on that issue, I hope the minister will update us at further meetings.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Absolutely, yes. You know, it's a concern of this government as it was with the last, and I'll give credit where it's due. I mean, the process at the federal-provincial-territorial meetings are ongoing to move forward with that issue; colleagues across Canada have the same concerns. We await the next meeting of that level of government interaction. Intergovernmental Affairs will assist us with that as well.

The work that's done by the ministry people here has been ongoing, and they're doing fine work with consultation, working with the federal people. And right now we're going to have to see what happens, but we'll definitely come out with any kind of new news we can.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. I'd like to at this time move on to protection and emergency services. I would like to start with asking about a proposal that the Saskatchewan Professional Fire Fighters Association brought forward this year to all of us in the legislature regarding additional funding for fire services staffing for safety, as they indicated at the time.

This is modelled after an initiative in Manitoba, a very recent initiative in Manitoba that saw the provincial government provide funding, much as we have in Saskatchewan over a number of years now for additional policing in communities. And the Professional Fire Fighters Association has put forward a proposal to the government to look at this type of model in the province of Saskatchewan. Could you tell me where this issue is in consideration within the department or within the ministry?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Absolutely, yes. The presentation that I received, as you did and our colleagues did last year, was something that has been an issue at their table for a while, speaking of not just the fire chiefs, but also the Professional Fire Fighters Association in Saskatchewan. When I met with them, I said that their initiative would not fall on deaf ears, and moving forward their plan to fund firefighters on trucks, on apparatus, is one aspect. I asked them to return back to their cities and to their association groups and to talk as a larger picture about how can we utilize this as an initiative to ensure public safety.

And with that in mind, we had not received any requests from city mayors or city managers to increase funding for firefighters when in opposition. I'm not sure when your party was in government if you received those from mayors, but the ministry informed me that that was one of the first times they'd actually heard about that. There's been a lot of asked-for money out of the provincial, out of the fire insurance premiums to help fund training.

So recently what I've asked them to consider is to look at the concept of, as we do with police officers, we fund specialized positions for the most part, and then we backfill of course with the new recruits. In this case for firefighters, there's advantageous application to maybe training. We could try to look at incorporating with the volunteer firefighters as well. And we could designate those, you know, moving forward as a complement.

However this budget this year received no funding for that. And in moving forward, it would be an ongoing consideration, but at

this time we have still received no response from the firefighters or the fire chiefs' association or the cities with more of a concrete plan on how they want to address this. As a ministry though and as a government, we would rather be able to do with that if we did allocate resources, we'd want to see a comprehensive plan as what they do with policing to tackle specific needs.

And we do know that our volunteer firefighters require training. And if we could look at specialized positions in the future of training officers that could be utilized within our volunteer firefighting services as well to augment those services — not to cross the line; we're not going to make every department volunteer by any means; I'm not making that statement at all — but we think there's resources that could be applied to help our volunteer firefighters in the long term as well. It's a work-in-progress. The fire commissioner's office has that as an ongoing agenda item moving forward. So we'll take it year by year and see if we come to a conclusion with their proposal.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. My understanding of the issue of staffing for safety involves largely four communities in the area of paid professional firefighters — the communities of Weyburn, North Battleford, Swift Current, and Yorkton — so it wouldn't be a significant cost.

My understanding is the cities of Regina and Saskatoon have adequate staffing to ensure for safety of firefighters and for the safety of firefighters entering a burning building to rescue, to provide rescue services — the two-in/two-out model — that's been the standard utilization of fire services across North America.

Now if those cities were to come forward with a request, would you be prepared to put it forward in next year's budget?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — To move into that area of working with municipalities and cities that would be requesting those services would fall under the public safety review committee as a measure to discuss that and to fully analyze the request and to bring forth the analysis to government and the ministry.

I won't make any commitment to any department today because what I've heard from different agencies is a little different. So the public safety review committee, who has membership from agencies that are involved in emergency services and protection, we utilize that committee as a means to vet the concerns, first moving forward and to put an action plan forward.

We also have to consider the fact that this may take a couple of years. I recall in my policing experience, it took a number of years to get the final ideology, philosophy behind how to fund police officers in this province. Different ideas came forward, and it took a working group of chiefs, the Saskatchewan Federation of Police Officers, mayors, and government officials to come to a consensus as to how best to allocate and utilize the resources available. So it's a work-in-progress, and it's not going to collect dust, that's for sure.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. As the minister may well be aware from the original presentation, this is a cost of approximately \$2.4 million in the province. It's one that I think

is an important initiative to look at. The expectation of the citizens of our province are that in a structure fire, that the response will be appropriate to do what's necessary to respond the needs of the families that may be involved. And it's a — to say the least — a very difficult situation to respond and not have adequacy to enter a structure safely.

Now having said that, many of our volunteer . . . The majority of our province is in fact serviced by volunteer firefighters. And I applaud the initiative this year that saw the ability of volunteer firefighters and emergency providers to use red lights to be able to respond more rapidly to service delivery in those communities, but I share your value on the need for training for volunteer fire departments and to better prepare them to deal with the situations they may face.

One of the situations I encountered travelling around the province two, three years ago talking to volunteer fire departments was the inability of volunteer fire departments to purchase equipment from, as an example, the city of Regina or the city of Saskatoon as they were upgrading their equipment and improving the equipment that they would provide for fire services. There was no ability because of the potential risk of selling a piece of equipment that may not be at 100 per cent any longer after years of utilization but is still vastly superior to the majority of equipment that would, in fact, would exist in many volunteer fire departments.

And one of the things that was mentioned to me many times as I was travelling the province talking to volunteer fire departments, mayors, and others in communities is that the province could provide, through the Department of Corrections and Public Safety, a mechanism in which they could save harmless the selling fire department and sell this equipment, which is far better than what many municipalities would have, to small municipalities. And in order to do that, the cities of Regina and Saskatoon as an example would want to have some insurance against being sued as a result of, you know, this equipment not meeting necessarily today's standards, top standards, that would be asked.

And secondarily I heard many times that we could save money by putting together bulk purchasing of an offer, bulk purchasing of equipment in fact, to municipalities on a regular basis versus each municipality having to go out on their own and tender for equipment. Have you had any thoughts on those particular initiatives and made any progress on those ideas?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Yes. I guess you've asked a lot of questions within that last discussion, so yes. And I need to go back to how you started off with the idea of officer safety and citizen safety in fires. There's one that when our government does make any effort or does move forward on that, that the commitment that we make and a promise we make for positions will be upheld.

The policing situation was one that we knew that there was a commitment made over two cycles of elections — 1999, 2003. The 200 officers were never fulfilled. So moving forward, we wanted the public safety review committee to make sure, ensure, that if we move forward . . . And we will most likely make some inroads. It could be maybe less than what the firefighters want initially, but it's going to be attainable and

achievable within the time frame we establish as a government.

The other issue . . . again I talk about the public safety review committee and because it's a critical point in how our government and how our ministry will be addressing the needs of our municipalities — whether they're large or small, professional, paid, or volunteer — is that the representation at that committee, for whatever reason in the past, that committee was shelved. It was put on a shelf and it was deactivated.

And when I talked to the fire chiefs association back in February of last year, they were quite happy with the fact that our government had recognized the need to reactivate that committee. And that committee has an expanded role right now that we have to look at, not just through our provincial public safety telecommunications network, but any aspect that deals with public safety.

And moving forward on your issue about your equipment purchases and your bulk buying and removing the liability, the officials in that public safety review committee would be turned to and looked at, much like we turn to our committee work with my colleagues to vet through processes and bring recommendations forward to ministers and officials. I'd also have that committee present to the Human Services Committee, moving forward with their recommendations as part of an action plan within a budget within the future.

So as a minister I won't stand alone and say that I know everything about how to best implement these needs, and nor will this government. Our government will turn to those people who are the experts in the field to advise us. So the concern of the equipment purchases and bulk buying are two that I've heard, absolutely, but we have to remember that there's training involved for that because some of these volunteer firefighting services are used to training with equipment that has, by all means they've got used to, and if we give new equipment or they purchase new equipment, we have to have a means to ensure that they're trained properly.

And hence that's why we're looking at, if we were to support initiatives of new firefighters, we could be backfilling those firefighters that could be on trucks as well, that could go out there and actually help train and/or bring the volunteer firefighters into those fire services and train them on site. So it's bigger than just the idea of putting firefighters on trucks and for entry two and two. It's a bigger global picture that this government will be looking at and considering after receiving consultation from the public safety review committee.

[16:00]

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. When can we expect that report to be coming down, and a full discussion at this committee about that report?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Well we just struck the committee back up again in the first part of 2008, so they've been focusing on the public safety telecommunication network right now. The fire commissioner's office does in fact have a liaison working on a regular basis with the public safety review committee through to the agencies, the fire chiefs, and the fire associations on a regular basis. I can't give you a date when the report is

going to come down. I can tell you that it's ongoing, and that they'll be discussing it.

I'm attending the fire chiefs' meeting in Prince Albert — their conference — at the end of this month, and I've had some consultations and some talks already with some fire chiefs about what I think is a better solution than just putting firefighters on trucks and not utilizing a bigger training mechanism here to encompass everything.

Because in 1991 we lost the ability to have money from the GRF [General Revenue Fund] actually from fire insurance tax go to the actual ministry — it was rolled back and put back in the GRF — so we have to look at other ways and be a little more creative in how we can address those concerns when we move forward. So ongoing is the best way to tell you that it'll be addressed.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. Many departments across the province, or a number of departments also have a mixture of both professional firefighters and volunteers. And of course that presents in itself some unique challenges as well. Without a training facility in the province, a full-time training facility, many volunteer fire departments have difficulty with the training. Have you looked at the possibility of initiating a full-time training facility and program in the province of Saskatchewan?

Mr. Hickie: — We have in fact, about six months ago to eight months ago, we discussed the possibility of that factor, but not just for firefighters. I mean the province has a great police college for municipal police agencies. All of our professional, paid firefighting services now hire only those men and women who go to a professional college out of the province for the most part and get certified to a level where they start on the job immediately.

Now recognizing that we have other issues with SERM [Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management] officers and with corrections workers that require maybe a facility, the ministry is ongoing looking forward, moving down the road to possibly — possibly — a provincial training college to assist all levels of law enforcement, public safety and protections, and emergency services. But it is a long way down the road yet because we have to again talk to the stakeholders as to what their needs are. And right now the training issues involving firefighters are that the professional paid services have their training facilities, of course, in-house. They do it in their cities. The volunteers are looking for ways to access that.

So again I'll defer a lot of that — most of it, if not all of it — to the public safety review committee to report back to the minister, myself, and to officials as to the best way we tackle to ensure that we don't lose the possibility of training every firefighter and ensure that we do it in such an efficient means that we're not going to be wasting taxpayers' dollars.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. Is the department prepared to look at changes to either legislation or regulation that would set minimum standards for response and professional minimums, I guess, for equipment in need in various areas of the province, keeping in mind it would well be different in various parts — major cities versus small

communities.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Just give me one second. You raised a good point on that issue. We recognize our municipalities are very much the ones who fund the cost of all equipment and training, and they also bear the responsibility for liability. So we are considering, with the public safety review committee again, any and all options that come forward to us from SARM [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities] and SUMA [Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association] moving forward, and in working with the stakeholders in fire services.

Right now it is a situation where we want to ensure that we first of all look at the review of The Fire Prevention Act to ensure that we can remove liability from volunteer services and who have to respond in large geographical areas.

If we put a standard set such as you need to have a certain amount of equipment — maybe two or three different pumpers or different variances in equipment — there could be liability issues and the SARM have told us that. They're worried about that. They're concerned about that to the ratepayers. So we want to work with this committee and with the stakeholders to ensure that we move forward slowly on that one, and to ensure that we have a buy-in from all the stakeholders, because we do recognize the legislation could be a means to an end. But we have to do more consultation moving down that road.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. In my thoughts, I was thinking more of even less expensive. And my understanding from travelling around the province, or areas in the province where extrication equipment in an accident could be more than an hour away, and if somebody's trapped inside the vehicle, you're well aware of the necessity to extricate the person as soon as possible.

And in some areas of the province, response depends on direction given by the municipality, and in some cases I've had municipalities tell me that they wouldn't respond unless they knew who was paying. And at this point, if it's on a provincial highway, of course the province pays or SGI [Saskatchewan Government Insurance] pays a portion of it, but if there's a question of who's paying, there are municipalities who have indicated they may not respond. So the only way to deal with those types of situations probably is putting in place, you know, responsibility to respond because those services are required.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Yes, and I know it's timely you mention that. A while back I was invited to speak at a constituency meeting of volunteer firefighters in the Kelvington-Wadena area and recognizing that when we first became government, SGI increased the fee to volunteer firefighting services that responded, but they're very restrictive in their extrication. They have to extricate a person from a vehicle before they'll be funded, the volunteer fire services.

So we discussed it within the ministry and mutual aid agreements are very much the means that we want to see to the ends, the ends to the means, as to how we look at, with SGI, to if you respond, we'd like to see a standard fee set for response. And then additional costs of course could be incurred or could be drawn back on from the extrication of victims. So it is a — you know I say it quite a bit — it's a work-in-progress, and it's

not that it's not easy or difficult to talk about it, it's just the issue of coming to consensus. Because we have also heard that because of some of the tours that were done in the past, that some concern was raised — by the previous government on touring the province — that they were fearful that they had to have a certain type of response, and that caused a lot of red flags to go up.

And we became government, we had to spend time to assure them, through SUMA and SARM meetings with the fire commissioner's office, that that was not in fact the case. We want to turn to a mutual aid agreement where we can look at zones of coverage for response, and therefore ensure the municipalities recognize that it's to the benefit of all that we work together as stakeholders, than to take a stance where you would rather not have a response and not get paid for it. Mutual aid agreements would provide that response and the resource allocation to cover the costs as well.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. So when do you anticipate that some of these issues will be dealt with? You say this is a work-in-progress. Are we looking at one year, two years, or are we looking at six months?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Well from the last thing I've heard from the fire commissioner is that they've spoken to a vast majority of SUMA and SARM delegates about *The Fire Prevention Act* itself that we're going to put forth, and if I'm not mistaken, it's going to be this fall of '09. And there is a general buy-in to the practices and principles that the Act will be providing.

So we should see some change within that Act. And what it's going to do is set up this first stage of mutual aid agreements and then ensure that the municipalities recognize that there's no liability on them, but to work together, again through the fire commissioner's office and the public safety review committee, to get the end result of mutual aid agreements. And as a government, of course, is to recognize that there is a need to fund at a higher level. We'll be bringing those forward to the SGI, to the minister involved with the Crowns.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. Part of the funding arrangement a municipality has responsibility for is to provide protection services. And one of the things that many residents believe in the province, they have a level of a service that they may not have. So do you have any plan to ensure that citizens are aware of what level of service they have within their jurisdiction?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — I'll start off with then I'll pass it off to Tom here, to the executive director of protection and emergency services for some more inside baseball information, I call it. He's been more involved with the actual public safety review committee than I am on an ongoing basis.

The Fire Prevention Act will allow for that provision, in fact, that municipalities recognize that there's a need for some public safety awareness, some fire prevention. And therefore their ratepayers will know what's in their area.

But that's also the reason why mutual aid agreements are beneficial because some volunteer fire agencies recognize that they have lost firefighters, volunteer firefighters. Other agencies

have had an influx; they've had response to their recruiting, unlike the other areas. So by mutual aid agreement we'll have the circles of coverage where they're going to be crossing over; they're going to know, a ratepayer will know what's in their area and who could be responding.

But I'll let Tom get into the nuts and bolts of what's been happening in the public safety review committee. And he may go back a bit to answer some more of your questions that I gave a different answer to at a higher level from government. He has some actual operational knowledge as to what's been going on at the meeting level.

Mr. Young: — Thank you. As a matter of fact, the committee's meeting today as we're sitting here, so work is progressing. Several of the issues that you did raise have been raised in the public safety review committee. And we're looking at, in terms of a path forward, trying to create the right balance between things like legislation and things like what kinds of roles the office of the fire commissioner can play, and then other mechanisms in terms of services that we could provide to create that right balance with all those different kinds of issues.

When we talk about fire safety, of course, we talk about prevention, which is a big aspect of fire safety. And one of the things about standards is that very small municipalities are unable to afford, as you'd mentioned, a paid, professional fire department. So what we look at is, well if they can't afford that and their choice is not to go that route, then what other things can very small communities do to still provide a level of fire safety there.

Well one of the things that is being discussed at the public safety review committee is things like a public awareness program on fire safety, things such as Risk Watch in the schools, and looking at smoke alarms in private residences, possibility of inspections of public buildings, arenas and things like that.

So there are several kinds of things when you look at the whole spectrum of fire safety that this committee is looking at. And some of the things, again as we move forward, that we will introduce perhaps, or at least propose, in some legislation for the fall. As the minister indicated, we'll look at a balance of some of those things.

So there's all kinds of issues related to mutual aid agreements, where municipalities can get together and provide a level of service that individual municipalities may not be able to provide by themselves. There's public awareness. There's training, as the minister had mentioned, and the issues of what can be done on a regional basis, close to the volunteers, is we're going to try to balance that with what are the needs of the professional firefighters, the paid firefighters in the larger cities.

So we're looking at all of those kinds of things in the public safety review committee, and certainly those things will branch off into whether it should be a legislative consideration or whether it should be something as public awareness or whether it should be something that goes back to the office of the fire commissioner in terms of an enhanced role. Those are the kinds of discussions that are currently occurring.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. With that I will move on now to talk a little bit about licensing and inspections. I'd like, if we could, an update where we are in regards to the transition from a government-run to more of an industry-directed inspections in the province and how the implementation is moving forward?

[16:15]

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Well what we did last year is that we sent out officials to Alberta to see their model, to see how it was working. And Brian Krasium, the executive director of licensing and inspections will talk after, again the nuts and bolts, of to what's developed within that working group. But we recognize there's maybe a more efficient means to get this job done. Now recognizing the fact that the expertise level is definitely within the ministry, we have found out, and as you're well aware, that this is an offset.

The ministry receives fees for the inspections provided, and it covers off the salaries for the most part, I would think — unless Brian wants to add some more when he gets in — but it's revenue neutral. So we'd like to see that removed outside of the . . . still within the ministry initially, but then moving to a self-kind-of-funded administered agency that's there for the demands of industry, because you recognize that industry waits sometimes too long for an inspection and it stalls their progress. And given our economic activity in this province, we want to assure that we move forward on that quickly.

We also looked at the idea of self-inspections and certification — I'll let Brian talk about that — where we recognize industries will do it themselves, inspect their facilities and then provide the certification to Brian's office. And then from there, they'll be given the stamp and the approval to move forward. So at that level of discussion about it, I'll let Brian take over and carry on.

Mr. Krasium: — Thank you. Within our legislative changes in January 1, 2007 we introduced a concept called quality management systems of inspections. And what the quality management systems of inspections allowed for was an owner of pressure equipment to be able to employ licensed pressure equipment inspectors, certified and educated, and that would entitle them to inspect equipment they own and manage.

Currently within the province we do have three organizations that have quality management systems — three companies. In total they represent approximately 3 per cent of our licensed operating inventory in Saskatchewan. Now on top of those three companies, we also have approximately 65 licensed pressure equipment inspectors within the province that will be used currently to support those three companies, as well as the future efforts of any other companies that may register their programs in order to take advantage of the benefits of a quality management system of inspections.

Our dynamics in the province are quite interesting, in that right now we have approximately 25 companies in the province that are responsible for over 40 per cent of our licensed operating inventory in Saskatchewan. And so if we have a number, a larger number of companies understand the benefits for a quality management system of inspection, then they will move

down that avenue of taking advantage of those opportunities and developing such a system.

Some of the benefits to having a quality management system of inspections are numerous. First of all, the owner of the equipment would be able to schedule their inspections of their pressure equipment at intervals that they find accommodating, obviously as long as those periodic intervals are within the limitations as prescribed within the current regulations. But, for example, for organizations or companies like a refinery, it has extreme benefits for the equipment to be scheduled for periodic inspection during the shutdown season when the equipment is normally out of service and at intervals according to their schedule.

So for example some refineries will operate on a three-year cycle of inspections or a three-year cycle of shutdowns, and their inspection intervals based upon risk management principles could be extended to go beyond the traditional inspection frequency that we utilize as a regulatory authority right now.

Also a quality management system of inspections also allows companies who implement such a program to be able to perform acceptance inspections on equipment they own and operate, acceptance inspections on new equipment. So if an organization or a company brings new equipment into the province to operate, and if they have their proper individuals in place, then they can simply do the inspection on their own, rather than waiting for one of our jurisdictional inspectors to be able to answer the call for allowing this unit to be operated. Obviously sometimes that is of great benefit, especially in the oil and gas sector where operation of this equipment is of course essential for the operating revenues of the company.

But of course another direct benefit for the quality management system of inspections is that for relief protection device servicing. Relief protection device is the last means of providing safety for a piece of equipment that may be running beyond its designed capacity, and that would be such as a pressure relief device or a safety valve. Currently the requirements for servicing intervals are established at frequencies that are nation-wide. And they are very prescriptive intervals, but they're prescribed at intervals in a general sense, without specific consideration being given to individual components, fluid services, and other issues like that.

A company that operates a quality management system can actually go in and take a very close look at the operational characteristics of their facilities, of their specific pieces of equipment, and the case history or the background of previous inspections on that equipment, and then decide whether or not the currently established interval for relief protection device servicing is in fact accurate or adequate for their continued operation.

They may find after analysis that they may want to service it at intervals more frequent than what the current standard prescribes. But in some cases, if the vessel is operating satisfactory — they've been doing a lot of serving on the unit — they may be able to extend that for a longer period of time than the prescriptive standard, and therefore again, saving time for shutdown and bringing the unit out of operation when there

is no safety concern in question.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. What do you think you can attribute the fact that there's been so little uptake in the quality management program and self-inspections?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Can you repeat that question? I never heard it from this side.

Mr. Yates: — I'm asking what you would attribute the fact that we've had virtually very little uptake in a program that three or four years ago was being designed, we thought would have significant uptake?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Well I think I'll start off; I'll let Brian finish off. But what I do know is that the industries in this province, who have in the last 18 months definitely benefited because of the economic turnaround and the level that they're involved with now with their operations and expansion and refitting demands, that they have their people look at their stuff, their equipment first. So they're working very hard with what's happening here

But also that we have to recognize that we stated — I think it was very first question I ever answered in question period, thanks to yourself — that we have seen over the years a number of inspectors, licensed qualified inspectors, move to Alberta because of the demands there when this economy here wasn't doing as well.

And now the problem is to try to find the right qualified people to come back to this province to help us out and to help industry as well. It is a demand still to be able to hire the right people. You can't just hire someone out of university. They have to go back and get the specialized courses after. So a lot of industry people are paying their people very well to help to keep them and maintain them. So we're moving forward on this standing, kind of arm's-length agreement, where we have Brian's shop will be overseeing this.

But industry equally is demanding the same professionals, and they use them for their own needs first. And there's also the demand that they want to expand, with Saskatchewan's economy the way we're doing now. They want to maintain their own inspections. So, Brian, you want to follow up with that.

Mr. Krasniun: — When we established the option for a quality management system of inspections within the current legislation, we looked at several models that other jurisdictions were operating under. And other jurisdictions had mandated a similar type of program onto the owners of pressure equipment. In some instances, the jurisdictions had found that they were unable to keep up with the inspection demands placed upon their safety program, and so they turned the tables and basically implemented a policy where an owner of X-number of pieces of pressure equipment would be forced to operate a similar type of program.

Here in Saskatchewan, we wanted to treat this more so as an alternative to the existing safety program delivery model that we currently have — the same model that a lot of our stakeholders have been comfortable with and have been happy with. However we did recognize that there are a lot of pressure

equipment owners out there that have assets in many provinces or many jurisdictions including Saskatchewan, and they feel comfortable or had wanted the opportunity to implement a similar type of program within our province because they had already had the expertise in the area. They already have the qualified individuals. So they simply want to have one particular type of program operating all their assets.

So one reason why we haven't received such a large uptake yet is because, first of all, it is, as I've indicated, an alternative to our existing safety inspection program — a voluntary one. The second one is that it has only been a few years now, and so a lot of the owners of equipment are starting to become comfortable with the concept of quality management and are just starting now to understand and realize the potential benefits of operating one.

I had mentioned that we have currently three companies that have registered programs within the province of Saskatchewan. Just recently, within the last few weeks, we had already received two other ones, significant-sized companies, where the number of equipment they own far exceeds the number of pieces of equipment that are currently operating under a quality management system. So if I could use a term, some of the bigger players now are starting to realize the benefits and are now ready to implement such a program.

You have to also appreciate that developing a quality management system of inspections also takes a little bit of time to put the program together; to get the individuals that are necessary, in order to perform these inspections, in place; get them accredited; get them into the province.

So there are a lot of factors and we do see a benefit to this. Companies and owners of the equipment are starting to see the benefit. And the utilization of quality management systems is starting to increase within the province.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. You know, one reason I ask the question is, one of the concerns was of course the pressures we had on the current system of inspections, and this would hopefully reduce some of that pressure. Are we still having the same pressures hiring people internally in the province that we were a year ago or two years ago, and if we are, what are we doing to address that program . . . [inaudible] . . . inspectors?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Well I guess if you look at the level that Brian's talked about, we have of course the industry hiring their own people and working with us in the quality assurance issue, and having those individuals and Brian and his people ensuring that there is a seamless transition to ensure public safety when we come to pressure vessels working within our communities.

The one area we're looking at as well is the recruitment if private industry does take people away from government. So we have to consider all options. And that's why moving out of this issue of having a standard ministry of inspections, having them as a stand-alone, arm's-length group — still with the ministry having some oversight, absolutely — will afford them a more competitive advantage we believe. Because as they start to expand their inspections of course, and it's driven by the need in the industry, fees will pay for those, offset the costs for

salaries, so it's revenue neutral.

And the industry tells us that they understand that, and of course they want to get their equipment up and running and operational, as well, quickly. So Brian and his staff are to be commended for how they respond right now. We've asked, where do you train people? And Brian's found a facility in Ohio that takes the individuals who are out of school and gives them an on-the-job training facility, kind of a community college kind of concept, I guess, in that level, that helps to advance their training to get them accredited faster.

So we have to look at some options too where we maybe have people identified in a stream, and we want to hire them. And we would then send them to training and have them come in and commit to a number of years working within government after. If a government puts out the cash, the cost of training, there has to be an agreement for two-for-one maybe — for every year you get schooling, you get two years you have to guarantee to the government. We're just floating these ideas around as something new because it's very competitive. But I'll let Brian finish up on that and follow through.

Mr. Krasniun: — Licensing and inspection has always found it difficult in order to recruit and retain professional and qualified pressure equipment inspectors. It has been quite a cutthroat business, especially in the last five years where the price of oil has increased to a point that a lot of the larger, private companies have been able to attract a lot of the more experienced inspectors away, lure them away for significantly larger salaries.

[16:30]

Albeit, we have been able to compete with a various number of initiatives. And there was a point in the fall of last year where I thought for the first time in my 18-year career with licensing and inspection that we were going to have 100 per cent complement of full-time FTEs. Unfortunately the last person that was going to be coming on board didn't quite make it. He had a change of heart. And so we started again into the recruitment process.

Right now currently we are looking at recruiting three individuals within our licensing and inspection field operations and one individual within our engineering department. These are full-time positions. And of course if anybody is watching this broadcast, they can apply online at the Public Service Commission.

But we are quite hopeful. Because of the economic times right now in Canada and in the United States, we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of applicants and also a noticeable increase in the education, skills, and experience in those applicants that we have received applications for. So in a current position, boiler inspector's position, where we may have received traditionally 8 to 12 applications per position, we are now facing in the 30's and 40's. So very promising for this next round of filling these vacancies, and we're quite hopeful that we will reach that benchmark of 100 per cent utilization of our existing FTEs in no time flat.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. With that I'd

like to move on to a few questions about the telecommunications, public safety telecommunications network. My questions have to do with — and I only have a couple questions — dealing with the \$310,000 first year to acquire radios for ministry staff to access the system. Could you tell me who would be utilizing that particular radio system within the ministry?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Yes. In fact I'll let Tom. If you want the exact details, he will get those. But right now we're looking at, as a government, we'd be looking at those people who would be typically on the 911 or the SaskTel FleetNet system now that we utilize within the fire commissioner's office and those people as well that we want to have them ready to transition. But I'll let Tom go into that detail for you.

Mr. Young: — I'm sorry. I didn't catch the number that you were . . .

Mr. Yates: — Well the \$310,000 this year for the first of two years to purchase — a total of 760,000 — to acquire radios for the ministry to access the new system. I'm just wondering who would actually be using them, who those radios are being purchased for.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Yes, as I thought, it really is for our correctional facilities. And it's going to be for our emergency response team, the people within the fire commissioner's office. So we have to ensure they're outfitted properly when they do the actual . . . when they have them ready to go come December 2010. So 310,000 will outfit those people.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you. So it's for our emergency response people, fire commissioner's office, and corrections. That's my understanding.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Yes.

Mr. Yates: — So these will be the new radios systems internally for the correctional systems or correctional centres.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Yes.

Mr. Yates: — That's all my questions on that area. Now I'd like to move into policing.

Thank you very much. My first questions have to do with a commitment of \$3.8 million to the RCMP to provide for backup for single officers in potentially hazardous situations. I notice in the allotment of 30 new officers, only 16 are going to the RCMP. And so could you identify for me how we're going to provide, how the RCMP and how the province is going to ensure the protection of RCMP officers in those situations, with only 16 new officers, and what the \$3.8 million will be used for.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Well the 16 that we're giving as part of the 30 aren't part of that for the allocation of extra resources for backup. Historically we have to look at the tragedies that RCMP officers have suffered in the northern and some of the rural detachments as single officer responses, and they've lost their lives. And to the families and loved ones out there, our hearts go out to them when that happens. And I know what it feels like to have to respond to those calls, having worked with

the Spiritwood incident after it happened.

And the national backup policy was developed by the RCMP under the provincial agreement contract. We have an obligation based on what the division commanders put forth as a requirement that they like to see to augment and have the appropriate number of officers added for response, plus offset dollars for overtime to call out officers in some areas as well.

So what the "F" Division commanding officer and I have spoken with, as has my executive director of policing services, is that this allocation of 3.8 million partly will pay for 15 new RCMP officers. So that's going to be above the allocation of 30. So 15 RCMP officers. And other dollars will be used to offset overtime costs as well for call-outs.

So we as a government gladly recognize that, and we accept our responsibility to ensure the men and women in the RCMP are given the protection that is required. And again we don't dictate that to them. They ask us for that based on what their needs are operationally.

And I will comment, and very proudly so, that after the budget was announced, the RCMP released . . . And I think, if I'm not mistaken, it's one of the first times they've ever did this in the province, that they're actually coming out and saying that this budget has definitely addressed their needs. And they're very happy that this government recognizes that we have an obligation to ensure the safety of those men and women in our rural and smaller northern detachments given the tragedies over the last number of years. And I gladly as a minister support that and brought that forward, and I'm very proud that our government is doing that.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Fifteen new officers and overtime costs are included in here. Are 15 officers adequate to meet that commitment in the various communities across the province?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — This is the first of a three-year plan that the new "F" Division commanding officer is addressing through his operational organization and his complement of executive officers moving forward. And as a government we recognize that the demands on the Depot Division for cadet recruitment and training is very steep right now. They're at max capacity running with more needs than ever before for RCMP officers across this country.

So this is one year of a three-year plan to ensure that there's enough officers out there. But that's also why we're funding the overtime positions that get called out in the middle of the night — at 3 o'clock in the morning when we're sleeping and we're all very safe in our beds — when they have to go and back up another officer. If we don't fund that, then we have one-officer responses and that's unsafe. So they have an action plan moving forward to address that, and this government will proudly accept the responsibility to fund those.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. What will the total contingent of new officers be at the end of the three-year plan?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — The final determination for that is unknown right at this time. This year the RCMP want 15 for

additional officers and overtime costs. Last year the allocation of resources went to offset overtime costs only as far as I'm aware. So we have worked with them to move forward on a three-year plan.

Now operationally the RCMP will be looking at call volume loads, statistical information gathered on what types of calls they're taking in different areas of the province. Based on that, they will be going to . . . And I'm just going to ask Murray for the name of the, an ARLU which is a . . .

Mr. Sawatsky:— That's correct, Minister. ARLU is the acronym the RCMP use — annual resource level update.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Thank you for that. So what happens is that on a yearly basis the RCMP "F" Division commander and his executive officers have to bring forth their plan, moving forward, to their northwest division command. And then nationally they have to allocate, much like we do here when it comes to budgets; they have to discuss their needs at a national level. And they have to summarize their needs, based on volumes of calls and data they receive from statistical information systems as to the level of calls that require a two-officer response, recognizing those are serious incidents that they would be sending two officers to, multiple-officer response, as opposed to other calls for service.

So last year they required a nominal amount of money. This year they asked for 3.8 million. So we look at the fact that if they address that to us and they have an action plan, if they need less officers or more officers, we will have to address that, knowing full well that if you put more officers in the street with the RCMP, overtime costs will hopefully and should be reduced based on their projections.

So that is not going to be included in the 120 officers I might add as well. It's a stand-alone, different allocation. We will have 120 officers in the street in this province after the end of our four-year first term. We will also have these extra RCMP officers for backup that we will not use as a means to skirt the issue of 120.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. Can you give us an update as to where the RCMP are in having their current detachments fully staffed? There was a challenge over the last number of years, particularly in northern communities, to fully staff detachments, and in many cases, they were operating understaffed. And as you're well aware, distances between detachments in northern communities are farther and response times or coordinated response between detachments more difficult. So do you have an update of the current situation, particularly in remote and northern communities?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — What I can say, and I'll pass it off to Murray after I finish with this, is that when the new "F" Division commander came in, Assistant Commissioner McGowan, and his chief superintendent from criminal operations, Beck, Randy Beck from Alberta, we've had some very fruitful discussions, very much moving forward in the issue of recognizing exactly what you talk about, Mr. Yates. And they have a team of executive officers that prioritize where the detachments need to be filled. They recognize that with the demands at depot, they have some issues getting their own

cadets to fill those positions for sure. And with the amount of retirees that are going on, they are working to ensure that public safety is still at the forefront of their endeavours.

But moving on with that, they have a requirement under the agreement, the provincial agreement to provide policing services. And they take a lot of pride — those two members take a great deal of pride — in having the commitment made to this province, recognizing that this is the home of the RCMP and where their heritage begins. And they want to ensure that they fulfill their obligations as our provincial policing agency. So, Murray, do you want to add any more to that?

Mr. Sawatsky: — Thank you, Minister. Mr. Chair, about all I could add to that is that every year the RCMP goes through an exercise of examining its resources and determining where best to deploy the resources that are provided. And with the new resources that are being provided this year and some of the resources that have been provided in past years, they continue to look at the impact of where those officers are going and what that means to the policing needs in the communities.

The last number of years has seen a lot of RCMP resources deployed to the North where there's an awful lot of work, very high caseloads. The RCMP continues to look at that, and we continue as officials to work with the RCMP to try and address those concerns and bring those forward to the minister on an annual basis. With these resources this year and with the money under the backup policy, that will again give the RCMP an opportunity to look at what the impact of these new resources and this new funding will be on them. And next year we will then go forward with recommendations to the minister as to where best to deploy any new resources that may be coming to the RCMP next year through the budget process.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — If I can add to that point as well, if I can, and thank you, Mr. Chair, for letting me do that. The relationship that we have right now — our government has — with the Saskatchewan Association of Chiefs of Police, which has representation of the Assistant Commissioner McGowan on that group, is outstanding I would have to say, unlike any time before, where there is a recognition and there is an understanding within the ministry of what their operational needs are. And I am very proud to be able to represent that as a minister at this time because I understand when they talk about operational concerns and what they need; I recognize that.

But I also understand that there's a team, an integrated approach here. And this is the first time in a number of years, that I understand it, that this chiefs' association worked together collaboratively to actually prescribe where the 30 officers will go, with a high level of consensus I might add, with the understanding that we have funded a great number of municipal police officers, as has the previous government — and give credit where it is due — although falling short of the 200 commitment over eight years I might add.

[16:45]

The issue we have now moving forward is we have to ensure that we maintain that recognition that integrated police work now moving forward is one to deal with the drugs, the gangs, and the violent crime. We see two different types of uniforms in

this province, but we see women and men with a common goal. Their heart is against the criminal element. They want to protect the public and they want to address that. So integrated police work is becoming more of a means to work together.

And issues up north that we see, we have a great relationship with the RCMP and the city police in Prince Albert, the chief there — a good friend of mine — who has brought forth with Assistant Commissioner McGowan a plan to address the northern communities through an integrated approach, a northern drug strategy.

So we have 60 more officers to commit in the next two years of our mandate. And I say 60 more as a minimum because we recognize that there's other ways to do this. We have SCAN officers as well that we'll look at to augment and assist as an integrated approach. And as a government, we get it. We get it. We understand; we're listening to the chiefs of police. My ministry officials that I have had the honour to work with in the policing services division are all ex-members of either municipal service or RCMP, and they get it. And I think finally we have a response from a government that truly recognize and appreciates the hard work out there in our community as we see an expansion in our economy.

So on that note, we have to look at next year, moving forward now, as to how the next 30 officers will be allocated. And I look forward to having the response from the chiefs of police and the RCMP, recognizing that we have an issue to fill more RCMP detachments, possibly, next year than municipal agency positions. But that'll be left for that committee to work together.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. One of the issues that has been identified over the years in northern communities is the amount of time that is spent on transporting individuals who are in custody to provincial facilities or facilities that are better prepared to deal with individuals over a longer period of time. As an example, if you're up in far northwest Saskatchewan, the La Loche, Buffalo Narrows area, you have long distances to transport inmates, prisoners to provincial facilities.

One of the things that was discussed, I heard for the first time about two, two and a half years ago, was the concept of perhaps having attached to the Buffalo Narrows facility or closer to the far Northwest some capacity to remand and hold individuals for court and take individuals on for periods of time prior to being transported further south if necessary.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Well, you know, you raise a good point. With our government, I'm very happy to say the Minister of Justice and I have talked and worked together along with the officials to expand video conferencing as well. And I'm very happy to say the Minister of Justice has got . . . The prosecutors in the province and defence counsel and the bench are very happy to see that there's a means to address this. And we could reduce some of our transportation requirements and let the video conferencing take place and then let the judge assign whether or not there's a bail or a recog order or probation or whatever, what have you, or remand.

We rely heavily on the northern postings to still utilize the RCMP for transport, under provost duty requirements under the contract that we have. They recognize it as well. And one thing

that we have to look at is every option to ensure that we have the needs met of public safety. So the concept of holding inmates in the northern community on remand is one that I think I'll let Murray talk about — a little higher, a different level, more operational-wise — what's been going on. But we recognize that we don't want to have a burden on the communities where people should in fact be held in remand.

Now we do have a correctional facility up in Buffalo Narrows as well. Whether or not we look at that, that is a means to hold the inmates on remand. We have to, you know, factor that into the plan if it's possible. But right now the RCMP Air Services Division utilizing provost uses that as the means to transport inmates down. And it's part of the contract; it's part of the fee we pay. And we understand that still, ensuring public safety and the communities are safe. But, Murray, do you want to add any more to that?

Mr. Sawatsky: — Thank you, Minister. Mr. Chair, about the only thing I could add to that is that over the last number of years there has been some significant gains made in having sheriffs take over some of the transporting, particularly on the corridor and in some of the major cities, both the security of the courts and the transportation of prisoners which previously was done fairly much exclusively by the police.

We continue to work with Ministry of Justice to try and identify those areas where additional savings can be made or where additional resources can be dedicated — non-police resources — to the movement of prisoners. The North, because of the transportation, requires a lot of air movement, and the RCMP principally does most of that.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. I'd now like to move on for the last few minutes to the young offenders' program area to ask questions.

Thank you very much. My first questions have to do with young offenders' facilities. We see an increase of about \$2.4 million in the budget allocation in the young offenders' facilities. Could I have some explanation as to what those particular costs are?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Yes, you can. Just give me one second to gather the data for you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks for that question. The increase of 3.805 million in the budget increase this year is for the following needs: 2.617 million for salary adjustments for in- and out-of-scope increases based on Finance guidelines, nurse salary supplement, enhancement for standby fees, maternity leave, and workmen's compensation board top-up, mandatory training backfill, and new funding to reduce overtime costs at facilities; 1.208 million for operating adjustments and increases to community-based organizations; and 160,000 for enhanced First Nation and Métis cultural programming at facilities.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. Now is there any of this funding going to be utilized for a conversion of non-permanent to permanent employment, similar to what is talked about in the recommendations in the adult system?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Thank you and thank you, Mr. Chair, for

waiting for the answer. It is a priority under the recommendations of the external investigation team to prioritize our needs on that adult corrections area, not on young offenders at this time. But as you move forward with the adult corrections, we will look at the young offender facilities, absolutely. Based on what we know right now, is that we have a very high demand in adult corrections to fulfill that obligation to adequately staff our positions and to help alleviate overtime costs.

So not that young offenders is not a concern. And for anyone out there in young offenders listening or watching today, you have a difficult job, absolutely. Your concerns, the focus we have is not completely lost.

We need to deal with what the hand has been dealt with us from the external investigation team report, and lessons learned from that will help us roll out with our human services personnel to see how we can best implement planning that change in the out years.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. I'm not trying to in any way trap you in these questions or anything. It's simply a matter that in the institutional environments, whether they be young offender or adult, many of the characteristics are the same and many of the challenges are the same as far as, you know, personnel issues and the needs moving forward. So at this time there is no plan, but at some point, as I understand, the plan would be to move ahead and examine those issues in a broader context in the young offenders' facilities as well.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Absolutely. I think we can't lose sight of the fact that the result of the external investigation team highlights a changing face of corrections, and part of that is going to be to ensure that we adequately staff our facilities, and the conversion of those permanent part-time to full-time is part of that move forward. And from that point on, we will be looking at all of our correctional facilities, absolutely, and costs associated to that and how to best implement those. So yes, I guess the best answer I can give you right now is that the dust will not gather on that report, and it doesn't just apply to adult corrections. We believe there's a transformation, a transitional phase in corrections unlike any other time in this province, so we have to address that going down the road.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. Does the funding under community and alternative measures indicate any new — the increased funding — any new programs being provided within the province or any new supports to offenders in the community?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — That's just our regular business operations, funding the CBOs to ensure that we adequately address that lift of 3 per cent. We don't see no real need or no real influx of new programs, just regular day-to-day business going forward.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. And I noticed that the funding in program support and regional services are relatively . . . Well pardon me, about \$700,000 increase in regional services, is that again to cover off additional increase in staffing costs and salary increases?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Yes, that's the best way. The breakdown is all for those things I addressed before, absolutely.

Mr. Yates: — Okay thank you very much. In the institutional area, you had talked about some increased programming for Aboriginal youth in custody. Could we have some detail as to what the new programming would entail?

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Sure, just give me one second. Thank you, Mr. Chair, for waiting for the answer. The answer to that question is, we're going to be increasing our elder services to the youth.

One thing that I've recognized — and I do this not in a vacuum; I do this with the help of the Legislative Secretary assigned to this ministry — that elders provide an avenue for the adults and the youth, Aboriginal offenders to open up and discuss their needs more so than maybe with the chaplain or with other counsellors. So recognizing that, within this budget too, we'll see an increase of elders to the youth facilities. That's the increase you see there.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you very much. With that, Mr. Chair, that would conclude my questions on the areas outside adult corrections. I'd like to thank the minister and his officials for their time today and assure you that my next series of questions will centre on strictly on the adult corrections and primarily the recommendations from the report.

Hon. Mr. Hickie: — Thank you very much for that. Mr. Chair, it's been a pleasure as always to work with this group of Human Services Committee and delegates and colleagues — great committee. And of course the questions were well put forth. And I have to say that this is not a situation where I do this, again, in a vacuum. I do it with great officials and the help of everyone in the ministry. So thank you very much.

The Chair: — That brings to conclusion this afternoon's session. I'd like to thank all the members of the committee, the minister and his officials for the answers they provided to the members of the committee. And with that, this committee will recess until 7 o'clock at which time we will resume with the consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Social Services.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

[19:00]

**General Revenue Fund
Social Services
Vote 36**

Subvote (SS01)

The Chair: — Good evening everyone. We will resume our agenda this evening. This evening we will be considering vote 36, Social Services. It can be found on page 131 of the Estimates book. Again I'll just a very brief explanation of what it is we do here.

The legislature has referred the spending estimates of the Ministry of Social Services to the Human Services Committee

for review. The minister and her officials are here with us this evening and are appearing before the committee as witnesses. And committee members will ask the minister a number of questions regarding spending estimates, and some time down the road in a few weeks time, this committee will then vote on the estimates. That in a nutshell is what we are doing here this evening. This is the first time that the Minister of Social Services and her officials have appeared before this committee.

So with that very brief explanation, I will call on Minister Harpauer to introduce her officials that she has here with her tonight, and if she has an opening statement I'd invite her to do that also.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I appreciate the opportunity to be here tonight and a chance to discuss the ministry's budget.

The team that I have with me this evening is Dr. Allan Hansen who is sitting next to me, who is the deputy minister of Social Services. Directly behind me is Cheryl Senecal, assistant deputy minister for policy; Larry Chaykowski, assistant deputy minister for housing; Tim Korol, assistant deputy minister for child and family services; and Bob Wihlidal, assistant deputy minister for client services.

We also have with us tonight Jeff Redekop, executive director for community living; Andrea Brittin, executive director for child and family services; Linda Martin, the manager, financial planning and information management for income assistance; Tim Gross, the associate executive director for housing development; Don Allen, the executive director for corporate services; and Trish Alcorn, the director for communications.

The annual budget process is a time to consider our history, the current state that we are at, and where we aspire to be in the future for our ministry. One could almost call it a plan.

Many of the programs in Social Services are the provision of obligatory services — assistance payments, support for people with disabilities, care for children and youth at risk, and providing safe and secure housing. There should be a reasonable explanation that government will in fact provide the budget to support normal appropriate amounts though these programs.

As we began work in Social Services, however, just 16 short months ago, it was surprising to discover something other than the compassion that one might have expected. Gaps were uncovered everywhere that we looked. There seemed to have been a lack of will to adequately support the work of all the people in the Ministry of Social Services. Programs had fallen behind in meeting the needs, and vulnerable people were facing increasing complex challenges with diminishing supports from the very ministry tasked to help them.

We found benefits undermined in income assistance through consistent decision making that saw the real spending power of benefit programs decline year after year after year. As an example, the shelter rates were not increased for people living on social assistance for 12 consecutive years, forcing those people into increasingly marginalized housing.

And what about seniors, Mr. Chair? We found that the seniors' income plan was not increased for 16 years. Interestingly in reviewing the NDP [New Democratic Party] 2007-2008 plan for the ministry, there was not even a mention of the seniors' income plan. Hide it. Don't let anyone know it exists, and just let it wither and die.

Surprisingly also upon examining the 2007-2008 plan for the ministry, there were no targets to reduce poverty, even for children. Increasingly that now seems to be the NDP priority, now that they are no longer in government and no longer responsible. There was no target in that report; however there was a statement that said, and I quote, "Reducing the persistence of poverty, that is, the length of time that people remain poor, can reduce the intergenerational transmission of welfare dependency." One can surmise from that statement, I suspect, that at least there was an objective to reduce childhood poverty. Yet when we examine the results of the previous government's efforts, we see that in 2004, 10.9 per cent of Saskatchewan children would be considered living in poverty, and by 2006, that had risen to 14.4 per cent.

We examined the programming for people with disabilities as well. That same 2007-08 plan referenced a number of items in relation to services for people with disabilities. The goal in the plan was, and I quote, "People with disabilities live more independently and participate more fully in the economy and the communities." And measurements were set to determine important items such as examining the numbers of people re-serving support, the number moving from institutions, and the number in their own residence receiving minimum support. But there was no mention of the number of people being ignored.

Upon forming government, what did we discover? Well we discovered a wait list, a wait list that no one knew about, a little secret, if you may. It was a wait list that had been allowed to grow due to underfunding of what many would consider an obligatory support program, underfunding that had occurred on an ongoing basis so that the wait list grew year after year after year, from 1991 when there was no wait list until 2008 when the wait list peaked at 440 individuals waiting for services to allow them to — to do what? — to live more independently and participate more fully in the economy and communities, the very goal that was set out in the previous government's 2007-2008 plan.

What was done when those people came forward to seek the help that they deserved? Did the government of the day put in every effort to do better? No, they turned their heads, and they allowed individuals with disabilities to languish on a wait list.

The Saskatchewan Housing Corporation is another interesting division to examine. We learned of an amendment to the corporation's legislation that was done in 1994 — one that removed the role of the broader board that would bring many perspectives to the leadership of the corporation — and instead buried the corporation inside the department of government without even a public advisory board. And what was the result? Well considering how taken by surprise the NDP were that our province could possibly grow, we shouldn't be surprised that housing was not prepared for growth. In 2004 a plan was released for housing that did not even reference the possibility

of growth. And then in 2007, as *The StarPhoenix* article states, and I quote, “The NDP cabinet awoke from its slumber this week to discover a housing ‘crisis’ . . .” And at that time they did commit dollars for housing, and the article went on to state, “This is crisis management in the Land of Nod.”

The NDP made a big deal out of announcing 100 million in funding to revitalize neighbourhoods, but of that, only 60 million was for social and senior housing. The remaining 40 million was for training institutions and community centres and flowed through other budgets other than the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation. Then in the shadow of an impending election, there was felt a need to do some additional community consultation. A document was prepared in August before the fall election, a document that was never released to the public and a document that never caused any actions to be taken nor improvements to be made.

As an example, we found that the neighbourhood home ownership program had been quietly allowed to die — no increase to the income thresholds, no increases to the prices of the homes that would qualify for the program, and of course no increase to the benefit available. The program simply died under the NDP, hidden from public scrutiny and strangled by neglect.

Over the years, community-based organizations have become increasingly important in providing services for any number of vulnerable people in our province, but did they get the support they needed or deserved? Well we’ve heard about CBO salary levels a lot lately in the Assembly, but the reality we discover was that from 2004 to 2007, over that four-year time period, the general grant to CBOs only increased by a total of 8 per cent over four years. Some years were a grant as little as 1 per cent, resulting in the erosion of the wages for those dedicated workers, another little secret that quietly went untold.

So often those dedicated and hard-working people expressed frustration with the lack of input they were allowed, how often they were asked to come and consult with government, but in the end their voices weren’t heard and their ideas and suggestions were ignored.

And what of the children in our care? What of the children who, through no fault of their own, need our protection and support? Growth in the number of children coming into care was remarkable from 2,798 in 2004 to 3,243 in 2007.

And did the resources for those children keep pace? During that period of time, budgets were often seeing no increase year over year, forcing child and family service workers to face increasingly difficult challenges. Often it was a challenge to even understand where the capacity was available, as there wasn’t even a modern electronic data management system to ensure that we had good information on the children we were trying to protect. The lack of an electronic case file system was something both the Children’s Advocate and the Provincial Auditor pointed out on numerous occasions. And what was the NDP’s strategy? It was to announce a system in 2004. They announced it would be implemented, and then the NDP failed to fund it — not in 2004, not in 2005, not in 2006, and not even in 2007, although many attempts were made to cover up this neglect.

And what was the NDP 2007-2008 plan? It set monitoring factors such as keeping track of number of children in care and the number of foster families who had completed some level of training. But would we see the number of children in overcrowded foster homes, the number of foster homes pressured to take more children than they were comfortable with? No, that data was not available. It was kept from the people of Saskatchewan and those who advocate for those same people and from the children themselves.

Well that was then. Today we have a new government. It has been 16 months, and in 16 months during which we have taken many actions to move forward with an agenda — you might call it a plan — to make changes to begin to address the challenges we face and to fill the serious gaps that were left behind by our previous government. We have moved to create an environment where we are not trying to avoid challenges we face, but rather where we’re willing to openly talk about those challenges, identify where things are not working well as we want, and to invite others into the conversation to find new strategies, new ways to look at issues, and to move forward together.

We as a government have implemented massive tax cuts for both income tax and property tax. These cuts have been done in a thoughtful manner to support those most vulnerable. Today there are 80,000 more low-income Saskatchewan individuals and families who will no longer be paying provincial income tax. And the historic reduction in education property tax will also assist those families with stabilizing their housing costs.

We have taken action to change the way we adjust shelter allowances and rental supplement. We have increased them to appropriate bench marks against average market rental rates, and we have indexed them to ensure that the rates are no longer allowed to languish unattended for years at a time.

We have also acted to increase the Saskatchewan employment supplement to ensure that it keeps pace and meets the need it is intended to address, which is often in helping single-parent families.

As we considered our income support programs, we are moving forward to create a new income support program for people with disabilities, one that allows them dignity and respect. We have created a task team of folks from community as well as from our ministry. Together they are exploring the implementations of the new program, how it will work, and identify issues that we must attend to as we move forward. Last week that same task team held broader public consultations and engaged more of the community in working towards a positive solution. We are looking forward to the implementation of that program, beginning this year.

As we examined changes to income assistance, we encountered new challenges, not the least of which was an outdated information system. And again we have acted. We committed the needed dollars, and we are currently involved in a request for proposals to update and modernize the income assistance information system, taking action to address a challenge ignored too long in today’s world of rapidly changing technology. This new system, when implemented, will allow integration across the ministry, giving all staff a chance to have

a more holistic view of those people we serve. And it will allow the ministry to seek a broader range of options in improving services to clients.

And what of seniors? We moved to increase the seniors' income plan, not tinkering around the edges but to more than double the income through the plan that they receive. We did it to respect the contribution those seniors have made to our great province. We will be there in the long term for seniors and we will treat them with the respect that they deserve.

And today there is hope with people with disabilities. In addition to the new income support plan for people with disability, we are moving forward with an aggressive agenda to eliminate the wait-list for services for these people. Already having a number of specific projects in place, we will very shortly move over 100 individuals off the wait-list — nearly a 25 per cent reduction in just a few short months. This is being done through a tremendous partnership with community agencies across the province. This is an open and exciting time where our province is coming together to ensure that we do the right thing in supporting people with disabilities.

The member for Saskatoon Centre and I had the opportunity in September to spend five great days with representatives of community-based organizations across the province. They were invited into an open and honest conversation around the challenges they face and to seek ideas to make things better in the work that we all do together.

And we responded to what we heard, as we said we would. We are pleased to be able to have increased the base grants for our CBO partners by 12.3 per cent in only 16 short months of being government. We have followed through on a number of initiatives that we heard, including working with community partners to build a plan to bring 211 telephone service to Saskatchewan and develop a web-hosted information sharing and networking opportunity for the CBOs. We will begin to enter into long-term contracts with our CBO partners this budget year.

We have moved to standardize and increase the private care home rates across the province, which was another sadly neglected area by our previous government. We have increased the rates paid for funerals for those people who unfortunately pass away while on social services. We have made major increases in support of the mobile crisis response units across our province. We ensured that there is no claw back of the income from the registered disability savings plan.

And the list goes on. We will continue to advance ideas and suggestions put forward by CBOs during the summits and those that come forward in the future as we continue to work together in a new, open, and inclusive relationship.

Considering housing, we have seen many actions taken to move forward in a positive manner to address the challenges. I have already mentioned the changes to shelter rates and the rental housing supplement earlier. That was a direct response to the task force on affordable housing. Two gentlemen, who didn't make a big production out of the process but rather who went out and listened, were open to advice and new ideas, and who put together a solid report with a list of thoughtful

recommendations for which they should be commended. It was released in a very open and public way.

And we have acted on those recommendations already. We are looking forward to the passing of legislation soon so that we can get a more open and inclusionary board in place to better steer the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation. The new board, when in place, will ensure openness in the operations of the corporation, and we are confident that they will provide more responsive and effective housing programs.

And how are we doing on the other recommendations? Well we increased the shelter rates, as mentioned. We changed the way communities are categorized for those shelter rates to be more reflective of the reality of the market rents. We increased the threshold for seniors to qualify for social housing. We reduced income taxes. We reduced property taxes. We have amended *The Residential Tenancies Act* to extend the notice period for rent increases. We have increased emergency shelter rates. We have increased the number of emergency shelter spaces in the province. We have supported the development of student housing in both P.A. [Prince Albert] and in Saskatoon. We have worked with the federal government, which has resulted in the extension of the existing housing programs, as well as a major investment in affordable housing as a part of the federal infrastructure investment.

We have also invested needed resources towards housing. We have been spending for 2009 alone of over \$50 million in support of affordable housing, 29.3 million in the economic booster shot, 10 million in the transfer from Social Services ministry announced last week, and of course 14 million additional dollars which is contained within this budget.

Today I think we also need to discuss our child and family services. The Children's Advocate, in his report on foster home overcrowding, has helped to lift the veil that hid the realities faced in our child welfare system. We are releasing data that has been frustratingly absent historically. This will be updated regularly and posted to our ministry website in an open and honest manner. This will allow all involved a chance to know what is happening and not to be surprised by sudden revelations as we move forward to improve the situations of those children who so desperately need our help to better their future.

Actions have been taken. We have increased spending for child and family services by over 40 per cent — more than \$40 million in our first two budgets, \$25 million alone in this budget — funding that has been desperately needed. We maintained the previous government's commitment just prior to the election to hire 60 more front-line workers in child and family services and to increase the rates paid to foster families by 15 per cent.

And now we are moving forward with a series of new initiatives — 150,000 for promotional activities to recruit more foster families. Money is committed to allow the Foster Family Association to hire a dedicated First Nations foster family recruiter. We are going to create a foster family referral program to enhance recruitment as well. We are going to establish a family finders program to support the recruitment of kinship care families. We are going to increase the funding for foster families an additional 3 per cent in this budget. We will provide resources to invest in intensive family support

programming, exciting projects such as the mentorship program just announced in Saskatoon with the Central Urban Métis Federation Inc.

We will standardize group home rates of pay across the province. We will expand the respite programming for foster families. We will create a mentorship program to support new foster families. We will enhance the damage compensation for foster families, and we will provide new provisions to appropriately recognize and compensate foster families for participating in the PRIDE [parent resources for information, development, and education] training program. We will be monitoring our progress closely and we hope it will all be positive. But where not, we will be honest about the need to change direction, to correct errors, and to continue to take action to make things better as we do all we can to better the life of Saskatchewan children.

I would like to take a few minutes to discuss where we're headed, which is what we hope to achieve. We'll have a system dedicated to the objectives of building self-reliance and of allowing individuals and families to have control over their lives and their futures. Our income programming will have supports needed that will ensure that people have opportunities to earn more income as they transition from assistance to self-reliance.

Our new income program for people with disabilities will offer dignity and will be easier to access and less of a burden to these people. Through our tax policies, low-income individuals and families will be able to benefit from maintaining more of their income that they need.

We will have modernized information systems supporting our income support programs so that we could be more responsive from the human side where workers will be less forced on pushing paper and filling in forms and more able to have a relationship with those that we assist. Our people will be closer to the community, involved and engaged in supporting those communities to create a brighter future.

People with disabilities will no longer have to languish on a wait-list to receive the appropriate place to live or a program to support their daily living. Our housing corporation will be gauged in the community it serves. It will be strategic in its investments, knowing that we are part of a community, working with people to understand the need, and working with the industry to find the most effective strategies to provide affordable housing. Our housing investments will be productive and will be faster and more responsive in bringing housing to those most in need.

Our CBO partners will have a meaningful and respectful place in service delivery where we can work together collaboratively to face challenges to celebrate our success with one another. Most importantly we'll have a child protection system that recognizes the needs of children and youth are the first priority, with children living in our care in a safe and a secure environment.

I thank you for that, Mr. Chair, and I open it to questions.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. Before I call on the

committee for questions, I would like to indicate that we have a further substitution this evening. Mr. Forbes is substituting for Ms. Junor. And, Minister, if you have officials that join you at the table to answer questions, could you identify the officials for the committee and for Hansard. It would be most helpful. With that, I open the floor for questions, and I recognize Mr. Forbes.

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And now I understand we have to about 9 o'clock. Is that correct?

The Chair: — Yes.

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you very much, and we'll get right down to work. We've got a lot to do. I've got lots of questions. I want to thank the officials for coming out. I appreciate that. I know my colleague . . . Can we use our names in here?

An Hon. Member: — Yes.

Mr. Forbes: — Mr. Taylor has some questions that he would like to start with, so I'll let him go with that, and then we'll get right down to some questions I have. Thank you.

The Chair: — Mr. Taylor.

Mr. Taylor: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. And, Minister, thank you as well for your comments, and your officials for your attendance.

Last year at this time, well almost this time — it was April 28 when we did estimates last year — and I asked some questions specific to housing in North Battleford, and I'd like to revisit those questions and ask for an update. Last year I was raising some questions about a \$3 million commitment that had been made prior to the 2007 election for affordable housing in The Battlefords under the neighbourhood revitalization initiative.

Mr. Jones last year indicated that an expression of interest had been posted and the department was in the process of reviewing at least four submissions from The Battlefords for funding under this program. A year later I've had no announcements with regards to additional affordable housing expenditures in The Battlefords, and so I ask you today what has happened to that program. What has happened to those applications made under that program?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Taylor. Of the process, which as you said, money was sort of earmarked prior to the election, my understanding is 2.136 million has been prioritized through the expression of interest submission, which includes 24 units.

I'm just going to turn to my officials to see what can be officially announced because we're working with the groups right now. There's three groups that I see before me, but I'm not sure what can be made public at this point. This is Mr. Chaykowski with the Housing Corporation.

Mr. Chaykowski: — Thank you very much. So a year ago Mr. Jones was in this chair at that time and talked about the expression of interest. We've been working with proponents that had put forward proposals through that. As the minister

mentioned, there are three that had been prioritized for funding. We're working with those to get those to the point of ready for announcement. They haven't been publicly announced at this time but there is, within that package for rental development, there is about, when you add up the three pieces, or those three projects, that's \$2.1 million.

[19:30]

Beyond that there has been other investments in terms of home ownership program. There's about another \$140,000 in terms of commitments that have been made to home ownership. Some of those have gone the full distance, and others, another family is working through trying to find the accommodation.

Mr. Taylor: — Okay. Thank you. I appreciate that update. As you can imagine, folks in The Battlefords are most anxious for a formal announcement. I just want to say for the record, sooner rather than later, but at the same time indicate that Battlefords, being in the west side of the province, benefiting from growth in the oil and gas sector, we've also got a very large number of new immigrants, we have a large number of students moving in from First Nations communities surrounding The Battlefords, and a lot of seniors who are leaving their homes and looking for rental accommodation.

The rental rate for affordable housing anyway in The Battlefords is virtually zero. So having additional units of affordable housing for students, immigrants, First Nations people, and seniors is a high priority for the people of The Battlefords. I don't have a week go by without somebody phoning my office. And so I appreciate the fact that there could be as many as, did you say 24 units announced in the near future? That would be wonderful. I know the next question will be, and when are there going to be more announced? Because simply the demand in The Battlefords is very high.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I don't foresee making major announcements beyond those that we just recently made until we have the new board in place. As you know, the legislation is before the committee. So once the board is in place, there'll be a number of tasks I'd like them to look. And that will be the stresses in the different communities, where the need will be the greatest, the existing programs and why some are obviously not working, and to take a look at the programs along with a number of other tasks that we would like them to look at.

But yes, I'm sure you are looking forward to the 24 units and the three groups that we're working with coming to fruition in The Battlefords. And I'm hearing from many, many communities just those very concerns expressed, with immigrants especially. That's really happening in my area where I live as well.

Mr. Taylor: — Okay. That would be all my questions, Mr. Chair. And thank you, Minister, and your officials, for those answers.

The Chair: — Before I recognize the next committee member, it's been brought to my attention that there are some committee members that are having difficulty hearing you, Minister. So if you and your officials could just turn up the volume just a wee bit, I think that would be helpful. No, just speak a little louder.

Sorry. The Chair certainly has no problem hearing you, but apparently one or two committee members have a bit of problem hearing you.

So with that, the Chair recognizes Mr. Forbes.

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you very much.

What I have is, I have a series of questions. First I want to just take a look at what's actually in the book on page 131 and 135, just to help me understand this more fully, and then we'll go to the plan. And then I have some general questions, some more specific ones about the foster care issue and about housing. And we'll see how far we get in this first section tonight.

First, when I look at page 131, I see under that under the FTE staff complement that you're down two, but I understand that they may be transferred. I think there was a transfer over to Education, there was a transfer over to Justice. Is that correct? One for . . . Well what happened to the two FTEs?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — That is correct. They were transfers. I'm not sure if you have the right departments. Mr. Hansen . . . Okay, so we have one transfer to Information Technology Office and one transfer to the Public Service Commission.

Mr. Forbes: — Then I'm mistaken, as I thought I read somewhere about one moving with the nutrition program to Education and one moving to Justice around the sexual assault initiative.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Those transfers did take place but the entire part of that budget was transferred, so it doesn't show up as an FTE reduction. It's like the FTE didn't exist. But you're correct; there was a transfer for those programs being transferred into Justice and the programs being transferred into Education. There was positions that went with the programming.

Mr. Forbes: — Good to know, and I do want to come back to human resources later. I know you allude to it in your plan that's on your website about some initiatives around human resources, so I'll come back to that in a few minutes.

But over on the next page, on 132 under accommodation services, it seems like quite a leap. I'm sure that it's relatively straightforward, but from 18 million to 24 million under accommodation services, can you explain the increase?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — That shows government-owned capital within the ministry. So for example as we work on building Dales House, that shows up there. So expansions within some of our . . . That one's in child and family services. As we own it, it will show up in that line if it's not taken over by a CBO.

Mr. Forbes: — And that is approximately \$5 million?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — It's under 5 million.

Mr. Forbes: — Five, okay. But close to 5?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — 4.8.

Mr. Forbes: — 4.8, okay. All right. Then under the employment support and income assistance, there's some numbers there that the Saskatchewan assistance plan relatively stays the same. There's a slight increase in that. But transitional employment allowance is significantly less — about \$8 million.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — We've had a significant reduction in clients.

Mr. Forbes: — Okay. Now that 8 million would almost represent a 30 per cent decrease. Has there been 30 per cent decrease in people on TEA [transitional employment allowance]?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I believe our announcement in December, I think it was December when we announced that year over year it was a 44 per cent decrease. But we're reflecting that the '08-09 budget would be 3,095 clients, and we're projecting that that will drop down to 1,950.

Mr. Forbes: — 1,050?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Which is a 31.1 per cent decrease.

Mr. Forbes: — Yes. That's huge. And so are you seeing the trending . . . I don't have my written questions with me here, but I did ask for the January, February numbers. We're not seeing that kind of decrease, are we?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — January and February are not the numbers where you're going to see significant decreases. Winter months tend to be more level and you'll see the major decreases usually within the spring and summer months. However, we have levelled somewhat. The major decreases was towards the end of last year, so we had last year's budget paying those benefits — and now I'm talking about calendar year — but those numbers have reduced even though they've levelled with a slight reduction. We're now looking at those numbers in the new budget.

Mr. Forbes: — All right. Well that's fairly significant. And I hope that that's the situation we're happening here in Saskatchewan. But we'll come back to that perhaps.

And of course the senior income plan, that's the increase, and that's a good thing. The employment supplement. What's interesting is the child benefit is staying exactly the same. Are you projecting then that there will be the same number of children on social assistance and we're seeing a flat rate there? Or why is it exactly the same?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — No, we overbudgeted last year by approximately . . . I forget the dollar value that we overbudgeted, but this should accommodate 460 additional children above what we had last year. But we had allocated too many dollars last year for the number of clients that we had.

Mr. Forbes: — Now this one we have talked a little bit about in the House. And we welcome the news of 1,000 new child care spaces, but we see that the child care parent subsidies remain at 17.1. Last year it was budgeted at 17.1 million and this year's budget is 17.1.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I'm sorry — the subsidy from our ministry?

Mr. Forbes: — Right, the child care parent subsidies.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — That is something I have no pressure from. I've had no calls on the amount of subsidy that we pay for child care. The calls that I get, quite frankly, is lack of spaces. So it's not that we will totally ignore it but I don't feel that it is the number one pressure right now, those rates. But definitely the spaces is a huge pressure.

Mr. Forbes: — So was the 17.1 million in the previous year used up?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — No.

Mr. Forbes: — No? What was the amount used?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — There was 14.975 was used.

Mr. Forbes: — Any particular reason you think that might be happening, an underutilization of a program like that?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Not all child care spaces are subsidized — like just our clients — so it just is a change in a client base. Or as I said, we have clients that aren't somewhere where there is accessible child care spaces. Because that is another area where Saskatchewan is grossly behind and we need to work very diligently to expand those spaces, because it is affecting, obviously, the clients that I serve in my ministry, being able to access spaces.

Mr. Forbes: — Has that historically been underutilized? In the past four or five years, has it been trending that it's always been underutilized?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — What do you mean by underutilized?

Mr. Forbes: — Well if the ministry, formerly the department, had set aside a number that it consistently was under, not fully spent.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — So what you're suggesting is, do we constantly project it wrong?

Mr. Forbes: — No. Well maybe. I'm just saying, it would be interesting to know is it a one-timer, that it just happened one year that it was wrong, or had it been . . . Because I know this is a changing landscape as well.

[19:45]

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Right. Looking at the history of that particular program, no, it isn't a trend of projecting it wrong. And I mean in this ministry, it really is all projections on the number of clients in any given program. In 2005-2006 for example, 11.6 million was budgeted for and 11.48 was used. In '06-07, 16.2 was budgeted; however, only 13.9 was used. In '07-08, 16 was budgeted for again, 15.98 was used, so very close to the full amount was used. And then '08-09, 17.1 was budgeted, 14.97 was used. So there's a couple years there I listed where the mark was off, but it is guesstimates on the

clientele of the year for that year.

Mr. Forbes: — And I'm wondering if it's also in anticipation of the creation of child spaces, of the child care spaces happening and then being ready for that. But I'd like to then move on to . . . And it's somewhat the similar issue but this is one I have been thinking a lot about, is the rental housing supplement. And the ministry has indexed that, and that's good, but I've seen through my written questions that it seems to be that there has been about 32 or 3,700 people take it up.

The increase has been under the disabilities aspect of that program. That's growing, but not the families and that seems odd that when it was first put into place — in '06 or '07 this program was launched, the rental housing supplement — when it was first put into place, it went up to about 3,000, 3,200, and then it sort of hovered around there. And I'm wondering is that a concern to the ministry.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I think if you're asking am I seeing a concerning trend in the change of clientele that are accessing the rental supplement.

Mr. Forbes: — Well I'm wondering. And that's an interesting aspect. Is there a fluidity, is there a change in people who are taking advantage of that as they move in and out to other, different kinds of accommodation?

But it just seemed to me that in the times that were so tough in Saskatoon and in other communities that this would be a program that would be taken up really well. For example, I asked some written questions about the waiting lists, and there's no waiting list for this program. People get on it right away. And I was a little surprised at that because I thought, this is a good program; people should be taking advantage of it; why aren't they taking advantage of it?

And so I'm wondering if the ministry's thought about this. Have they thought about if this is meeting the need? In theory it sounds like the right thing to do, but is it really getting to help people who need support in the housing costs so their homes are affordable?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — It's definitely a targeted program, and it was introduced under your party when you were government, targeted to families and people with disabilities. And I still think it's a very important program obviously, because we indexed it and increased it.

The statistics that I've just been given by my officials is from October to March, so that is how many months — six months — the past six months we've had an increase of almost 700 clients. So that's fairly substantial.

Mr. Forbes: — From what, from . . .

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — This is provincial.

Mr. Forbes: — Yes, but what's the total number?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — That is from 3,047 to 3,683. So yes, I think the uptake is . . . There's a number of months, from April to May for example, it was a reduction of 2,913 down to 2,911,

but then in September it had fallen to 2,884. But from then it's been kind of a steady climb. So I don't see it totally dropping off, and I still see it as a very important program.

Mr. Forbes: — I agree. It's a very important program and the indexing and that has made it even more viable and valuable, but I'm just wondering if people know about the program. With that kind of number, I was expecting it to be in the five figures, not in . . .

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Well we substantially increased the budget, as you see, to accommodate the increases that we made, as well as the indexing that we incorporated. There was fairly substantial increases in that, and the shelter allowance in January which was the six-month anniversary date of revisiting the shelter. There should perhaps be — and we're not precluding that there shouldn't be — maybe a better strategy of letting people know that this is available, and it's available to, for example, the Saskatchewan employment supplement clients may also be eligible for this. So we could perhaps do a better job of making the availability of this program known.

Mr. Forbes: — I think that would be a very worthwhile thing. And especially the fact that because of the idea that you're lifting them into quality circumstances is a very important thing.

And then just to move on to page 133, and that is under . . . And I just don't know what this is about, so forgive me on this one. This is under supporting families and building economic independence. The program delivery goes down from 63.6 million to 62.1. And so if you have any clarification on that, those numbers . . .

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I circled it. I'll just turn it over to Don Allen.

Mr. Allen: — Don Allen. There are two items within that particular section of the estimates, and all that happened was that there was some expenditures that were in the program delivery that really should have been in the income support call centre. So you'll notice that there's really just been a switch from one area to the other area.

Mr. Forbes: — Okay, thank you. And then over here, and I think these are both things that the minister's alluded to, and we'll get into the questions. One is around the child and family community-based organizations — and that's a significant increase and that's good — and the Sask Housing, which we'll talk at length about.

So those are technical questions I have on those couple of pages, but I wanted to now go to some comments I had. I noticed that now this year — it could have been past years, but it's the first time I noticed it — you have posted on your website the plan for 2009-10. So that was helpful as I went through this.

I'm not going to go through each part, but I do have some questions. And I believe it's on page 5 under the human resources, government goal — promises. And it deals with the last part in terms of human resources within the ministry. And last year, of course, we talked about some changes in executive

level, and I'd be curious if the minister has any comments. I know that you have now four acting people at the deputy or that senior level. Do you see changes? Or how are things at the executive level?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — One of the biggest changes that we have, I think the most significant change, is to have someone as an acting deputy minister or for assistant deputy minister for child and family services, to give that a focus.

Mr. Wihlidal is no longer just acting, he's a permanent position now.

A Member: — He always has been

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Or he always has been.

A Member: — Yes.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Okay, so we haven't actually made major changes to date.

Mr. Forbes: — I see Larry is acting for housing. I got the sense earlier that you were talking about you were waiting to see what would happen with Sask Housing in terms of its board?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — That's true. We'll be making no major decisions on that position until we have a board in place.

Mr. Forbes: — Okay. And Cheryl Senecal as policy is acting as well?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Yes.

Mr. Forbes: — And will that continue or what's . . .

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Temporarily. We will be looking at making it a permanent position.

Mr. Forbes: — And the fourth person I was talking about was actually an acting director, not a deputy minister or connected at that level. It was Len Frohlick.

But what I wanted to ask about in this plan was around the, on page 5:

Undertake measures to support skill development within the Ministry, and to recruit, retain and engage staff in the development and delivery of social services.

[And] Develop a Ministry human resource plan.

Can you talk a little bit about what that will entail? What is that?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — We have a challenge within our ministry — again, it's not new or unique — of retention of the front-line social workers, in particular in child and family services. It is not an easy job by any means, and there is a fairly rapid turnover, and so we've had discussions without coming to any resolution or solution on how to address this. And those discussions as the management team will continue because I do think it's an important issue, and in an important area of the

changeover staff that we have in the front line.

Mr. Forbes: — I think that's a very important discussion to have. I know I've talked to a few people about this. And one of the issues — and I don't really understand this fully, not being a social worker — but when you're working in the front line, how many are actually trained in social work? How many are required to be registered with their professional organization? That's voluntary in nature. I compare that with teaching, with the STF [Saskatchewan Teacher's Federation] where it's not voluntary; every teacher must be registered with the STF in the public school system.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — In child and family services, they are all BSWs [Bachelor of Social Work]. In income assistance, they are not necessarily. I have met a few times with the association and had discussions with them. However the direction we've taken so far — and that could change — but for now, I have basically taxed the association with the job of talking the workers into wanting to join them. It is voluntary; it's not mandatory.

I know myself, in the past, when I was a member of a professional association, it was voluntary at the time. And the association itself had enough benefits — or I thought at the time — to make it worth my while to become a member of the association.

So they do agree that there's work that they need to be doing on their front on even making awareness to potential members, possibly right in school when they're taking their training. So it isn't mandatory for workers in social assistance to be members of the association, but they do have to be trained to be in child and family services.

Mr. Forbes: — One of the challenges of course is the whole issue of ethics or professional conduct. And of course if the person working within a professional circumstance, like a social worker, what are the procedures in terms of complaints around professional conduct now?

[20:00]

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Okay. If they're a member of the association, of course they have processes to deal with what would be considered misconduct. If they are not, there is processes through the Public Service Commission that we have here within government. There are policies of course within the ministry and expectations, level of conduct expectations within the ministry. And should that come into question, there are processes through the Public Service Commission that must be followed.

Mr. Forbes: — So what would be the percentage of the social workers in the child protection branch that would belong to the professional organization?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I have heard it and it's eluding me tonight, but we can get you that number because I know I should know it.

Mr. Forbes: — And I might give you a written question on that. I don't know.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Something in the back of my head is telling me that it's around the 50 per cent but . . .

Mr. Forbes: — Fifty per cent. Okay.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I'm dragging this really from the back of my mind.

Mr. Forbes: — Sure. We should get exact . . .

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — So we should get the right number.

Mr. Forbes: — Okay. Then in terms of the number of investigations that have gone on in the Public Service Commission, would it be very many? Or first has there been very many come to the ministry, and how many have then gone further into the Public Service Commission?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — That I'll have to ask my officials because any smaller investigations or whatever isn't brought to my attention.

Mr. Hansen: — You specifically are referring to the child welfare?

Mr. Forbes: — Yes. It actually could be the whole ministry, you know. Really I'm more interested in the process as opposed to one branch that I'm thinking of. I'm just curious about how well does the system work.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Probably to be in all honesty with you, you would probably get the best answers in estimates through the Public Service Commission to the processes that they have in place. Because I sort of know them, but I wouldn't be very credible in giving answers about the Public Service Commission procedures and rules. And I'm sure you would get very, very good answers from them.

Mr. Forbes: — Good. Thank you. Then I'll leave this for now. We may come back to it. There's some things that when we talk about the foster care situation, I'll have some questions related to that.

But I did want to ask you before we get into that, of course, I thought this report *Health Disparity in Saskatoon* was a landmark piece of work. And of course coming out in November, I'm just curious as to what the ministry's response and how they are looking at that for direction. What could we expect in the next while from that?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I have spent some time on that report. I've spent some time on the Ontario strategy to reduce poverty, and spent some time — little less time I have, just because of time restrictions — on what Alberta is doing and have sort of outlined the strategy that we are aiming towards within our ministry.

But specific to the Lemstra report, it's based on a premise that once you are poor, you're more likely to have health issues. And I guess the question to you then would be, do you agree with that premise. And if you do, that means that you would give the report more credibility than another who may question that premise.

My background, many years ago — far too many, more than I count — was health care, and also involvement with a number of people in health care. So I have to say, what about the individuals who due to complicated health conditions are limited in their ability to work? Are they not more likely to be poor? And so the health condition came before the poverty.

And research conducted actually within the ministry in 2001-2002 indicated that many individuals did come for assistance due to health conditions. I know I have some personal cases where that is indeed the case. Unfortunately circumstances happened with individuals' lives in health-related situations, and that then reduced their ability to generate an income.

Another that you and I have talked about very briefly, very briefly, is addictions, and I can name case after case after case of where a very promising individual somehow got involved in addictions, be it alcohol or drug abuse, and that led to health problems and poverty.

So that begins the sort of the questioning of Mr. Lemstra's reports. Many of his recommendations, I feel, are blue sky in nature, which isn't my nature at all. I believe strongly in action, and not just broad-brushed blue sky recommendations with no substance as to how in the world you would ever make them happen.

However, we have implemented a number of recommendations even prior to the report. One is no. 8 which is lower limit of tax exemptions, which we've already done. No. 9 in the recommendations is to review program effectiveness of Social Services programs. That's always under review. It was when your party was in government. It will continue to be so now that we are in government. No. 24 is expanding the affordable housing projects which of course is an ongoing process. No. 31 is to increase the monthly shelter allowance, which we did. So those were already done.

Some of the recommendations definitely deserve consideration, and others that I think are absolutely outrageously impractical and borderline irresponsible. So then the question becomes . . . You just said that you think this is a fabulous report that should have a lot of weight, of credibility. So what about no. 5? Do you believe that we should introduce legislation to eliminate child poverty? And if you do, who would you charge for breaking the law — the parents, the community, the government? What possibly would be the punishment for breaking the law because we have a child that fell below the level of poverty? It's an impractical, unworkable — in my mind, silly recommendation.

Another would be no. 22. Do you agree that we should cap annual health care spending increases? You know, well, that would be pretty significant to the direction that I think we need to go in health care. We start capping health care spending increases, then how do we address a number of areas because addictions and mental health — both which can lead to poverty and health disparities — fall under health care expenditures. This would mean that we couldn't afford to fund a children's hospital in Saskatoon. A large, huge, huge percentage of the health care budget is wages, so that would mean considering capping wages.

Then there would be no. 12, and he talks about the creation of a single resource for those who are unable to work, which would see identical and equitable assistance rates for those unable to work. So I wonder if that would be well-received within our disability community. I don't think I've ever seen a community so elated to know that they would be separated from what's deemed to be welfare. And right now there is an additional income level for individuals with disabilities, albeit not that high, but you know, it's something to be looked at in the future. It isn't addressed in this particular budget, but should we take that away because all people who can't work should be equal? Well I don't know whether I agree with that. I do think there is added expenses for individuals with disabilities that other people don't incur.

It was a report that was conducted in . . . you know, the investigation itself by Dr. Lemstra and Dr. Neudorf in 2006. When we have recommendations that are kind of out there, it tends to take away from recommendations that possibly could be very good, but you wonder where they're coming from. It's someplace in the report, and I couldn't find it when I was doing notes on the report. I think it's alluded to that 300 million would just solve the problem, and again, there is nothing to substantiate that. There is nothing to base that on. There is no suggestions of where that 300 million should be placed. Within the poverty strategy that we have as a government as a whole, we have spent way over \$300 million towards low-income and low-income supports and tax cuts, etc. And if that's the case then we've solved it, and I don't believe, I'm not delusional at all to think that we've solved the problem with over \$300 million of spending.

So I guess I think that you're more excited about the report than I am. I'm more excited about what we're doing and the measures that we've taken already in government. I've weighed them against what Ontario is suggesting, and Ontario brings a lot more into the equation. It's not narrow-minded at all. It brings a lot of pieces into the equation saying, hey, it's not just money. It's not just throwing money at it. And in fact there's evidence that just throwing money at it does not solve the problem in many, many cases; that we have to start within early childhood development. We have to look at education. We have to look at a number of pieces if we truly want to look at poverty.

And I don't believe that . . . I know there's a number of recommendations in different areas in Mr. Lemstra and Mr. Neudorf's report, but some of them are questionable as to whether they would work.

Mr. Forbes: — Well I appreciate your frank answer, and I think that's a good discussion to have. And I'm enthusiastic about it; I don't know if I'd use the word fabulous, but I can live with that.

And now it is interesting. You've picked a couple, and I thought no. 22 — I tried to glance to it right away — about putting the cap on health spending, coming from health researchers, is an interesting thing because I think actually what they're trying to get at is to be more proactive. And I think that throughout North America we see governments who are caught being reactive as opposed to proactive. If we could get ahead of the game, that would be far better.

And child poverty, that's an interesting one, and one that actually I find it is amazing many people don't realize the minimum wage that will go up to, on May 1 this year, could potentially be at LICO [low-income cut-off]. I don't know. I don't have access to those numbers, but they'd be very close to LICO.

But I do think that there's a lot of value in this report. I thought what was interesting was the fact that they didn't use the Saskatchewan information as much as they might have. But I thought that was the best thing, was the first recommendation or option they talked about, how can we develop a poverty reduction strategy. Well, I'm hoping . . . I'm all ears.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I would love to tell you what our strategy to date is. And strategies I think should be a live document, you know, to evolve. But what we have is a series of aggressive action steps, and as I mentioned earlier, I don't have a lot of patience for blue sky statements and mission statements and perhaps, maybe, someday, if. I believe in taking action, and we have taken a number of aggressive action steps to first fill gaps — that I mentioned earlier — left behind and to give people the tools and the supports that they need to transition from dependence to independence.

[20:15]

So what does that mean? So if you have an individual who is totally dependent, he or she or the family will have access to the general living allowance. They will have access to shelter allowance which, since forming government, we substantially increased to 70 per cent of the average market rate for a given community as determined by CMHC [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation]. We have indexed that to the average shelter rate that will be adjusted every semi-annually, so there's been a significant increase now in February of this year.

They may have access to rental supplement if they're renting. It is available to families with children and individuals with disabilities; it is not available to just a single individual. That is 30 per cent of the average shelter rate for a given community, as determined by CMHC, and 40 per cent of the average shelter rate, if the individual has disabilities or if a family member has a disability. So that is also indexed by our government and adjusted semi-annually.

They will have access to the low-income tax credit, which was introduced by our government to replace the previous sales tax credit with significant increases from the previous tax credit. So the basic and spousal tax credit increased to \$216 per person and \$84 per child for up to two children.

The income thresholds where the maximum tax credits begin to be even reduced, just begin to be reduced, was increased to \$28,335 from what was, under your party when you were in government, 13,935. So over double the income. This low-income tax credit income threshold increase will mean that 300,000 more residents will qualify for the credit, and we made it retroactive to 2008.

That person that is totally dependent will qualify for the transportation subsidy, which is the discounted bus passes that's available to major cities due to the government's commitment

to provide funding to the participating cities. That was a program that was began by the previous administration. And then on October 1, 2008 our government increased mileage rates paid to clients for funerals, medical appointments, and other important matters to 22 cents per kilometre per private vehicle, which is up from 17 per cent under the previous government, and 27 cents per kilometre when a driver is required, an additional 2 cents per kilometre for clients in the North.

That individual will have, their utilities are paid what they are. The actual bill is paid for SAP [Saskatchewan assistance plan] clients. And then on October 1, 2008 our government increased the home heating allowance for TEA clients by 20 per cent.

If that is a family, they will qualify for the Canada child tax benefit, the universal child care benefit available, the GST [goods and services tax] rebate. They will have access to services offered through the number of CBOs to assist the individuals and families in overcoming barriers that they may have and in offering skills training.

Since the election, our government has increased the funding to CBOs to stabilize that very important resource. We increased funding by 12.3 per cent. And also beginning with last year's budget, our government has increased funding to food banks by 20 million over four years to offer more skills training.

We have, for clients through our ministry, we have Jobs First skill training that we offer, parent support workshops for TEA clients that are deemed employable, and that was introduced in the '08-09 budget, and we delivered that in partnership with Advanced Education. Their drug costs will be totally covered, I believe, if they are a client of Social Services, and there is some allowances for children's activities. So that's a totally dependent person. If they then start to work a little bit, they can earn up to \$125 before anything and still receive all of the previous benefits that I mentioned.

So maybe that is an area that has been ... [inaudible interjection] ... Okay, then we have a minimum wage job. So then on May 1 it will be increased, which will be the second highest in our country at 9.25. They'll still qualify for the rental supplement, they'll still qualify, or they may qualify for the Saskatchewan employment supplement, which again was increased by our government, as was the income threshold so that they still get support.

Anyone on the Saskatchewan employment supplement still qualifies for the low-income bus pass; they still qualify for the low-income tax credit; they will have a child care subsidy through our ministry. They will still qualify for the Canada child tax benefit available for families, and the universal child care benefit available for families, the GST rebate. And the drug costs, beginning January 1, 2008 is covered for children 14 years and under, for a maximum they'll have to pay is \$15 dollars. They'll also qualify for the active families benefit which our government introduced.

And that then is gradually reduced as they gain independence. So as you go through the stages, there is supports to bring that person or family from total dependence through to independence.

Mr. Forbes: — Are you telling me then — and it is quite a long list, but as I said earlier, for example, the rental supplement which less than 4,000 people in this province take advantage of; and I think more people should, so there's some reason they're not — but are you saying then that, you know, generally speaking we have a poverty reduction strategy in this province and the job is done?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Of course I never said that, nor did I give everything that I have here because your impatience was obvious.

Mr. Forbes: — Well I'm saying though is there are different things that, you know, when I look at your baseline for how you're going to have social assistance beneficiaries as a per cent of provincial off-reserve population, and it goes from 6.1 down to 5.3 — actually that's what it's gone — and I'm not sure where you're aiming to go after that. That's where it is right now.

What do you see? What are the numbers? What are your benchmarks? Have you set benchmarks for how many people will be taking advantage of these programs, and you're going to make sure, or you have a reason to believe that that's going to be the case?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Our benchmarks right now — and I've said it before; I'll say it again — our benchmarks are filling in the gaps left behind by your administration when you were in government. Four hundred and forty individuals on a waiting list with disabilities, that's a benchmark — to eliminate that. To bring up the fuel rates. To get shelter rates where they're not sitting there for 12 consecutive years while rents are going up, and to get them to be responsive to a market that's changing, that's the benchmark which we indexed.

Once we get some gaps filled here, then we can stand back and say, okay what more needs to be done. But I'll tell you, in this first year in government, we are filling in gaps. And we were talking earlier about child care spaces. That's another one. I think we're at ... Oh, I forget the number, but our neighbouring provinces of Alberta and Manitoba are thousands of spaces ahead of us. That's the legacy that the Saskatchewan Party government inherited.

So then to sit back when your government never set targets, never had a strategy, never had a plan, and now to demand a new government to have a plan, when we inherited a legacy of gaps and negligence in leaving people behind, is ludicrous.

Mr. Forbes: — You know, I would suggest this. You know, I'm here to find solutions, to get understandings of where the ministry's going. But to suggest that the province was in ruins when you came along is just not true.

And it was unfortunate that the Premier had alluded to the financial situation of the province as stark, found the cupboard stark. But with \$2.1 billion to start with; to start with, if only we had \$2.1 billion in '91 to start with. We were far below that and so to compare the two is not quite right. And we know what the situations were.

And we can have this long debate, but I do have other specific

questions about the things here that we would, I would like more answers on. But I do appreciate the philosophical discussion too because I think that that helps us understand where you're coming from. So with that, I'd like to move on to foster care, if I could ask you a few questions about that.

Now I'd like to refer to your document of February 2009, and we have in many times said that we support many of the initiatives that you are taking. But we do have some specific questions I have about page 2. And that is the data that you have, and it's pages 9 to 11:

. . . describes in a clear and forthright manner the situation in the child welfare system. The data will be posted on the Ministry website . . . and will updated regularly.

Has it started to be posted and or when can we expect to see some of this information?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I'm being told that it is posted.

Mr. Forbes: — It is posted, so if we were to go . . . What would we see on the website? Where would it be on the website; socialservices.gov.sk.ca, it's there?

A Member: — Yes.

Mr. Forbes: — And we would see, what kind of data would we see?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I'm just going to turn it to the director of child and family services, Andrea Brittin.

Ms. Brittin: — Good evening. The information was posted in February. It will be updated in either May or June. What will be posted on there is some basic client information that will provide folks a look at number of children in care, number of child protection families, number of children placed in foster homes with more than the recommended four, that kind of client information. And it will actually be the information that was contained in your background, updated on a regular basis.

Mr. Forbes: — So what I've got here, I think, off the website is what is there now. I know there is some forms about foster care, if you were interested in becoming a foster parent, that type of thing. It's up there right now.

You have talked about setting some real targets to expand capacity during the next fiscal year. It's 200 additional spaces. What is the long-term need do you think that you'll have to have over the course of the next multiple years? When do you see that you'll have enough foster families and then we'll be turning the corner as a province?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I would have to sit here and actually do the math. It's a difficult question to answer. It is a changing target yet again. We are definitely seeing in the cities of Saskatoon and Regina an accelerated rate of children coming into care. That is, as you look at the charts, is rather alarming. The foster family situation has not been able to meet that type of increase, obviously.

And as I had mentioned in the address to our plan on moving

forward in child welfare, we will be looking at more group-type settings, especially for our youth. We're also quite excited about the announcement we made with CUMFI [Central Urban Métis Federation Inc.] which is more of a wraparound situation where we bring in mentor moms to try to heal the families.

So there is so many different models that we're looking at, as well as aggressively looking at kinship care. I'm very hopeful of the success of that program — the pathfinders?

[20:30]

A Member: — Family Finders?.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Family Finders. We're going to work aggressively to find family members who would be interested in taking some of these children into their care. So there's so many areas that we're looking at that, to just say foster families alone is not the answer.

Mr. Forbes: — And I agree with the CUMFI. That seems like a very innovative project and I know they do really good work. On page 5, you've talked about "... an independent organization to conduct a policy compliance review." How is that going? Have you got a group together that is prepared to do the policy compliance review?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I'm being told that we're negotiating a contract right now, so we're unable to announce who that would be.

Mr. Forbes: — On page 6 you talk about the legislative review. And I think this is a very timely piece and I'm glad to see it. I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about the scope. I'm also curious in terms of who might be consulted, because I know we often talk about stakeholders, but I think the public has to have confidence in the system as well. Sometimes we have too . . . I don't know. We need to include as many people as possible because everybody does want to see the right thing done for the children of our province. So will there be some opportunity for the public to be engaged? Or what do you see happening over the next few months? Particularly if this is to be introduced in the fall.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Right, and that may be a challenge. Someone that I want in particular to be on the panel isn't available as soon as I had hoped. So this is a very credible person and the discussion needs to be around who is consulted within the process.

I know that we are not the first province by any means to do a review on their legislation that deals with child welfare. Ontario has done so. I believe BC [British Columbia] has done so in not too long ago, so we're going to take a look at how they conducted their review.

To have absolute open, public consultations, I'm not sure. I haven't given a lot of thought to the merit to that. A lot of people understand the issue but don't necessarily understand the legislation end of it which is different. So I haven't given any thought to having absolute open, public consultations, but there will be consultations of some sort.

Mr. Forbes: — When was the last time it was really overhauled? I don't know that.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — That's a good question. I'm being told about 1991.

Mr. Forbes: — Wow. So it needs a good look at.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Yes.

Mr. Forbes: — And I guess that's my other question is the scope. You know clearly there's some issues you have to deal with right away. But are you limiting the scope? Are you kind of taking a look of how wide your discussions will be about this piece of legislation?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — No, I think it can be looked at literally from end to end. And I mean there's some good things in the Act but because of the . . . If we're going to open it up and have consultation, I think everything should be open for discussion.

Mr. Forbes: — I appreciate that, especially after it being almost 20 years and would be almost 20 years when it gets passed and really fully implemented.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Precisely.

Mr. Forbes: — So thank you with that. I wouldn't mind some responses in terms of the work around the *Breach of Trust*. The report was quite a thorough report. I felt badly I couldn't be at the press conference. It seems to be one of those things . . .

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I missed you.

Mr. Forbes: — But I'm curious about recommendation no. 1. And that is where the Children's Advocate talks about reporting out every six months on the recommendations, and he actually talks about “. . . regarding each and every recommendation . . . to facilitate public reporting by the Children's Advocate Office.” So they can further report. What's your take on that recommendation and how might you help the Children's Advocate in their public reporting?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I guess my take on that is we can send him a specific . . . We could pull it off the website because we will be updating it. And we could print it off and send it to him if he likes, but it will be public.

Mr. Forbes: — So in terms of this, you won't be doing anything special to facilitate recommendation no. 1?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — We're responding initially to each of the recommendations to the Children's Advocate, but the progress will be public knowledge. And you know, my response is that the most immediate concern is obviously capacity. The whole report was on overcrowding, and without dealing with capacity, you're not addressing the most immediate concern. That's not to say that there isn't other issues involved, but the most immediate is to expand capacity, and that will be publicly online.

Mr. Forbes: — Fair enough. Thank you for that. So I'm not sure if I heard you right, so I don't want to put . . . So you will

at some time in the future be responding to each of the recommendations in some form?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — That should have been sent already, or not. It should have been sent already.

Mr. Forbes: — Okay. Well we're looking forward to that. There is some that . . .

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — It's prepared.

Mr. Forbes: — It's prepared. That's fair enough. Good. No. 15 I thought was very interesting, where he actually did talk in the report comparing it to the all-party legislative committee. But then when he talks about the recommendation no 15, it's more of an all-stakeholder special committee, and they're very different. But I thought it was an interesting concept of really creating some sort of committee to help guide the ministry with this very important issue. Have you thought about doing something like this, or is that in the works?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — The particular set-up that he's suggesting, yes, I've thought about it. No, it's not in the works.

Mr. Forbes: — Fair enough. Now going on to some further down. The whole issue around children and youth first action plan, and really that's when he starts to talk, I think — basically no. 26 and on into 30 — he talks about really, you know, much more than the ministry, but the Government of Saskatchewan embracing those principles. Is it something that you see? And I assume that Social Services and you as minister would lead this because you'd be the most familiar with this. It impacts you most directly. Is it something that the government has expressed some interest in pursuing?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — You were referencing no. 26?

Mr. Forbes: — 26 to 30 actually and it gets into, 27 talks about a vision action plan, references through some of their work and a vision. But essentially what it is calling on the government, much bigger than just the Ministry of Social Services, but any ministry that has any contact with or role with children would be embracing these principles.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Had you allowed me to finish the strategy to address poverty, I went on to the initiatives being done in Education, Advanced Education, health care. Because every one of the ministries, as you said, children are everywhere and in each and every one of the ministries. So yes, to adopt the principles was not a ministry decision. It was a cabinet decision.

Mr. Forbes: — Okay.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — So it was a discussion at the cabinet table, with agreement from my cabinet colleagues and the Premier, so that it is a governmental initiative to adopt the Children's Advocate principles. It was not just the Minister of Social Services.

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you. The last part of this, his recommendations really talk, from what I can gather, more talking about how youth, children would be able — I'm talking about sections, recommendations 42 to 45 — and talking about

court and talking about enabling children to obtain full status as a party in child welfare proceedings, a much more fuller justice process than there is now. Do you see this as something that might be part of the discussions when you review the legislation?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I'm not sure if it'll be part of the discussions on that particular piece of legislation. It's definitely discussions that I've had with the Minister of Justice already. We're looking at interjurisdictional comparisons and there is, sort of all over the map, different methods of having some sort of representation, legal representation, for children that are in care of the Crown.

And I think that we could do better as well. The discussions with the Justice minister right now are still very preliminary. But there are a number of initiatives that his ministry has taken towards family supports in court. It's another reason why we have moved sort of the sexual assault, domestic violence agencies into Justice because they're doing a lot in that area. And I think there is potentially, once he has a chance to go through what's available in other provinces, to come with some level that's better than what we're doing now. But it's still very preliminary at this point in time. Dr. Hansen.

Mr. Hansen: — Yes, Mr. Forbes. We've been meeting with the advocate, and there's a couple of things we've been meeting with. Like for example, in Saskatoon, there is a lot of representation — pro bono, the bar — in terms of providing representation by lawyers in certain cases. And that's only in one level of court; it's not in the lower level of court. There's nothing in there to . . . It's not permitted. It is in the higher level of court.

Regina, we're trying to expand that so that the same level of service on a pro bono basis in Saskatoon could be extended to Regina. And there's a whole series of initiatives vis-à-vis actually handling situations before you get to court. The whole notion of trying to . . . Court is not always the most efficient or effective way of dealing with these situations. A lot of court time is wasted. A lot of time, it's an adversarial approach.

So the advocate strongly believes, and we, as we endorse this. And we've been working, as the minister said, with Justice to really start to deal with things on a negotiation, bringing in new actors into this process to hopefully resolve a lot of these situations, so we don't have to go to court, to leave the child, and have a role for the parent in that whole process.

So we've been working on this and certainly we would see the legislation as enabling this. Apparently there's some excellent initiatives in Alberta, and some senior officials in the ministry have had discussions with senior officials in Alberta. This official advises me that it's a great idea, so we're going to pursue that.

Mr. Forbes: — I see our time is moving away real quick. And I've got lots more questions, but I would kind of want to tie up some of these things. Have you had a chance to meet with Elizabeth Fry folks? They're the ones who are advocates for women in jail.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — No, I have not. I'm trying to

remember. There was an attempt and something happened in their schedule or mine, but I have not met with them.

Mr. Forbes: — You know, I had a chance to meet with them, and they've asked me to raise some concerns. And I think it would be something worth exploring, particularly, you know — I didn't realize this — but women are the fastest growing prison population globally. And in Saskatchewan, it's the Aboriginal women that populate our prisons. And it's actually growing for women while it's decreasing for men which is just really . . . I'm amazed at that.

[20:45]

And for some of the crimes that they commit are not crimes that you would think that are dangerous to communities. And you're probably wondering why am I talking about this when I should be talking to Corrections. But really what's interesting is that we see they write, increasingly we are criminalizing and imprisoning women with social issues, poverty, mental health concerns, addictions, and fractured families. But they raise the question about how many Saskatchewan mothers are in prison and how many children are in care because their mothers are in prison.

And in fact actually it talked about some of the circumstances that are happening around the world — actually in South Africa where Nelson Mandela said, this can't work; we've got too many moms in jail and the families are falling apart. And they've taken a look at that to see if there is something they could do.

And, you know, it was interesting. They made a point. We were government at the time but when the strike was on a couple of years ago and more women went back home because there were going to be problems in the jails, that actually things were okay. And so the folks at Elizabeth Fry said, are there lessons we could learn here, particularly with the foster care situation where we're putting some young moms in jail for crimes that, where we go, should we take a look at this? Is this another area, when you're taking a look at a wide range of things, maybe we could revisit that one and say, is this really the best place? You know, obviously there are complicating factors but I did want to raise that with you as minister and if you have an opportunity, to take a look at that.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I think we're going to weigh a lot of merit on the CUMFI model. And it's going to become watched very closely — not just in Saskatchewan, by other jurisdictions as well — because the success of bringing in mentoring parents to heal families I think is going to be huge if it works well. I'm so very excited and optimistic about this, and that speaks to what you just said. If it's sort of minor infractions, is there some way to fix the problem and keep the family together and have a little guidance?

And so we're not there obviously. But there is things to be looked at, and we will be one small step at a time in changing the model of how we're working with families that are considered to be broken.

Mr. Forbes: — Well I appreciate that because there is things that we learn as we delve into this, and I do agree CUMFI has a

lot of street experience. And as we get to know some of these things, it's very important.

Just a quick question, a couple of quick ones. Last summer there was the signing of the historic child welfare framework between Canada-Saskatchewan-First Nations, and I'm just wondering how that was going. I did read something about the federal budget. Actually it was a Winnipeg paper talking about, I think just a couple of weeks ago, the federal government had only so much money. They were going to have to choose between four provinces. Only two were going to get funding.

How are things in Saskatchewan? Are we in? Are we okay?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I think our funding is solid. I don't think we have any specific proposal yet. It'll be basically decided by the First Nations communities. I don't think there's anything specific, but our funding is secure with the signing of the agreement.

Mr. Forbes: — Okay. There's nothing at risk here?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Not to my knowledge.

Mr. Forbes: — Not that you've heard. Okay.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Now we're dealing with the federal government . . .

Mr. Forbes: — Yes, and I know. It sounded like everybody was at risk. They were talking about Alberta, Manitoba, us, and I think it was Nova Scotia or New Brunswick. Manitoba hadn't signed their agreement. Alberta . . .

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Yes, I read something about Manitoba, yes.

Mr. Forbes: — Yes, and so they were deeply concerned because there was only \$20 million up and of course any one province could have used that money.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Oh absolutely.

Mr. Forbes: — But they were going to go to two. So we'll have to monitor that one. And the other question — well that computer system. How is that working, or not?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — We'll get someone. You need anyone but the minister to talk about IT [information technology] systems because . . . We'll turn it over to Ms. Brittin.

Ms. Brittin: — Okay. We are quite pleased in the progress that we're making. First of all, I need to say that replacing and improving the ministry's many, many outdated systems is quite a massive undertaking as you might appreciate, so we're in a place now where we're looking at buying the package. So as folks know, we did the RFP [request for proposal]. We have quite a lengthy process of evaluating the vendors that have come forward to say that they are able to provide a system for us.

The evaluation process has involved the ITO [Information Technology Office], Government Services, and about 50

ministry staff have been involved in the evaluation process. So the requirements that were identified, we had over 700 requirements, individual requirements for this case management system that will replace our existing system. So as you can understand, in order to evaluate the proposals against over 700 requirements is quite an undertaking, but we have made our way through that process almost. Once we have evaluated the proposals, based on what they've written for us, we will be undertaking demos of the systems to make sure that what they said on paper that they can do, that they can actually do for us. And so once those vendor demos are completed, we may even do site visits.

So that takes us to the place where we're actually purchasing a package. That unfortunately is sort of the easy part. Once we actually purchase the package, we need to configure that package for Saskatchewan. So obviously we have Saskatchewan legislation; we have Saskatchewan policy. And all of that needs to be configured into the new system.

And then once that's done, you need to go through an intensive testing process, and then we get to a place where we're actually converting all of the existing data into this system. So of course, for child and family services, it's all a manual data. We have piles of files. And we're going to have to somehow get those piles of paper files into the system.

On the income assistance side of the world, they have existing systems, and so some of that will be automated, although there's going to have to be interfaces that need to be built in order to make sure that that process works.

And so I go through all of this just to let folks know how big of a process this is. We are making good progress. We are pleased with the progress we've taken. And I do just want to say that the time that we've taken so far to move this project along and the time that we anticipate it to move along is consistent with other jurisdictions that have moved forward IT projects of this magnitude. So that's giving us some comfort as well.

So as already has been announced, we have prioritized child and family services. That is where we're going to be starting here so that we can get things moving for the folks that work for child and family, hopefully by 2010.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — That's why she answered the question.

Mr. Forbes: — So will you be under budget if you're taking a package? Will you be under budget? Or do you think you'll be close to the cost?

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Oh, please.

Ms. Brittin: — I think that we anticipate that the budget that we have will work for us for the out-of-the-box solution.

Mr. Forbes: — Okay. I think it's really important to be done right, obviously. And of course the whole question is making sure that . . . And I think that in the report it alluded to having a culture of people valuing and putting in good data because if you put good data in, you'll get good data out. And that's what you really want to get at the end of the day.

I just want to ask one last question, and it's very important. And that is, one, doing great work on the disabilities front and I think, you know, in terms of your attention to that. But this is one that is, I hope you don't see it as blue sky, but I think it's really important. It's in terms of leadership, and that's the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. And I did send you a written question, and you wrote back that the process is under way in Saskatchewan. Can you describe what is that process? How do you see this?

The reason I ask this — and this is as a former minister and I really see how this is so important — in Canada and the world we are looked at as leaders, and it's so amazing how we let things like this fall off the table just because we have so many other pressures. And we do have pressures in our provinces, no doubt about it. And the world looks at us and they wonder, why can't we do these things? And so I really do want to encourage you as minister to take a leadership role at the national level and say, this is important. We're taking care of other issues that the disabilities community has asked you to do, but we're actually even going further than that because it is critical.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — As the UN [United Nations] convention in the area of disabilities, as in child welfare as well — the UN convention on child rights — I don't have a specific initiative right now to go above and beyond what we're trying to address with the increase in supported living and the day programs. That has, I think, been keeping the officials full-time busy. However I couldn't enjoy working with a community more than I enjoy working with the disability community. And so as time allows, I'll be doing another round of meetings with the different groups, and I will be more than receptive to discussions on what further can be done.

It's interesting that you talk about leadership in areas of disabilities. I think that is bold, but something we should look to in trying to achieve in our country and on the international scene.

Mr. Forbes: — Well thank you with that. And I think the next section, I won't get into other questions. We haven't talked about housing yet.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Okay. I was just going to say, you want to give me a heads-up what to study next?

Mr. Forbes: — Well the next big ones are really basically housing and income assistance. I don't know whether my colleagues will have any ones that they want to come back to. And the CBO summit, what's happening at CBO world, we'll talk about that. And just those would be the big ones — CBO and housing. And we'll take it from there. And I appreciate, unless you folks have . . .

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — I want to thank you for the questions, for the debate, and the actual discussion. And some things are a philosophical discussion. And those conversations need to happen too in order to get good, solid ideas.

So I want to thank you for the questions tonight. I want to thank all my officials for coming tonight and helping us out with the whole endeavour of going through our estimates.

Mr. Forbes: — Well thank you as well. And to your officials as well, thank you very much.

The Chair: — Committee members, that concludes tonight's review of the estimates for the Ministry of Social Services.

I understand that there may have been a bit of confusion with regards to my opening comments. We will not be voting any estimates tonight or in the next number of meetings. Voting of estimates will be done at a later date in all ministries.

We will take a short recess to facilitate the exchange of ministers and officials. And when we resume, we will be continuing our consideration of the Ministry of Education's estimates.

At this time, the committee will recess for a short period of time.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

General Revenue Fund Education Vote 5

Subvote (ED01)

The Chair: — I'll call the committee back to order. We will continue with our examination of ministry spending estimates. We have before us the Minister of Education and his officials. This is the second time that the minister and his officials has appeared before the committee. Dealing with the estimates, vote 5 found on page 49 of the Estimates book.

Minister, I would invite you to introduce the officials that you have with you this evening and following that, we will commence with the questions that committee members may have for you.

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. And it's a pleasure again to be before the committee to address one of the largest areas of expenditure, of course, next to Health. This is a very significant amount of dollars, due to the changes that we made.

It's my pleasure to introduce many familiar faces to this committee but some new individuals as well this evening. Seated on my right, of course, is my deputy minister, Audrey Roadhouse. On my left is Helen Horsman, assistant deputy minister, and Darren McKee, also assistant deputy minister.

Behind me in the first row we have Dave Tulloch who is with financial planning and management. We have Lois Zelmer who is the executive director of early learning and child care. And we have Clint Repski and Rhonda Smysniuk who are with education finance and facilities. In the next row, we should have Angela Chobanik from education finance and facilities; as well as Rosanne Glass who is the policy, evaluation, and legislative services executive director.

And then in the last row, in no specific order, we have Sue Amundrud with curriculum and e-learning; Doug Volk with the Teachers' Superannuation Commission; Joylene Campbell with

the provincial library; Terry Meyers, regional and integrated services; Darryl Hunter, accountability, assessment and records; Elaine Caswell with children's services; and Gwen Mowbray who is the manager with the HR [human resources] services from the Public Services Commission.

So, Mr. Chair, those are the officials that are with me, and it'll be our pleasure to answer questions of the committee.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister, and welcome to all your officials who have joined us here this evening. Before I ask for if any members have questions for the minister, I should just indicate that we do have a further substitution. Mr. Wotherspoon will be substituting for Ms. Junor.

And I understand that Mr. Wotherspoon has some questions for the minister so, Mr. Wotherspoon, I recognize you.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And I thank the ministry officials and the minister for obliging the committee to answer some questions here tonight. We may as well get straight to it here.

I'd like to understand what's led to this sweeping centralization of education in Saskatchewan through the changes in education financing. These changes certainly bring a lot of long-term concern with regard to local level control and, in the end, high-quality education that we should expect here in our province.

So to understand this process and where we've arrived with this sweeping Act to centralize education in our province, I have questions specifically around the Reiter report, or the report for the member from Rosetown-Elrose. My first question would be with regard to the actual ministry support that this member and this report received, specifically the actual time allocation that it took in the '08-09 budget. If there is an equivalent FTE number that the minister could provide to this committee, we'd appreciate understanding what sort of resources this project took.

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Wotherspoon. I'll try to explain a little bit about how the report was commissioned, of course, and how it came about.

But first, I guess, your initial comment about the sweeping centralization causes me some concern because the governance model that we are following and will continue to follow with the elected boards of education has not changed. So there is no sweeping centralization of the powers of the board.

The only thing that is different is that the board will not have access to the property tax base. But we are working with the boards of education, and I know I've had the opportunity to speak with my deputy minister and my assistant deputy ministers tonight, who have been on the road meeting with 28 out of 29 boards of education already since budget.

We have been able to meet with 28 boards of education. The ministry officials have been able to listen to the boards, to have an idea what their concerns are about funding and whether or not specific changes or requests will be listened to, and the preparation of those budgets for all the boards. And the

meetings have gone very well; they've gone very well.

There is a degree of excitement out there. Yes, there are some concerns because boards of education and the members, the individual members, want to be assured that of course in the long term they will have adequate resources. And we're committing to doing that with them. And that's why over the next two years we're going to transition to a different method of allocating the funds to the boards.

So there will be no surprises for a board come the time of a provincial budget. The only thing that may change is if the province decides, the government of the day decides that they wish to have less money come from the property owners and change the mill rates, effectively lowering them so that property owners would pay less for education.

[21:15]

Now correspondingly of course there has to be a balance to that, and there has to be additional dollars provided by the General Revenue Fund through the budget that we see before us today. And that's why we're, you know, debating I guess, and answering questions on, you know, the most significant change to the education budget in the province's history. When we're starting to talk about the addition of \$241 million to the budget, that's the kind of change that was necessary to ensure that boards of education are adequately funded.

Now the process where the board will continue to build its budget, they will continue to determine the local programs. They will continue to determine what schools they will operate, what programs they will have at those schools. They will continue to work within that budget. And they're going to continue to do so.

Now when we look at how did we get to this point, of course the Premier asked the member for Rosetown-Elrose, Mr. Reiter, to review all previous materials, to make himself available to all people across the province. And in fact Mr. Reiter broadened that. He consulted with me on a regular basis. It was a pleasure working with Mr. Reiter in terms of determining, you know, what his goals and his objectives were and then providing the necessary people and the necessary aid to ensure that he could do his job.

He travelled throughout the province. He visited the province of Alberta. He visited the province of Manitoba. And basically his work, his really extensive work, started after last year's budget. So really probably post-April 2008. And it lasted until this year's budget. I received the report a little earlier than that. I received the report, the final copy of the report, in February 2008.

I think your question was, you know, what time was dedicated by an individual. We had one individual from our ministry who was responsible for assisting Mr. Reiter within the ministry and I would think that we could probably say that there was the equivalent, like one full-time equivalent was probably used up over the course of the year.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thank you, Minister. What was the total cost of conducting the report?

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Probably three areas of expenditure that I can highlight for you, Mr. Wotherspoon. There were three — they're referred to as S4's — there were three submissions to the Ministry of Education from Mr. Reiter. In May 2008 it was \$374.15, in June 2008 it was \$1,348.13, and in September 2008 it was \$1,515.72. Those two larger numbers are the trips out of province.

So we had a total there of \$3,238. Those would have been expenses paid to Mr. Reiter from our ministry to do additional work beyond his sort of regular duties as an MLA, which was, you know, meeting with individuals. And those were done at his remuneration as an MLA, and his job, okay.

Now beyond that, Mr. Melvin, Mr. Craig Melvin was contracted by the ministry before the Jim Reiter report and was on a different project. But we also asked Mr. Melvin to provide some additional help, and there were some additional costs. From September 8 to February 28, Mr. Melvin was paid \$29,325 dollars for everything that he did, which included some assistance to Mr. Reiter.

And of course we have our individual that I introduced to you from our staff, Angela Chobanik, who is a person within the ministry who, as I said, full-time equivalent, probably we could say that 100 per cent of her cost for one year would have been allocated to that. So from what I can see in terms of the costs, those would be the full costs of the Reiter report.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Okay. So just about or maybe just under \$100,000 of costs that have been detailed here. I guess the question to the minister would be if he would commit here to this committee to providing the actual calendared timeline of meetings that the member from Rosetown-Elrose conducted and who he met with specifically through that period of time. If the minister could provide that to the committee or in hard copy format, that would be valued.

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — A very extensive consultation process was followed by Mr. Reiter. And I don't have the timelines and I don't know if Mr. Reiter has tracked the timeline as far as the day that he met with each of these groups. But for the record, Mr. Chair, I can indicate that the consultations occurred in three different provinces.

And in Saskatchewan, the groups that Mr. Reiter met with were: the Association of Saskatchewan Realtors, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, Good Spirit School Division, Prairie Spirit School Division, Provincial Association of Resort Communities of Saskatchewan, Regina & District Chamber of Commerce, Regina separate school board, resort village of the District of Katepwa, the Rural Municipal Administrators Association, Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, Saskatchewan Association of School Business Officials, Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce, Saskatchewan rental housing association, Saskatchewan School Boards Association, Saskatchewan Stock Growers, Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association, Saskatoon Chamber of Commerce, Saskatoon public school board, Saskatoon separate school board, South East Cornerstone School Division.

In Alberta: the Alberta School Boards Association, the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, the Catholic School

Trustees' Association, the deputy minister of Education, Edmonton Public School Board, the Minister of Infrastructure, the Minister of Municipal Affairs, and Municipal Affairs financial officials.

In Manitoba: the Association of Manitoba Municipalities, Keystone Agricultural Producers, Manitoba Association of School Trustees, Stu Briese, MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] and special adviser to the Minister of Education.

Those are all of the consultations that took place with groups or with individuals outside of the province. And I know that there were numerous phone calls, emails, and many other kinds of communication from individuals in the province. Now I don't think that we will be able to tell you the specific dates as to when he met with, you know, a particular individual, and I'm not sure that that's the information that you're wanting.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — I was interested. I did ask for the specific dates. If that's not available, I guess we understand. I would assume that Mr. Reiter certainly kept a record of that work, and if the minister would endeavour to provide that to the committee, it would be appreciated. But certainly hearing just the stakeholders that were consulted with was part of the question, and thank you for the answer.

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — I can guarantee that Mr. Reiter will know the date that he was in Alberta and the date that he was in Manitoba and I'm sure with some of the other major groups in the province of Saskatchewan. I'm sure he tracked that. And I will endeavour to provide the Chair with a full listing of whatever Mr. Reiter can provide, in ensuring that it's of course accurate, and be able to relate that to the Chair before we have our next estimates within this committee.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thank you for that. The education sector's long valued its role, their partnership in policy creation in this province. And the education partners have played a very important role in policy creation in this province. And there seems to be a concerning trend of not utilizing those policy partners in the way that they can be. And certainly it's not about simply making policy out of consensus. The opposition and this member's very aware that that's not where best policy's made. But certainly it's about consulting and understanding perspectives of specific groups within our province, and specific valued education partners.

So noting that concern, I guess I'm interested from this minister if he can provide an explanation of why he chose not to make the report public to stakeholders, at the very least. Whether or not the broader community would have this report, but why did stakeholders not receive this report prior to budget day?

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Well, Mr. Wotherspoon, as I indicated when the first draft of the report came out, and then subsequently when I talked to the media on that first week of February when I received the report, the report was very crucial in terms of determining the direction and the strategy of the new government. And in discussion with the Minister of Finance and other officials as we worked toward what might be the option that could be selected from the report or, as it ended up, being a hybrid model that was selected by using, you know, a combination of options recommended by Mr. Reiter, this

information was critical in building the budget.

And I think the member fully understands that, you know, as the Finance minister is building a budget, there's a degree of confidentiality. And that discussion was ongoing with the Minister of Finance and myself and the Premier and cabinet and our caucus as we worked towards building the budget that was released on March 18.

It was not a surprise to anyone because I indicated in that scrum that I did with the media in that first week of February when I received the report and I said on the day of the budget it would be released in its entirety to everyone. And that's exactly what we followed. The public has access to the report. They can see all of the recommendations that were provided by Mr. Reiter, and they can see now that the model that we've selected is a bit of a hybrid model.

So that is a decision that I and other government officials made, was to ensure that we had the ability to discuss the entire report and to be able to determine an option that we were going to move forward on. So it shouldn't be a surprise to anyone because that was the plan that I outlined long before the report was in my hands.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — I don't believe that that was outlined prior to very near the deadline of that report being handed in. And I believe stakeholders were very eagerly awaiting that report and having the opportunity to look at options in how education was financed. For the minister to say that nobody was surprised that this report wasn't released I think would be a massive understatement unless education partners convey a different message to the Education minister than they do to the opposition critic.

But the minister noted the extensive work that the member from Rosetown-Elrose conducted in this report, put forward four recommendations, and then noted that there was work to be done that put another option on the table. I guess my question to the minister is, why did he reject the member's report?

[21:30]

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — The information that was provided by Mr. Reiter was very extensive. And after probably a week of having that report in my hands and having had a chance to go through it, I had the opportunity to sit down with Mr. Reiter and talk about his recommendation and whether or not other solutions were possible.

Mr. Reiter was involved with me right through the entire process. He understood the value in determining a policy that was — he in fact chose the word — the hybrid model. And that's what we worked on. So we also analyzed, Mr. Wotherspoon, we also analyzed some of the material that had been presented in the Scharf-Langlois report many, many, many years ago. We looked at information and he looked at information in the Boughen report.

We also looked at a very recent report that had been done by a member for the School Boards Association. Mr. Ernie Dawson had conducted a report. I think it's about two years old, not much more. And we looked at the models. We looked at the

models because Mr. Dawson's report had done a more extensive job of looking beyond Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. His report had looked at all provinces and the systems that are in place in all of the provinces.

And in that report Mr. Dawson indicated, of course, that seven provinces are either following the model that we currently have, which is a combination of General Revenue Fund money and education tax dollars coming from property owners, or they're 100 per cent funded by the province from the General Revenue Fund. So there are seven provinces that are already doing that, and Mr. Dawson's report contained that kind of information.

So when we had a chance to look at the hybrid model, and sort of looking at a bit of a different proposal than what he had been thinking of, he was fully in support. And if you ask him that, I'm sure you will find out that he helped to develop the hybrid model. And he helped to, you know, work through it to determine what might be advantages and mill rates that needed to be set. So that is the reason. We wanted to use his information, and we felt that working collaboratively, both he and I, we felt that we were able to strike a hybrid model that maybe was better than some of the material that was in the report.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — This opposition has had concerns, from the onset of this report, that the long-drawn process was likely more of a stall tactic, and in the end a bit of a political charade to push aside campaign promises and expectations on the public around very clear language around reform and reduction of property tax.

The minister, the fact that when he received the report that had four options on it, and the minister had no interest in any of these options, chose not to put these options open to the public, sort of proves this point that the member was sent on a bit of a wild goose chase that arguably offered more political time for this member and this party to get their plan together, which certainly they did in very short order between the time when that report was put forward with no options that were suitable to this minister and then the new proposal that was put forward.

I guess my question to the minister: he mentions that the member from Rosetown-Elrose was involved in this process, but where was this new model conceived? Was this done at Executive Council, or where was this new model conceived? Where were the thoughts, the deliberations? Where did the plan come from? Because it certainly didn't come from the member for Rosetown-Elrose.

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — When you started off your comments, Mr. Wotherspoon, you said, the long-drawn-out process. Could you clarify what you're referring to as the long-drawn-out process?

Mr. Wotherspoon: — The long-drawn-out process that was the Reiter report. The time in which the member from Rosetown-Elrose was sent across the province, for a period of over one year, to bring back recommendations that were then rejected and a plan put together in a very speedy time, or efficient time, in place for budget.

I know the member from Rosetown-Elrose in certain comments

certainly said there had been enough study on this report; it's simply a matter of how and when, not if. And certainly the minister refers to the numerous studies that have been conducted through time. So the point being that the member was apparently studying something for well over a year, but in the end it didn't direct the ministry.

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Okay. We'll try to get an explanation of what this is, Mr. Chair. As I indicated in my opening remarks, Mr. Chair, the Premier asked Mr. Reiter to do an extensive review of existing literature, existing reports, and do a consultation with a number of people in the province to determine what the strategy might be for a long-term solution.

Now the member, Mr. Chair, suggests that this is somehow a long-drawn-out process. Well I think it's very clear that our position, the position of the Saskatchewan Party in the last campaign, was that we had identified a four-year strategy. And the four-year strategy was a rebate program, and the rebate program was going to provide assistance over the course of our term in government, and it was going to move the rebate to residential and commercial and industrial properties from 10 per cent to 20 per cent over those four years. We were going to double the rebate. And that meant that in the first year, it was at 10. In the second year just completed, it was 12. And if we hadn't introduced the long-term strategy, this year it would be 15 per cent. The next year it would be 17 per cent, and then finally in the last year of our term as government, it would be 20 per cent. That was a promise that was made, and that was the rebate short-term solution.

For agricultural land, the promise was that we would move from 38 per cent to 80 per cent rebate, and that was going to be over a five-year period. In the four years of the Saskatchewan Party being government, the first year was going to be 47 per cent which we just had this last year. If we were still using the rebate program, this year would be 56 per cent. Next year would be 66 per cent, and the year after would be 80 per cent.

So that was the promise that was made prior to November 7, 2007, which was going to be a rebate program for all taxpayers. The public understood that. Everyone understood that, that this was a short-term solution because the rebate returns, of course, money to the property owners. And I've indicated this number to you, Mr. Chair, and to committee members, but I'll repeat it. In this last year, the amount of rebate that was provided to property owners in the province of Saskatchewan for all classes was over \$158 million.

So as a government, we met that challenge of trying to lessen the disproportionate amount of money that was being paid by property owners to support education. Mr. Reiter's objective was to develop a report. In fact I think his initial comments to me were that the report would probably take a year, a year and a half, and we might be able to have that report by the end of 2009. In our discussions in 2008, and the economy and the numbers that we saw coming into the province changed our thinking dramatically about whether or not a long-term solution was doable before the end of our term, our four-year term, or nearing the end of the four-year term.

So I asked Mr. Reiter to see if he could speed things up and do a consultation process that would take most of the fall, that he'd

become a very busy individual in the fall of 2008 and ensure that throughout, as I said to Mr. Wotherspoon in my last answer, Mr. Chair, that process really started right after the last budget. And that was cranked up very extensively by Mr. Reiter. He made himself available. I know he spent hours and hours travelling to meet with individuals and as a result of that kind of dedication by Mr. Reiter — and I want to compliment also our staff, Angela Chobanik and Clint Repski for helping to do analysis of numbers; the input of Mr. Melvin was also very much appreciated — we were able to, or Mr. Reiter was able to do an analysis of all of that material and produce a report.

Now that draft report was worked on in the month of January. And I can tell the member opposite, Mr. Chair, that the contact with me about the draft material and its content occurred between January 17 and January 31. And the reason I point out those two weeks, Mr. Chair, is I happened to speak many times on the phone to Mr. Reiter while I was in Jamaica. And he was sharing with me the draft material, and I was kept abreast of what was going on and we talked about what kinds of things he was putting together and how he was putting the report together so that when I arrived back on January 31 back into Saskatchewan, the report was ready within a few days. And that report was received.

Now as I indicated then, the report was going to guide me as the Education minister because the specifics of the report . . . The report isn't prepared for government. It isn't prepared for cabinet. It was prepared for the Minister of Education. Mr. Reiter is the Legislative Secretary to the Minister of Education. So that report was used by me to determine a plan that I could present to the Finance minister and to cabinet and to caucus about alternatives. And there were alternatives discussed with caucus.

So I think the question that Mr. Wotherspoon asks is, where did this hybrid model originate? Well the hybrid model originated in discussion in my office between Mr. Reiter and myself, and we worked with our officials to put together information. We looked at circumstances as how this would affect the province, how it would affect school boards, how it would affect mill rates. And we tried to look at all those kinds of things before we fine-tuned that hybrid model then to bring to caucus and to cabinet to begin the process of introducing it in the budget by March 18.

So a pretty short timeline when you look at the fact that the report was received in those first few days of February — and I'm not even sure which date of February it was produced, but it's in that first week of February — to the point where on March 18 where the budget has already been printed and ready to deliver, that was built in. And as Mr. Wotherspoon has pointed out, in fact the option that was suggested in the report is not the option solely that was used to plan the budget.

So there were many, many hours of hard work done by officials, by elected representatives within our caucus, within our cabinet to produce the model that we see here today.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — I don't dismiss the work that the member from Rosetown-Elrose would have conducted in his actual meetings or the work. But the point is that the report was rejected and a new plan put together incredibly quickly. And

were those decisions made, as we understand now, that they were made in discussion in the minister's office between the member from Rosetown-Elrose and the Minister of Education? If there's anyone else to add to that or anyone else involved in that dialogue, please clarify.

But I guess my question is, when did the deputy minister and assistant deputy minister, when were they made aware of this new plan?

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Well I'll confirm two things for the member, Mr. Chair. Indeed the report was analyzed and assessed by Mr. Reiter and myself, along with the Minister of Finance. I do want to mention the fact that Minister Gantefoer was kept abreast of our options as we developed them. The hybrid model or the hybrid option that has been proposed is not a large deviation from one of the options that Mr. Reiter presented, which was enhancement to the funding to school divisions and a very limited amount of ability for taxes to be collected by the school board.

[21:45]

What we did was said, yes, we need to enhance the amount of money that has to be provided to school boards, but we are also going to rely on the property owner to continue to fund some of the costs of education. But we were going to cap that. And as a result, that is the phrase that we have been using — Mr. Reiter, myself, the Minister of Finance, the Premier, everyone connected with this budget — has been using the phrase, cut and cap, because that's exactly what we did. We cut the amount of taxes that were being levied. We've capped them at a specific mill rate as established by the government and will be established already. The government has established those mill rates for 2010. And we built that in.

So that probably took us most of February to develop that. So probably the officials within my ministry wouldn't have become aware of those changes until late February, early part of March, as to the fact that we were contemplating a pretty significant change to how education was going to be funded.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — It's just concerning — when we look at the major change that this certainly is and the potential implications on the education that students across Saskatchewan will receive, the implications on school boards — that some of the groundwork wasn't able to be done prior to that budget. And it's being done now and quickly and rightfully so because it needs to be done.

But I guess my question, it's my understanding, I think I saw an OC [order in council] that stated that the member from Rosetown-Elrose is appointed for another year or another term. Am I correct in this? So my understanding . . . and I believe I saw an OC a while back; I don't have the document with me and whatnot. But that the member from Rosetown-Elrose is Legislative Secretary for, I believe, another year or for an extended period of time into the '09 calendar year. Could the minister speak to this term? What's the exact term that that OC stated, and what's the scope of this work? And what's the Legislative Secretary's mandate in this role?

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Wotherspoon. Mr.

Chair, I don't know the exact terms of that OC. So I can find it for next meeting. The role and responsibilities of the Legislative Secretary to the Ministry of Education or the Minister of Education, as far as the report, are concluded. The report is concluded. The final copy is in my hands. Now whether or not there is an extended period of time that the OC expires beyond the presentation of that report, I can report that, but I don't have that at my fingertips.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — The minister then doesn't have an extension of that activity or a new, I guess, a changed role that you're aware of at this time. I believe it extended the period of the entire year. I should have brought the OC, but the Minister doesn't have any new direction or new mandate for the member at this point.

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — No, Mr. Chair, I do not have a new mandate for the member at this time. My understanding is that the legislative secretaries are all appointed for I think it's the calendar year. And so when the December 31, 2008, came about, Mr. Reiter was not finished his report. So a new OC was prepared to put him place as the Legislative Secretary for 2009. As far as his responsibilities for — I'll call it — the Reiter Report which was the term that has been used by the media, that responsibility is concluded.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Through conducting this report, it was made clear or at least perceived by Education's stakeholders that school boards' ability to access the property tax base and to justify this need to the property owners was not on the table. And I know the minister's stated in a question period recently about 100 per cent funding and whatnot and that he believes that boards did believe that the potential was there for them to lose that access to the tax base, because he suggests that he had mentioned that 100 per cent funding was possibly on the table. Whether or not he-said-she-said or whatever happened, the point is that the education sector was clearly under the impression that their ability to access the property tax base wasn't on the table — the very choice in which the minister ended up bringing forward.

My question to the minister is, why did he not provide this within the scope of the discussions? Why was the education sector not clear that that was on the table? These are valued partners and long-standing relations that have served education incredibly well.

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Well, Mr. Chair, as I've referred to Mr. Dawson's report a number of times, not only here in this committee, but also in the Legislative Assembly. This was a report commissioned by the Saskatchewan School Boards Association two or three years ago. Mr. Dawson studied all of the provinces, and he concluded that there were seven provinces that were funded either 100 per cent from the General Revenue Fund or a combination of some tax dollars set by the government and the rest delivered through the General Revenue Fund. There were seven provinces that are doing this. The only three provinces that were not doing this were Quebec, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.

And in his report, Mr. Dawson points, you know, very clearly he indicates to the reader of the report, well we're not sure whether, you know, we're the best because we're still holding

out on the old system or whether indeed we've fallen behind because other provinces have moved forward. So for board members, trustees, to think that no change was going to occur, that their system was going to remain the same, I think is something that I guess individual board members would have to answer to.

We have never said, I have never said, the member for Rosetown-Elrose, as we travelled around the province, that said we guarantee that you will have access to the property tax base — never said that. So therefore when we made the change and we wanted to ensure that there was a degree of stability, Mr. Chair, because there has to be a . . . If the government is going to fund 100 per cent of the cost of education through a method that is a hybrid method where we still set a mill rate on the assessment values, taxable assessed values of property owners throughout the province, there has to be a bit of control in that.

And there were many individuals who pointed out, well you know, if you provide enhanced funding to boards of education, all that they're going to do is to upload the extra costs onto the taxpayer because they're going to now be able to do all kinds of things. I don't believe that that was true. I think board members are very conscientious when they look at budgets.

And as I've indicated, Mr. Chair, in my years as a Chair and a member of the Canora School Division Board from 1985-1994, every spring I and the board members on my board would struggle with the fact that we first wanted the government to provide enough money in the way of a grant, and when that didn't happen, we then had to worry about cuts. We had to worry about whether or not we would provide a certain program because we didn't want to increase the mill rate. That was the first goal: not to increase the mill rate. In the end, when a board of education has to determine what its mandate is — and that's to provide quality education to the area that it serves — there were times when the boards of education had to increase mill rates. And mine was one of those boards that did, as well.

So this change now will enable boards of education to concentrate on governance. And that's what I indicated to boards, the individual boards, and to the School Boards Association when I met with them to talk about the fact that this was not a governance review, that the governance in the model that we have in the province of Saskatchewan, I believe, is a good one. And boards of education are locally elected. They're locally accountable, and they are there to ensure that they can plan for the betterment of the education process within that school division.

What we have removed from this equation is that the board of education does not have to worry about whether or not the taxpayers are going to pay their taxes, whether or not the municipality in fact puts on a mill rate factor and changes the amount of money that a board was anticipating, whether or not the arrears are going to affect the lines of credit. Those are the kinds of things that we're going to work through over the next two years. And I've already identified, I think, for members opposite, that we see a number of things that we're going to have to work through because it's pretty clear.

And one of those, as I indicated our last series of questions . . . we spent a lot of time on capital. Capital funding is a concern to

me because the 65 per cent/35 per cent split right now may not make as much sense, as we work through the next two years, for a board of education that doesn't have the money set aside right now because they're not anticipating a project this year or last year, but they may get a project two years from now to build a particular brand new school. And if their 35 per cent is their cost, then we're going to have to look at where does the board of education arrive at that funding. They're either going to get it from the grant that we provide or from the fixed amount of money that we're going to have the property owners provide.

So that's going to have to be built into their budgets. That's going to have to be built into their budgets. I apologize to the member from Hansard for moving my microphone. So those are things that we're going to work on, and it's not going to be an easy process. And boards of education understand that in the discussions that they've had with our team of officials that have travelled around the province, meeting with 28 of the 29 boards of education, they've identified some of those concerns.

And the meetings have been very productive to having a better understanding, our officials having a better understanding of the circumstances that a board of education finds themselves in today as a result of our changes, and the ability for us to recognize how we might be able to develop that funding formula over the course of the next two years.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — The minister talks about how boards . . . and what was said and what specifically wasn't said. I guess it's important that the minister know and that the member from Rosetown-Elrose also be very clear that the school boards truly did not believe their tax base or their access to that tax base was on the table. And it's a matter of being straight to valued and important education partners and they shouldn't be looking for the fine print or the nuance in one's voice.

And I know that the minister knows this when strong board members rise in the spring Assembly that we recently had and talks about the broken trust in the education sector because of promises of things such as the education model or the Alberta model not being on the table.

This is a concern. But it's a concern that needs to be addressed as we go forward to make sure that we have adequate funding for all the school boards and their important programs, to make sure that actual costs are now identified and that when we look at some of the funding pieces — whether it's diversity or whether it's transportation, whether it's pre-K or community schools — that all those needs are addressed through funding dollars and certainly that we get a little bit of a levelling of the land for boards that have been constrained by low assessments with limited ability to go to the taxpayer and bring the dollars to the table that they need for programming.

So there is some opportunities and some challenges that exist, and it's going to be incredibly important that the minister and the ministry is set for this task, and certainly getting out with these initial meetings is important. I'm interested in what that process is going to look like going forward.

But we are concerned when we look at basically the elimination of the funding manual that does exist and going out now to

make deals or to create budgets with school boards. We're concerned about a lack of transparency and of objectivity. We're concerned about a politicization to the process that can exist and how arbitrary is the potential funding that can be delivered here at this point in time. So we have lots of questions about how this is going to work specifically because we haven't heard that. And who's doing this work, and how does the minister know that they have the capacity right now for what is a very significant task before them? Where did we get the individuals to add to the ministry to make sure that this complement of FTEs is ready to support what is a really, really big task? So those are questions around making sure that the minister and the ministry is set for the big task before them and the important challenges they're going to meet.

[22:00]

And on that note I guess, I have questions specifically around the reconciliation process that is being undertaken right now by the ministry or the meetings ensuring that the adequate grants are going to be in place for this current school year. So we have these initial meetings that have gone on, and I understand those meetings have been very introductory in nature. Very important I know for this ministry to hear the concerns and to convey kind of where they're going, but it's important that the minister is able to put on the record very specifically what this . . . And if the minister could stick to this exact question in his answer: very specifically, what is the plan going forward to ensure that all the needs of school boards in Saskatchewan and students are going to be met, both in this calendar year, but really importantly on a long-term basis going forward?

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Chair, there are a number of questions there, and I hope I don't miss some of them, but if I do I'm sure the member will re-ask them, and we'll get them on the record.

The member talks about the Alberta model and for boards of education . . . And Mr. Reiter was talking with the Saskatchewan School Boards Association. He met with different boards to talk about funding models and what kinds of models might work in Saskatchewan. Well at many of the meetings, there was discussion about the Alberta model. So what is the Alberta model? The Alberta model is 100 per cent funding from the province of education.

So for board members who are involved in discussion with Mr. Reiter about the Alberta model — and it's a 100 per cent model — what might be the result in a Saskatchewan model? It could be that, it could be that. It could be that 100 per cent would be coming from the General Revenue Fund which is the option that Mr. Reiter recommended. That was adjusted to the hybrid model, which involved both the General Revenue Fund picking up as we move forward to next year — we're looking at the General Revenue Fund will be probably paying for 66 per cent of the amount of education — and the remaining 34 per cent is going to come from that property tax component that is going to be controlled by government as we reduce it.

As I indicated in, I think, the last series of questions in estimates — but I'll repeat it if I didn't do that — as costs increase for education, we're going to look over the next two years. There will be inflationary costs. There will be costs to

materials. There will be costs to transportation. We don't know what a litre of fuel is going to be, whether that be diesel or gas. We don't know where contracts will take us in terms of human resource contracts.

So as those costs increase — and there is a commitment from our government that we have to ensure that boards of education are adequately funded for the challenges that they will face — as the costs increase and no further dollars are required from the property owner because we in fact have already set the mill rates for next year, then you know that the percentage is going to change. And in fact, we believe that 66 per cent for next year is probably baseline, and that additional costs will increase.

So that was sort of the first part of the response about whether or not board members had any, you know, idea that an Alberta model or something like it might be coming at them. Well that was discussed.

I do want to indicate, you know, there were many members of boards of education who made comments after March 18. And I know that the Chairman of the Prairie Spirit Board of Education, Mr. Andrew Bergen, had this to say in the *Clark's Crossing Gazette* on March 26. And he says this: "The Prairie Spirit Board of Education believes the principles behind the government's plan of action are strong . . ."

So while Mr. Bergen may be surprised that we made the move that we did — to say no, you don't have access to the property tax base any more where you set the mill rate; it will be set by government; that may have come as a bit of a surprise to him — he understands that we need to move forward, that we need to develop a better plan for delivering education. And in fact he's indicating that the principles of this new plan are strong, and we're going to move forward.

The current budget that has been discussed by my officials, by Mr. Repski with board treasurers or CFOs, chief financial officers — I better use the right term here; my days we used to call them secretary-treasurers but they're chief financial officers — they've been calling about information on the numbers that we are using in our projections and they are numbers that came from their last set of audited financial statements and the current budget that they have. These are their budget numbers.

And then we built on top of that. We know that come September 1, the next year of the current contract with the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, that will add on a percentage increase on September 1. And we also know that there will be a significant amount of inflationary costs. Some are suggesting it could be 3.2, 3.3 per cent for this fiscal year. We have added 4 per cent to all of the other costs to ensure that there is adequate monies that are being provided to the board of education for this budget.

Now this is base budget. We know that there are discussions with our officials as we move through and I would hope that the member wasn't . . . Maybe it was tongue-in-cheek when he suggested that there has to be, you know, political pressures to get adequate funding for children, because I don't see it that way. My officials don't see it that way.

My officials and I are going to work with boards of education to

have a better understanding of what monies are needed at each of the 29 school divisions to deliver the kind of education that is expected of that board. We're using their numbers, we're using their budgeted numbers, and we've added on those additional things.

There will be circumstances where we will adjust. Maybe, or at least hopefully, it's due to the fact that there are 300 new students next fall in that school division and that we're going to have to adjust the amount of money that we allocate for their budget. Because they may have to hire a few more teachers because of the fact that they have extra students.

Maybe there will be changes because a board of education is declining. And we saw that happen this year where particular boards of education continued to lose significant numbers of students. And those kinds of concerns have to be recognized and met within the budget.

So, Mr. Chair, the budgets that we're working on with all 29 boards of education have been set at a base amount. There are continued discussions with the chief financial officers in each of the school divisions to ensure that we have accurately reflected the numbers, and now the boards of education will be busy preparing their expenditures within the budget that they have now been assigned.

So the governance model, not changing at all. They still are going to plan who they have as their teachers, who they hire, where they're going to have their bus routes, but they're going to work within the budget that has been developed with them and the officials within my ministry. So I think it's a great approach, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — School divisions, clearly shocked with the news on budget day, have had very little time to prepare for justifying where they are financially as a board; what their future plans are; how that relates to their financial needs.

And certainly there was inequities that existed in the previous model with boards with low assessments, as we talked about. With the current model, that doesn't really have any . . . I mean it lacks complete transparency and objectivity. It's a concern that we sort of have almost a wild west gunfight out there as who's the quickest to draw here, as far as the boards. Who's the quickest to have their plan ready, their long-term plans forward, their budgets in place?

And in some cases, Mr. Minister, there's a real concern that those plans that don't have their plans in place, that haven't maybe taken the look at their entire division the way they wish they would have if they knew they were undertaking this sort of levelling of the land and new educational financing activity, they don't feel prepared. And there's concern out there that it's going to be a matter of who's most prepared to advocate, who's most prepared to sell the job, or who's closest to the minister. We need to address some of those pieces.

I asked about process specifically to the minister. I guess a question would be, when will the boards know the actual dollars that they'll be receiving, and what's the timeline for them knowing this?

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Well, Mr. Chair, a few interesting comments by the member. First of all, boards of education — and I'm not sure whether the member has sat on a board of education; I don't believe he has — boards of education who have been elected for the last four years and have been in place, have been working on their budgets for months. They already know the basis of what they want to and how they want to deliver education. So I would hope that the member opposite would give trustees a little more credit for the fact that they don't sit around and find themselves in a vacuum because something new was explained to them.

It's not really new, as I've said to you, Mr. Chair. Boards of education and individual members have been very critical of the foundation operating grant formula, the FOG [foundation operating grant] formula. We have heard that the formula which was created in 1974, which is 35 years old, was broken. It needed repairing. It didn't work — all kinds of phrases and clichés to describe the old foundation grant formula.

And the direction to my officials, to me, was we needed something different. We needed something better to reflect actual costs of education. So we've been working on that. And so have boards of education, but the boards of education are planning the budget for September 1 — first date of their new budget is September 1, 2009 to August 31, 2010.

And I know maybe people who are, you know, I'm sure watching this exciting program tonight would recognize that there are three different fiscal years that we're dealing with here. The taxation year — and that's why we had to do supplementary estimates a week ago — the taxation year is January 1 to December 31. It's a calendar year. The government fiscal year is April 1 to March 31. And the school division year, as I just indicated, is September 1 to August 31. So there's a configuration of many different models as far as, when does funding kick in? When are you going to do that?

So the boards of education are busy working on the budget that they will put in place for September 1. They already have been given the base estimates, as I've already explained to you, Mr. Chair, as to how that number was determined, what it means to the boards of education, and the boards are now responding to that number.

As I indicated, my officials have met with 28 boards. There's a 29th one that still is going to be met with. So that all the information from all 29 boards will have been received by my ministry officials. And no decisions are going to be made about changing any particular number until all 29 boards have been met with and we know what their concerns might be.

[22:15]

Now when that happens, we believe that by the end of June, before the school year is out, that final budget that is going to be provided to each one of the 29 boards of education will be there, the fine tuning. Now there's always reconciliation that's going to happen throughout the year. It did happen under the old system, and it will continue to happen under the new system. That's going to happen.

The other situation that kicks into play . . . And I mentioned the

fact that these particular board members, many of them, in fact most of them, unless they were elected in by-elections, have been in place for four years. That's not the usual length of time, but we know that amalgamation that occurred, boards were put in place for four years. This fall is the first time since the amalgamation of school division boards where an election is going to take place again.

And I've heard from a couple of board members who said, I've served for a long time under the former system and I'm not sure that I'm going to run again because I see this as maybe a bigger challenge, and I'm not sure that I want to do that. That's the decision that individual board members will continue to make, Mr. Chair.

Because as I said, the governance model has not changed. The governance structure's the same. Each board of education this fall will elect its trustees to represent them in all 29 boards of education. Anyone who is contemplating being a candidate for a board of education, whether they're the incumbents that are going to be coming back or whether they're going to be new people, understand the system that we've put in place now. They will understand that they don't have to worry about the finances and setting mill rates and facing, you know, the wrath of the local coffee row downtown in a small town — if they're a board member from a rural part of Saskatchewan — because we're going to be working with the boards of education over the next two years to develop a model that ensures that the budgets provided to the boards of education are adequate.

That was the promise that we made. That is one of the identified conditions that had to be met, and we believe that we're going to meet that, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — The point this member was trying to make was simply that boards were operating in a very different financial environment, in many cases a constrained environment, and they had no idea — because they weren't told so — that they were going to be losing that access to the property tax base. So if they had future plans that they were developing, they had revenues that they could identify to pay for some of those plans whether a board was going forward.

So the concern is that school boards should have had the time, the awareness that this was a potential change so that they could have been ready and prepared to bring the very good work, budgets forward and to talk about the plans that they have on a go-forward basis.

The question was, when will boards know the actual dollars this year? And is this the same process for next year? Because boards, as the minister alluded to, are in that process of setting budgets for the next year very soon thereafter. And how does this relate to them having some certainty as to funding process for the 2010-2011 budget?

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — A couple of questions there, Mr. Chair. I think I answered the question and I said that the final numbers will be provided to the boards of education by end of June. So that is the goal and we believe, my officials believe that we will have had the full opportunity to have met with all 29 boards of education to understand what inadequacies may be there within the current system. And we're going to move forward.

There's a couple of points though, Mr. Chair, that I think we need to ensure that . . . Because I think some board members may be a little upset with the suggestion made by the member opposite that they were just waiting for the opportunity next year to add 3 or 4 or 5 mills to the taxation base because, you know, they've been very cautious and very prudent and they didn't expect what we just did so therefore they didn't add on the mill rate increase that they were going to last year, and they were just waiting for something. I find that hard to understand that a board of education would want to sit back and then add on 2 or 3 or 4 mills of taxation to the property tax payer. That's just not on.

The other thing that happens, Mr. Chair, within a board of education's budget, is 90 per cent of that budget is pretty well fixed — year to year to year. Not much changes. Especially now, Mr. Chair, in that we're seeing a levelling off in enrolments across the province.

Still have a little problem in Regina and Saskatoon with those four boards of education having lost 1,200 students, September '08 number to September '07 number. That's the comparison. And in all of the entire rest of the province there was only a loss of about 600 student enrolment numbers.

So we're seeing a levelling off. And when you have a levelling off of enrolment numbers and you don't have those, you know, fluctuations from highs to lows, that stabilizes the human resource plan that a school division has in place, and that stabilizes 90 per cent of a school division's costs because they're running the same bus routes. They're operating the same schools. They pretty well have the same number of teachers. So only about 10 per cent becomes a bit of a flexible number where a board of education may decide to do one initiative versus another initiative or the like.

So those kinds of things are where we will have to work with the boards of education, and we've had numerous suggestions already about ensuring that there's a contingency fund. Maybe that's the way to have the availability within an existing budget because the member is right. There will be the need now for boards of education to have a budget approved by the ministry, but we're going to be able to have built into that budget some flexibility so that if there is a program that a board of education wants to initiate and it's mid-year, that they won't have to produce a new budget, that it will be built in.

So we're going to look at those kinds of things to ensure that there's flexibility, that there is indeed monies provided so that that board of education doesn't have its hands tied — to use a cliché here — and have the ability to deliver quality education in the province. Because, you know, Mr. Chair, we've talked about, you know, since I've become minister, in question period we've talked a lot about, you know, school closures and the opportunity for taxpayers to get a break from the disproportionate amount of taxes, and we've talked about, you know, the availability of bus routes. But the main discussion, Mr. Chair . . . And that's why we're talking about something like a student achievement panel, and we're talking about outcomes, and we're talking about the indicators report, and we're talking about PISA [programme for international student assessment], and we're talking about assessment results. We need to ensure that of course we're moving in the direction of

providing quality education in the province of Saskatchewan.

We've been known as a province for producing well-educated children, but we also know that there are places where we have to improve. Just this last couple of days we've heard about the mention of dropouts and the problem that that creates especially here in western Canada in Alberta and Saskatchewan where the economy is vibrant. But it also creates a bit of a problem in the education system because we go back to decades ago when the dropout rate increased rapidly when it was very easy to get a job and the job was a high-paying job.

So those are concerns that we have to address, and boards of education are the ones that are going to be able to address those concerns at the local level. And at the ministry level, my officials are committed to working with those boards of education, with the directors of each of those 29 school divisions, with the superintendents to ensure that we have a good education model to deliver quality education in the province.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — I'll not take the time to correct the minister's spin on my language as it pertains to school board because we do have lots of valuable questions that still need to be answered. The opposition, quite frankly and then sincerely, is concerned about the capacity of the ministry to be able to meet the needs that exist here right now.

It's a huge undertaking. I know we've got highly qualified individuals in the ministry here right now. But I've heard nothing with regard to a specific plan — what the team of financial supports within the ministry actually looks like and how we're actually going to meet all those needs. That's a big concern to this opposition. It's also a big concern to realize here, at this point in time, that the school boards will not be able to any longer go to the property tax base to justify local needs that might not be identified by a minister at any point in time that really are important to students' learning and students' achievement and student equity.

And we can look to a place like British Columbia, here and now, that just simply cut funding. And their boards don't have access to property tax, so right now every division, as I understand, in British Columbia is going through the process of identifying programs and services that they need to cut as a result of a tightening and a reduction in education funding centrally. These are the concerns that we see long term because certainly these implications will be here for a long period of time. They'll certainly go through various ministers and various governments, and any one minister can offer a huge amount of direction to the educational landscape in our province. And that's concerning.

When we're talking about locally negotiated aspects, I'm interested in if the minister's had any discussions around implications on locally negotiated aspects such as teacher contracts. Would it be fair to assume that since a board couldn't really negotiate in good faith something that they don't have the ability to pay for, that having the ability to access those revenues, that the ministry will simply be covering the additional costs of link agreements on a go-forward?

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Chair, in the limited amount of

time, I'll try to answer two or three of those questions.

First of all, we do not see any changes to the current negotiations at the local level. It will be the responsibility of the board to hire staff, hire principals, teachers, and to negotiate a local contract. They have that capability right now, and in many instances of course the costs of local agreements are built into their budget, and we're recognizing their budget.

So if there's additional expenditures because of some very, very expensive item that a board of education would suddenly negotiate, those would be discussions of course that they would have with my ministry officials as they move through that negotiation process. So that's number one.

Number two, the number of additional people that are going to be required, we haven't had the opportunity to go through the process because there will be a process that is followed by the Public Service Commission. I think that so far we've done internal transfer of only two individuals. But I can tell the member opposite that of the total of 22.4 full-time equivalents that we discussed the last time, there's only 18 of these that are actually new people that we're going to be putting in place. And of those 18, five are going to be for early learning and child care.

And as we haven't even had the opportunity to discuss child care yet . . . but we're very pleased with the fact that we're going to be adding 1,000 new child care spaces on top of the 500 that we had allocated last year. And there are a few of those spaces where, you know, due to construction problems or due to some of the circumstances in certain communities, we haven't implemented them. So we're going to need some staff there.

We're going to have four full-time equivalents that are going to move into the facilities branch with Rhonda and Margaret Ball. And in that area, we know that we allocated \$300-plus million worth of projects last year, and that's combined cost of the boards of education and the ministry. And we're going to have to have additional people to ensure that we can move forward with those capital projects and any new capital projects that we're going to announce in this fiscal year.

And finally, Mr. Chair, the nine full-time equivalents to address and implement the changes in school funding, to address property tax relief in the province, so we're going to be adding nine additional full-time equivalents to the Ministry of Education to ensure that there is communication with boards of education, with those chief financial officers, with all of those different people that are responsible for facilities planning, or whether they're responsible for, you know, a program at the school division level. Those are people that we're going to hire. We're going to be working on that process as we move through the next few weeks because now that the budget has been introduced and has been passed, we're now going to be able to move forward and begin the process of advertising and ensuring that we find the 18 people that we'll be needing to fill all of these positions.

The Chair: — It is now 10:30. Mr. Wotherspoon, you would like to make a couple of final comments and thank the officials? Certainly, go ahead.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for the opportunity to ask questions here tonight, to the ministry officials for their attendance, to the minister for obliging the questions. The opposition is concerned with what appears to be a plan that's not in place here yet and the meaningful and important work that needs to be conducted on a go-forward basis — got a large task before the ministry and a very important one in meeting the needs of students at the very grassroots level.

Thank you for the questions here tonight. We certainly have more questions in estimates as we go forward. Thank you to the committee members.

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Chair, thank you very much to all members for being so diligent and concentrating on every word, but most importantly to all of my officials who have been behind me and have been here to support me even though most of the discussion today, I guess, was centred on a discussion between the critic and myself. So we may not have needed all of the people, but I'm sure that they were able to provide information if requested and they'll be available next time. So again thank you very much to all members of the committee.

The Chair: — I too, as Chair, would like to thank the committee members for the five and a half hours that we've put in today in examining estimates of spending. I would certainly like to also comment on the member from Rosemont and the Minister of Education and thank them for the lively debate that we had here this evening and certainly thank them for staying on topic.

I see some of my committee members are giving me the windup sign, so seeing that it is past 10:30, this committee stands adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 22:32.]