



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Mr. Terry Jenson, Chair
Martensville-Warman

Ms. Meara Conway, Deputy Chair
Regina Elphinstone-Centre

Mr. Muhammad Fiaz
Regina Pasqua

Mr. Marv Friesen
Saskatoon Riversdale

Mr. Joe Hargrave
Prince Albert Carlton

Mr. Warren Kaeding
Melville-Saltcoats

Mr. Hugh Nerlien
Kelvington-Wadena

[The committee met at 15:30.]

**General Revenue Fund
Education
Vote 5**

Procedural Clerk (Ms. Humble-Selinger): — Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the Standing Committee on Human Services. It is my duty as committee Clerk to preside over the election of a new Chair. I'd like to remind members of the process. I will first ask for nominations. Once there are no further nominations, I will then ask a member to move a motion to have a committee member preside as Chair. I will now call for nominations for that position.

I recognize Mr. Kaeding.

Mr. Kaeding: — I nominate Mr. Terry Jenson to the position of Chair.

Procedural Clerk (Ms. Humble-Selinger): — Mr. Kaeding has nominated Mr. Jenson to the position of Chair. Are there any further nominations? Seeing none, I would now invite the member to move the motion.

Mr. Kaeding: — I move:

That Mr. Terry Jenson be elected to preside as Chair of the Standing Committee on Human Services.

Procedural Clerk (Ms. Humble-Selinger): — It has been moved by Mr. Kaeding that Mr. Jenson preside as Chair of the Standing Committee on Human Services. All in favour of the motion? All those opposed? I declare the motion carried and invite Mr. Jenson to take the Chair.

The Chair: — Well thank you very much. Welcome to the Standing Committee on Human Services. My name is Terry Jenson. I'm the MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] for Martensville-Warman.

With us this afternoon as part of the committee, we have Matt Love for Meara Conway; we have Mr. Muhammad Fiaz, Mr. Marv Friesen, Mr. Warren Kaeding, Mr. Hugh Nerlien, and Mr. Travis Keisig in for Mr. Joe Hargrave.

Pursuant to rule 148(1), the following estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 were committed to the Standing Committee on Human Services on March 30th, 2023 and March 22nd, 2023, respectively. 2023-24 estimates: votes 37 and 169, Advanced Education; vote 5, Education; vote 32, Health; vote 20, Labour Relations and Workplace Safety; vote 36, Social Services. 2022-23 supplementary estimates no. 2: vote 37, Advanced Education; vote 5, Education; vote 32, Health.

I'd like to table the following documents: HUS 14-29, Law Clerk and Parliamentary Council: 2021 regulations filed; HUS 15-29, Law Clerk and Parliamentary Council: 2021 bylaws filed; HUS 16-29, Law Clerk and Parliamentary Council: 2022 regulations filed; HUS 17-29, Law Clerk and Parliamentary Council: 2022 bylaws filed; HUS 18-29, Office of Information and Privacy Commissioner: Correspondence re: Bill 101, dated February 7th, 2023.

Today the committee will be considering the estimates for the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health.

Subvote (ED01)

The Chair: — We will first consider the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Education. We will now begin with the consideration of vote 5, Education, central management and services, subvote (ED01).

Minister Duncan is here with his officials, and I would ask that the officials please state their names before speaking into the microphone. As a reminder, please don't touch the microphones. The Hansard operator will turn on your microphone when you're speaking to the committee.

Minister Duncan, if you would, please introduce your officials and make your opening remarks.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and congratulations to you. Good afternoon, committee members. We are pleased to be here to speak about the Ministry of Education's '23-24 budget.

With me today and to help the committee with our questions and our answers, to my left is deputy minister, Donna Johnson; to my right is assistant deputy minister, Rory Jensen. As well, joining us, behind us, assistant deputy minister, Jason Pirlot; assistant deputy minister, Mike Walter; executive director of corporate services, Rhiannon Shaw; executive director of education funding, Angela Chobanik; executive director of early learning and child care renewal, Shaylene Salazar; executive director of programs, Kevin Gabel; and the chief executive officer of the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation, Darren Gasper; as well as my chief of staff, Mitch Graw.

It's my pleasure to present this year's Ministry of Education budget. Thanks to Saskatchewan's growing economy, we are able to make significant investments in our children's future through education, child care, and libraries. This year we have more students, more schools, and more affordable child care. The '23-24 budget is ensuring that students have access to high-quality education opportunities no matter where they live in this beautiful province. It's ensuring that we are supporting young families with accessible, affordable, and high-quality child care and learning opportunities.

The 2023-24 budget is also supporting libraries to continue to offer meaningful services and access to resources across the province and particularly in rural communities. This is truly growth that works for everyone.

I want to thank our partners in education, early learning, and libraries for all the work that they do each day to support the citizens of this province. Thank you to the thousands of teachers, administrators, support staff, and professionals in our schools who work every day to give our students the opportunity to reach their full potential. The work that you do to spark imagination enables students to grow and thrive. It's making a difference in our students' lives.

I also want to thank the thousands of early childhood educators

who ensure that our youngest learners are well cared for, able to learn and explore in safe environments, and are set up for future success. Thank you also to the librarians and staff that help to support a lifelong love of learning for families and people of all ages. You're making a difference in contributing to a strong Saskatchewan.

The Government of Saskatchewan is prioritizing Saskatchewan students and early learners with a record investment of \$3.1 billion for education. This is an increase of 192.8 million, or 6.7 per cent, over the '22-23 budget. This budget supports pre-kindergarten to grade 12 schools, early learning and child care, libraries, and family literacy programs across the province.

Saskatchewan's 27 school divisions will receive \$2.04 billion in school operating funding for the '23-24 school year. This is an increase of 49.4 million, or 2.5 per cent, compared to the '22-23 budget allocation. This is the first time school operating funding for the 27 school divisions is over \$2 billion. It's also the largest increase in school operating funding in eight years.

This supports the highest enrolment growth in more than 20 years. As part of this increase to the operating grant, school divisions will receive 30.5 million to address enrolment growth from the 2022-23 school year and projected enrolment growth for '23-24 school year. School divisions will also receive \$18.9 million to address other inflationary pressures, such as increasing utility and insurance costs.

Included in the operating funding is \$304 million for supports for learning, an increase of 4.1 million, or 1.4 per cent, over last year's budget. This funding allows school divisions to make local decisions to support students' individual needs. These supports can include access to professional services such as speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists, and other professionals and paraprofessionals.

We're also providing \$7 million in targeted funding to school divisions to retain the more than 200 educational assistants that have been hired since September of 2021. EAs [educational assistant] play an important role in supporting students and teachers in managing increasingly diverse classrooms. This is part of our government's ongoing commitment to support diverse student and classroom needs.

Since 2007 our government has increased school operating funding by \$626 million. This is a 44 per cent increase.

School divisions will also receive \$50 million in '23-24 for preventative maintenance and renewal funding. This allows divisions to proactively maintain existing school facilities to ensure that they are safe and welcoming environments for years to come.

This year's budget does not include funding for a future collective bargaining agreement with Saskatchewan's teachers. We know the current contract with teachers comes to a close in August and the government-trustee bargaining committee will be entering into good-faith negotiations with the teachers' bargaining committee later this spring.

The Ministry of Education continues to work with school divisions to meet the needs of students now and into the future.

The ministry is working collaboratively across ministries and with our education sector to support our students in the areas of mental health and well-being. We know that mental and physical well-being is a key component to students being successful. This is a goal that is shared by the education sector and stretches across the roles of education into other human service ministries.

In addition to the funding for school divisions in the '23-24 budget, the Ministry of Education will continue to invest \$609,000 to support initiatives related to bullying prevention, positive mental health, and student safety. This includes funding to support student access to Kids Help Phone, which is available by phone, text, or online 24-7, 365 days a year in both French and English. The ministry is working together with school divisions and our partners at Kids Help Phone to ensure that students know how to access these services if and when they need them.

Since 2020 our province has also invested in providing mental health first aid training to school staff. The ministry is continuing to offer this training to school divisions, making mental health first aid available to students when needed, similar to physical first aid. We are also continuing to provide access to Respect in School training and other training grants.

The Ministry of Health is also continuing to provide \$2 million in support to the mental health capacity-building initiative within 10 schools across the province. The initiative promotes positive mental health in children, youth, and families. It focuses on prevention and mental health promotion, early identification, and intervention. It also helps young people better manage their feelings and increase awareness of where they can find help. This school-based prevention and promotion program was recommended by the Children's Advocate and helps build resilience in youth, families, and communities.

The Ministry of Health has also committed \$3.4 million in this budget to annualized funding for the integrated youth services initiative. In November the province announced that the John Howard Society was awarded the contract to coordinate and integrate services to meet the needs of youth aged 12 to 25 and their caregivers. These services will be offered in at least three yet-to-be-determined physical locations across the province. Virtual programming will begin while physical locations are being established.

Together these services are providing support to our youth to ensure that students are able to come to school physically, mentally, and emotionally well and are able to learn and grow to meet their full potential. The issues of mental health and well-being are not simple, but together as a province and community we can come together to make the future brighter for our students.

We are committed to increasing opportunities for students in directing their education and ensuring that all students are receiving a high-quality education, no matter if they're in the classroom or choosing to study online. This year's budget provides \$23 million to support the start-up and operation of the new Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation, also called the Sask DLC.

Last fiscal year our government established a new Sask DLC

treasury board Crown corporation to oversee centralizing online education in the province. The centralization will start in the '23-24 school year and provide students, teachers, and families with a consistent user experience and flexible learning opportunities no matter where they live in Saskatchewan.

Like in-person education, there's no cost to students to attend the Sask DLC up to age 22, and students have the option to take one or more classes online.

By bringing together the great work of online learning teachers from around the province, the Sask DLC is proudly able to offer more than 180 online courses for kindergarten to grade 12 students. This includes more than 120 high school courses with unique electives. These electives will support students in reaching their goal of graduation while also exploring new subject areas that interest them and help support them in discovering their future paths and passions.

Elective course options include everything from autobody to equine studies, agriculture and sustainable food production, and wildlife management, just to name a few. Another great example is the animation course. The Sask DLC has a partnership with the Vancouver Animation School, which allows students to learn from Disney and Pixar instructors.

[15:45]

This wide variety of course options ensures students can find a course they are passionate about and let that passion start now. The full list of course options is available at Sask DLC's website, and as of today, student registration is now open for the upcoming school year.

Students who have questions or would like assistance selecting courses can contact the Sask DLC, which will work directly with the student's local school division to meet their needs. Students will register with the new school and then be connected with their local school division, allowing students to access local supports and activities such as speech-language pathologists and educational psychology assessments. School divisions will also provide student activities such as driver's licence training, graduation ceremonies, and extracurricular activities, including arts and sports. Adult students over the age of 22 wishing to complete their grade 12 or take additional electives will also be able to do so at the Sask DLC for a cost.

Staffing for the Sask DLC is under way, with opportunities being posted on their website as they become available. Sask DLC will employ around 150 educators across the province. Approximately 60 teachers working at Sun West Distance Learning Centre are being transferred to the Sask DLC location, located in Kenaston. Ninety additional openings are available to educators around the province at the head office in Kenaston or at one of the nine regional campuses in the communities of Estevan, La Ronge, Moose Jaw, Neilburg, Nipawin, Prince Albert, Saskatoon, Swift Current, and Yorkton. These regions were selected as they currently have a strong online presence in their communities and ensure all areas of the province have access to high-quality online learning.

The ministry is continuing work on solidifying locations for the staff within the regional campus communities. Each regional

campus will have a principal, teachers, and a number of support positions. Teachers and staff in these regional campuses will maintain a local connection to the students that they're serving, both online and in person, and will be able to support students who choose to study online. A quality assurance framework has been provided to the education sector to provide a road map for online service providers and schools or school divisions who have students accessing online learning. It describes roles, responsibilities, and expectations to support consistent and effective online learning options for Saskatchewan students and help to ensure that online learning will support student needs and enable their success. Separate school divisions, the Conseil des écoles francsaskoises, and independent schools interested in offering online learning can apply.

The ministry is working with applicants to ensure that their existing online learning platform provides a consistent learning experience and that all students choosing to study online are receiving a high-quality education. Successful applicants will be notified later this month by the ministry, and all course options available to students will be available on their websites. This centralization will ultimately provide support, flexibility, and accessibility for families across the province. We look forward to the Sask DLC's first year in '23-24 and seeing the many great learning opportunities that they provide to students who choose to study online.

In addition to supports for the classroom, school infrastructure continues to be a priority in this budget. Building new schools and renovating existing schools supports our province's growth — our growing province — and we're proud of the investments that we're making right around our province. The budget allocates 147.3 million to capital projects to provide safe and inclusive learning environments and address enrolment growth. This includes funding to begin planning eight new school capital projects around the province. This includes 4.4 million to begin planning on the five new major capital projects. We will be working with South East Cornerstone School Division to begin planning and design for a new kindergarten to grade 12 school in Carlyle that will replace the aging elementary and high school. The town of Carlyle has already secured 21 acres of land for the project. The new build will bring together the two school communities into a modern learning environment and create efficiencies for the school division long-term.

We will also begin planning two new projects with the Conseil des écoles francsaskoises in '23-24. This fulfills our province's commitment to honour the terms of the MOU [memorandum of understanding] that was signed with the province's francophone school division back in 2019. The ministry will also be working with the CÉF [Conseil des écoles francsaskoises] to begin planning and determining the scope of a new K to 12 [kindergarten to grade 12] school in Prince Albert to replace École Valois. We'll also begin planning to build a brand new francophone elementary school in Saskatoon. These schools will provide quality and modern learning environments for francophone students in these communities.

The ministry will also begin working with Prairie Valley School Division to plan renovations and an addition to the Greenall High School in Balgonie. The renovations will modernize the school, repair aging infrastructure, and provide the division efficiency moving forward. The added space will provide students access to

better performing and visual arts, science and practical and applied arts spaces, as well as modernizing the gym. The renovations will also involve updates to better support students requiring intensive supports.

Work will also begin with Regina Public Schools to plan a major renovation to Campbell Collegiate. Campbell is one of the largest schools in our province and was built in 1962. This renovation will rebuild the vocational wing of the school where many of the practical and applied art courses are taught. The new space will provide students with a state-of-the-art learning environment for years to come.

In addition to these new major capital projects, the budget provides 11.3 million for minor capital renewal projects. This is an increase of 6.8 million over last year. This minor renovation program supports school divisions in addressing structural repairs and renovation projects that cost in the range of 1 to \$10 million. This year we will begin planning three new minor capital renewal projects to consolidate the elementary school into the high school in Kelvington, to renovate St. John Community School in Prince Albert, and to renovate Medstead Central School. Planning is already under way on two additional minor capital projects we announced last fiscal year. I expect construction to get under way this year on renovations to Kyle Composite and renovations to École St. Margaret School in Moose Jaw.

Work is also well under way on 20 major capital projects around the province to build 15 new schools and renovate five existing schools. Students at the new Argyle elementary school here in Regina will soon be moving in to their brand new, modern school while work is continuing on their neighbouring school to replace École St. Pius. This joint-use facility is a welcome addition to Regina's Lakeview community and will be able to accommodate approximately 800 students between the two schools, with the ability to expand as enrolment increases with the addition of relocatable classrooms. The schools have a unique design, featuring a two-storey school for Regina Public and a three-storey school for Regina Catholic. The joint-use facility will also feature a community space and a 51-space child care centre.

This past year, construction also began on the new kindergarten to grade 12 school in Blaine Lake. The new school features a large gym with a stage that will be used by both the school and the community. Prairie Spirit School Division is also contributing to the industrial arts space for the project, which will include both woodworking and welding areas for the students. The new school will accommodate 150 students and is expected to be complete this fall.

Construction is also under way on a new kindergarten to grade 12 school in Carrot River. The new school is being built onto the existing high school gym that was built in 2005. The new school will provide state-of-the-art classrooms for up to 350 students and the new school is expected to welcome students in early 2024. Construction is also under way on the new kindergarten to grade 6 school in La Loche to replace Ducharme Elementary School.

Design and planning are wrapping up on a number of projects that I expect will begin construction later this year: a new joint-use facility with two elementary schools to consolidate St. Peter,

St. Michael, Imperial, and McDermid schools in north Regina; a new kindergarten to grade 12 school to replace and consolidate the elementary and high schools in Lanigan; a new joint-use facility with two new elementary schools to replace Sacred Heart, St. Mary, Empire, and Westmount schools in Moose Jaw; a new elementary school to replace St. Frances Cree bilingual school in Saskatoon; and a new francophone elementary school in Regina.

Together with the city of Regina and the Regina Public and Catholic School Divisions, we recently announced that a location has been finalized for the new joint-use school in West Harbour Landing.

Work is also continuing with the city of Saskatoon and Saskatoon Public schools on a new school to replace Princess Alexandra, King George, and Pleasant Hill elementary schools in Saskatoon.

Renovations at Yorkton Regional High School, John Paul II Collegiate in North Battleford, Holy Rosary High School in Lloydminster, and Lloydminster Comprehensive High School are also expected to be completed later this year.

Also included in this year's capital allocation is \$16 million for relocatable classrooms. This funding will support school divisions in addressing the largest enrolment growth in over 20 years. Together with this year's investment, our government has now invested over \$2.4 billion into school infrastructure since 2008. This includes 60 new school builds and 35 renovations.

In addition to supporting the 27 school divisions, our province remains committed to supporting families and students who choose independent schools. There's \$17.6 million in operating grants for qualified independent schools and historical high schools. This includes 11.8 million in continued funding for independent schools and 5.8 million for historical high schools. This is an increase of \$78,000 to support enrolment growth.

Supporting our youngest learners and their families continues to be a priority. The '23-24 budget provides 386.9 million for early learning and child care that supports young families in our province. This is an increase of 72.8 million or 23.2 per cent over last year. This includes 359.9 million for regulated child care. Of this, approximately 298.2 million is from the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement and the Canada-Saskatchewan Bilateral Early Learning and Child Care Agreement. Through these agreements the province has reduced parent fees for regulated child care spaces to \$10 a day as of April 1st of this year.

Parents of children under the age of six who attend regulated child care on a full-time basis are now paying \$217.50 per month. This is saving families an average of 395 to \$573 per child every month compared to March 31st of 2021. These are incredible savings for young families.

My ministry officials are working with child care providers around the province to support them through the transition to \$10-a-day child care. We know that creating more affordable child care is great news for young families, and we want to ensure that our child care operators can support families and their staff through this transition. We are ensuring that this change will not reduce the number of child care spaces or services available throughout the province. We recognize that each family's child

care needs will vary, and we want to ensure that child care operators can continue to offer families full-time or less-than-full-time care as they require. Families will continue to receive the child care that meets their needs.

Through our agreement with the federal government, we're also continuing to increase the number of regulated home-based and centre-based spaces around the province. This is a part of our ongoing goal of ensuring families have access to regular child care. I'm proud to say that to date nearly 4,700 new child care spaces have been created under the Canada-wide federal agreement. This includes 3,402 new spaces in child care centres and 1,294 spaces that have been opened in home child care facilities. As of December 31st, 2022 there are 19,790 regulated child care spaces in operation in 144 communities across the province. We look forward to continuing to increase the number of regulated spaces available to families as we expand the workforce.

To support this growth, we're committed to attracting, retaining, and growing a strong and skilled workforce of early childhood educators. This budget provides funding to continue supporting the current ECE [early childhood educator] wages as well as provide free ECE training, professional development initiatives, and bursaries. The ministry will also be supporting the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association to develop a comprehensive ECE recruitment plan. The ministry is also hard at work developing an early learning and child care funding workforce strategy and wage grid, as well as a new funding model for regulated providers.

The province is also continuing to support a number of programs that support young learners and families, including those that are living in vulnerable circumstances. This year's budget provides 17.1 million for funding for the KidsFirst regional and targeted programs. This is an increase of \$500,000 over last year. The KidsFirst targeted program served more than 1,650 vulnerable families last year, resulting in approximately 92,000 services provided.

KidsFirst regional travels to smaller urban and rural communities around the province to provide unique mobile early learning opportunities for children age five and under. These opportunities include take-home literacy kits, story walks, and pop-up preschool events, just to name a few. The program also provides caregivers with reliable parenting information and knowledge about early childhood development. Last year more than 15,900 children and adults were served in 343 communities by these mobile learning opportunities. In addition, there were over 1.6 million social media and web page views in 2021-22.

The ministry remains committed to supporting families of children with developmental delays and those experiencing disabilities. To support this, there's 5.4 million for early childhood intervention programs, or ECIPs. This is an increase of 156,000 over last year.

[16:00]

ECIPs provide support to families of children experiencing delays and increase kids' readiness for school. ECIPs help to catch up children's development. That makes for more successful transitions to schools. Last year Saskatchewan's ECIPs served

more than 1,200 children in 211 different communities.

In addition, this budget provides 7.5 million to support the 15 early years family resource centres, as well as open six new centres around the province. This is an increase of a million dollars over last year. Early years family resource centres provide free programming for all families with children up to the age of six, allowing them to connect with a range of trusted early childhood programming information and supports in a single location.

Early learning family resource centres are currently serving communities of The Battlefords, Estevan, Humboldt, La Ronge, Meadow Lake, Moose Jaw, Nipawin, Lloydminster, Prince Albert, Regina, Sandy Bay, Saskatoon, Swift Current, Weyburn, and Yorkton. Work is currently under way to develop six new centres in the communities of Ile-a-la-Crosse, Kindersley, Tisdale, the Warman-Martensville region, as well as second locations in both Regina and Saskatoon. And we expect that these centres will be open to families later this year.

The '23-24 budget also provides 2.6 million for child nutrition programs. This funding is provided to school divisions and CBOs [community-based organization] to help them address child hunger, offer nutrition education, and provide skill-building opportunities like cooking classes. This is an increase of \$75,000 over last year.

Preparing our youngest learners to be ready for kindergarten and lifelong learning is a collaborative effort between families, community organizations, and the province, and we believe that these investments will go a long way in supporting young families and children.

We know that thousands of residents visit public libraries each year to benefit from the many services that they offer. That's why this year's budget provides 11.6 million to support the provincial public library system, including providing 6.3 million, an increase of \$182,000, in resource-sharing grants for the seven regional library systems; \$1 million, an increase of \$30,000, in resource-sharing grants to the northern library system; and 1.4 million, an increase of 42,000, for the municipal libraries in Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert. Also included is \$2.9 million to support accessible library services and infrastructure, such as internet connectivity and the single integrated library system.

Additionally supports to the public libraries will also include a new investment of \$200,000 to refresh the province's central collection of multilingual materials and add materials in Indigenous languages, as well as literacy resources in support of a growing and diverse province. We know that these library resources help our local public libraries provide high-quality materials to a growing and diverse population.

The '23-24 budget also provides 1.1 million to support Saskatchewan's literacy programs. This includes \$576,000 to support family literacy programming, including the network of nine family literacy hubs around the province. Also included is \$500,000 to continue support for summer literacy programming provided by eight school divisions. This summer literacy programming provides students opportunities to maintain and grow their literacy skills over the summer months. This supports

future success, both in the classroom and beyond as we continue to work towards supporting a highly educated and skilled workforce in our province. We will continue to work with our library and literacy sectors to ensure that residents living across the province have access to high-quality materials, services, and programs.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening remarks and highlights the meaningful and very significant investments that we are making in education around the province. I want to thank the Ministry of Education staff for all that they do to support our pre-kindergarten to grade 12, early learning and child care, literacy, and library sectors. The work that they do makes a difference in the lives of all Saskatchewan people.

I also want to thank our sector partners for their collaboration and support as we move into a new fiscal year. We have lots to be proud of, of what has been accomplished in the last fiscal year. I look forward to continuing to work together to accomplish our shared goal of supporting students and early learners in reaching their full potential. Thank you.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister, for your opening remarks. And before we get to questions, I'm just going to make note and recognize that Mr. Hargrave has taken his seat with the committee. And so with that, I will open the floor to questions. I recognize Mr. Love.

Mr. Love: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and congratulations on your election to Chair. Looking forward to working with you and other members of this committee and all the officials who are here today in the interest of education from early childhood through adult literacy and libraries and everything in between. I appreciate the work that our public servants do and thank them for being here today.

In particular I'd like to thank Deputy Minister Johnson for her career in public service that I know is coming to an end soon, I believe. Thank you for the decades of service to this province, for the time and commitment. And on behalf of the opposition, and I think all members of this committee, I want to thank you for that, and know that your work is valued as all public servants are but yours in particular. It's certainly a career of putting the needs and concerns of the people of Saskatchewan first, and it's much appreciated.

Mr. Chair, I'll get into my questions. Today and tomorrow when we reconvene, it will be my intent to focus my questions to the minister and to his officials when they are able to answer in three key areas, those being examining the estimates and funding for education from K to 12; spending some time discussing the new Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation; and also discussing the funding and oversight of qualified and certified independent schools in the province. Tomorrow I'll conclude my time with some questions on libraries and literacy supports. But that's my plan as we take time in this committee to examine the estimates before us.

First question. Thank you, Minister, for your opening remarks. Much appreciated. I took some notes, and I'll refer to some of those comments throughout the proceedings today. But just as an opening question for you, Minister Duncan, I'm wondering if you can comment, as you went through the process of developing

a budget for education, what was your intent with this budget? And can you name three to five objectives and priorities that you focused on?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. So I think certainly when we set out to build the budget for this fiscal year and the upcoming school year, I think a couple of things that were pretty key in terms of what I was hoping to see — that ultimately treasury board did approve and the cabinet did approve — and I think it's some of the themes that you probably have already heard or seen as a part of when the budget was unveiled. And so really looking at, kind of, the concepts around more students, more schools, affordable child care.

So I think, you know, first and foremost looking at enrolment growth — and seeing really enrolment growth that we haven't seen in at least 20 years, likely longer than that, but certainly we can confirm 20 years — and ensuring that we had funding that recognized the enrolment growth that school divisions were facing.

More schools, so knowing the need that there was for capital investment, continued infrastructure investment. I won't go through the list that you've already heard in the opening, but certainly the nearly \$150 million in infrastructure funding that continues and does move us to a number of new projects. As well as a number of projects that, you know, we're hoping will be complete either certainly in time for this upcoming school year, but certainly in the next little while. As well as affordable child care, continuing to implement the federal-provincial agreement.

That was a very big part of our thoughts around building this budget, and I think ultimately too providing more opportunities for students across the province. And I think that that really formed a lot of my thoughts around what eventually has become the Sask DLC, ensuring that students have opportunities regardless of where they live, and frankly being able to provide that support to school divisions to be able to provide a wider array of opportunities for their students.

So you know, I think those are some of the key things that certainly were priorities for me and for us as we put together our submission: concepts around supporting more students; having more schools being built or being planned for; and more opportunities for our students; as well as implementing more affordable child care for folks around the province.

Mr. Love: — Thanks for sharing those priorities in this budget with the committee, Minister.

A follow-up question. If you could list the major concerns from the main stakeholders in K to 12 education — being Saskatchewan school boards and teachers — what are you hearing are maybe the top one or two concerns from those key groups? Not in response to this budget, but just their main concerns overall that they would like to see addressed in our K to 12 system.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question. I think this would be certainly consistent with the time that I've had the privilege and honour of being Education minister in Saskatchewan. I think a couple of areas that come to mind would be classroom complexity. I hear that a lot from stakeholder groups, including

the SSBA [Saskatchewan School Boards Association], the STF [Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation], and others. So that would be one area.

And I think the other area, kind of along similar lines but not identical, but certainly from those stakeholder groups and others, would be issues around mental health and wellness of students as well as staff.

[16:15]

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Minister. I agree. That's what I'm hearing too. There's other concerns, but I think you've done a good job narrowing that down to the big ones that are out there.

So in my first question I asked what your priorities were, and classroom complexity wasn't mentioned. You've indicated that you know how significant of a concern this is in our 625 schools within 27 publicly funded and delivered school divisions. Why was classroom complexity not mentioned as one of your priorities, and why is it not represented in this budget?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So I think, as you're aware, Mr. Love, we do have a committee, a class size and composition complexity committee. That work is still under way, and so we are working through that process now. Do certainly look forward to receiving recommendations from that committee, and I do look forward to, when that work is done, sharing that with my colleagues. You know, I'm not naive to think that it won't come with some sort of price tag on it.

There might be other work that maybe wouldn't require new funds. But in the event that there is, what I have said to the stakeholder groups, as well as to my colleagues, is that when we have that work, we would then look to build that in to either a future budget or, depending on the timelines of when that work comes, if there's something that we can do prior to that, we would have that discussion.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Minister. I do want to note for the committee that you can identify, I think any of us with concerns over our education system can easily identify, classroom complexity as the top concern. And I appreciate the work being done by the task force or committee that's looking at this, no doubt, and I'm very curious to see what their findings and recommendations will be.

But yet we know that these concerns are not new. These concerns have been building for years. And again I want to just take a moment to express disappointment that despite knowing this is a top concern, it's not listed as a priority in this year's budget.

Moving on, Minister, I'm curious when it comes to operating funds for school divisions. Last year on budget day you made several comments in the media that you didn't believe that inflation affected school divisions, and then by the time we got to this committee — and I was happy to see this, you know — were able to talk about some of the ways that inflation impacts school divisions. And of course in the summer your government brought forward funding to address inflationary pressures. So there's been some learning and growth along the way.

What rate of inflation were you factoring into this budget? And

how did you develop that number that you landed on?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Okay, thanks for the question, Mr. Love. Yeah, I'll just maybe make a comment about last year. I think when we would have been building the budget and even into January of last year as the budget was being finalized, late January, I think there was some belief, whether it be the fed chairman or others, that inflation was hoped to be transitory at that time. And obviously that didn't transpire as many of the experts were thinking.

So last summer we did provide some support to school divisions to address inflationary pressures. I would say at that time though, in terms of their increasing costs related to insurance or fuel, we had been a number of months already into the year. And so, you know, we had a better idea, and certainly they had a better idea of what those costs were actually going to be.

In terms of this budget, it's not that we based the increases on an inflation rate. We looked at a number of things, including projected costs when it comes to utility increases, when it comes to the costs that school divisions as an employer are facing on CPP [Canada Pension Plan] enhancements and EI [employment insurance] enhancements that have been implemented at the federal level. There's others in that area; utilities would be one. There would be other non-salary inflation.

But it's not like we picked an inflationary number and then just I guess added that to those costs. We looked at what projected costs there would be in a number of different areas that would be true costs to divisions that we can project out what those costs may look like over the course of a year.

Mr. Love: — So what was your projected true cost for CPP, EI, utilities, and non-salary items?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So thanks for the question. So the number that we've used is 18.9 million for inflationary pressures. That would be 5.7 million would support the costs of changes to the Canada Pension Plan as well as employment insurance. And then the remainder of that 13.1 million would be to support non-salary inflationary pressures. This could be utility bills, insurance premiums, and other general inflation expenses.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Minister. Can you comment on and clarify what inflationary costs the budget doesn't cover.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So the largest area that wouldn't be covered would be on the CBA [collective bargaining agreement] side. Obviously the largest of that is the teachers' collective bargaining agreement. And as you know, and as I said in the opening, negotiations haven't begun because the contract hasn't concluded.

Mr. Love: — Does the budget cover inflation on fuel costs?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question. There's nothing built in on the inflationary side for fuel. When we did the one-time adjustment last summer, fuel prices were considerably higher than they would be now. So we will continue to monitor it, but fuel prices are generally at or lower than they would have been this time last year.

[16:30]

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Minister. I'm wondering if you can comment on the following numbers that have been shared with me. In 2016-17 transportation in operational funding for schools was \$284.74 for distance; \$540.34 for student. In 2023-24, despite massive increases in fuel and transportation costs and bus replacements, those numbers are lower. I have \$280.24 for distance; \$536.50 for students.

So can you comment on, despite massive inflationary pressures, increased costs for transportation, bus replacement, why those numbers are lower in 2023-24 compared to 2016-17?

Mr. Jensen: — Rory Jensen, assistant deputy minister. So between '16-17 and '23-24 budget, there has been an increase from approximately \$127 million in transportation funding to over \$133 million. So we have recognized an increase in transportation fees.

Also in that time period, there's been a number of things that have happened. As the ministry, we undertook a review of the funding model and there was some rebalancing of where costs were associated to recognize the costs that were experienced in school divisions.

We also worked with school divisions to negotiate bulk fuel purchasing, so school divisions could use bulk purchasing power to receive better rates on fuel costs throughout the province. So that's helping primarily rural school divisions that need to buy a lot of fuel but don't have, generally, the purchasing power to negotiate better deals with fuel providers.

Another factor, too, in transportation, particularly in rural transportation, is when there's enrolment growth happening, the costs of a bus route doesn't increase, generally won't increase if they just have to make another stop at another farm or another stop in a community to pick up a student unless they have to add kilometres to that bus route. So the funding model also will recognize just the number of kilometres travelled, and often that won't change if it's just adding one stop along that same route.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Mr. Jensen. I'm wondering if the minister could comment on the reduction in per-student funding for transportation, and the impact that that's having on many school divisions around the province.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. You know, I think as Mr. Jensen has pointed out — at a time especially when we're having increased enrolment, a greater density of students — just looking at, I guess, a per-student funding, I don't think that tells the entire picture. As Mr. Jensen has pointed out, adding another student onto, for example, a bus route or a number of students onto a bus route, doesn't in and of itself increase the costs that are borne by that school division.

Mr. Love: — So last year, Minister, we had several school divisions — you know, some of which drive upwards of 25 000 kilometres a day in bus routes — talk about the failure to cover inflationary costs for fuel and transportation, and that led them to somewhere in the neighbourhood of a \$2 million operating deficit on transportation alone.

So my question to you, Minister, is where should these divisions, if again they'll be facing an operational deficit due to the failure to fund inflation for transportation, where should they find \$2 million of efficiencies? And roughly how many FTE [full-time equivalent] equivalents of teachers would you estimate would need to be reduced to cover that level of cost?

[16:45]

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for question, Mr. Love. I would just say in a general sense, looking at the provincial average, we certainly are well below where we were last summer when we did add additional funds to school divisions. So we were well over \$2 a litre. I think 2.04 was the number that we were looking at last year. We're well below that now in terms of a provincial average. We will obviously be monitoring that over the next number of months to see what transpires this year when it comes to fuel costs.

You know, I think it's too early for me to speculate in terms of what divisions are going to do when it comes to developing their budgets. They have until the end of June, I believe, to submit a budget for approval. They'll be making decisions in terms of what their budget's going to look like.

We specifically addressed non-salary inflation to close to \$20 million in this budget. Divisions have a lot of latitude in terms of where they choose to put their dollars. We will have a number of school divisions, particularly on the public side that will, we believe, see savings in terms of their operations through the creation and the funding of the Sask DLC. And so those savings that we expect certainly can be used for other parts of their operations. They have autonomy to make those decisions. So we'll see over the next number of months what decisions that they make.

Mr. Love: — Is there any funding provided in this year's budget for non-teacher salary increases, including educational assistants, language assistants, secretaries, librarians, caretakers, bus drivers, and social workers?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — No, there's not. Not specific to those areas. In terms of the salary inflation or contract agreements, that is within the \$2.04 billion, the envelope of funding that the 27 school divisions receive. Not specific to, obviously, the teachers CBA. When we have an agreement, you know, we'll have to make decisions around that. But with respect to the non-teacher salary increases, those will be funded out of the 2.04 billion that has been allocated to school divisions.

Mr. Love: — Thank you. Are there any supports for increased inflationary costs for the purchase and implementation of technology in schools?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. School divisions do have, on an annual basis as a part of their budget allocation, divisions would have a plan to replace technology. Typically it's done on a rolling schedule. So that would be a part of their budgeting process, what they would budget for on a given basis.

So nothing specific to say that we are funding replacement technology in this budget other than, again, whatever portion of

their portion of the \$2.04 billion that they've already identified in their budget-making process, as they would do in any given year.

Mr. Love: — Does the 2023-24 budget increase for education operating funds, does it include any funds that have been previously announced or disbursed already during this current year?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So I think two that come to mind. One would be that we are recognizing the mid-year adjustment that we made last year, the \$15.5 million to support the enrolment growth of the 2022-23 school year. So that is recognized in this budget.

And the other one would be annualizing the \$7 million for the EA fund. So there is an additional amount of money to annualize that at \$7 million, understanding the difference between the fiscal year of the government and the school year of the school divisions. So that's now annualized. I know that that was a concern of school divisions. Obviously didn't want to only have one-time money to hire people and then not have the funding to continue with that employment, and so we recognized that and have annualized the entire \$7 million.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister, are you saying that the 15.5 million announced in September for enrolment growth and \$7 million for additional EAs, that those are represented in the \$49.4 million increase this year?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — The 15.5 million is represented by the 49.4 million. The 7 million is over and above that.

Mr. Love: — So let's think about this for a minute. As you mentioned, the school division fiscal year is different than a March-to-March provincial budget year. So if we look at this school year that we're currently in, and we look at the supports for inflationary pressures and the supports for increased enrolment, one of the concerns that I'm hearing from school divisions is that those supports will not be there next school year, which takes a \$49.4 million increase in operating funds and brings that down to about \$15 million. So they're seeing this as a 0.7 per cent increase in operating funds for their school year. Do you agree with that position, Minister?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. I don't know if I would agree with the characterization. I think when you look at budget day to budget day, there are 2,900 more students that are now in school. Funding for those students has been added to the base, so that's the 15.5 million.

We are anticipating an additional 2,500 students that will be enrolling this fall over and above that, so that's the additional \$15 million. And I won't belabour the . . . because we just spoke about the \$18.9 million projected inflationary pressures that divisions may be facing. So I guess I don't agree with the characterization.

Mr. Love: — So again the characterization is that on the school year budget, on their years, which, you know, are different than the provincial government March to March, in the school year they're going to see an increase of 0.7. And of course it's going to be different for every division based on their projected

enrolments, and I understand that.

I'll maybe just move my question as far as supporting school boards with adequate, predictable, and sustainable funding and ask for your response to the Saskatchewan School Boards Association reaction to the 2023-24 budget. These are folks who know our system well. They're elected to be accountable to the public for our 27 public and separate boards. And I'm wondering if you could respond to this statement from the SSBA:

The operating increase announced in the 2023-2024 budget does not cover the expenses that school divisions are facing. This budget contributes to the existing instability and continuing erosion of the publicly funded education system, and our school boards are increasingly concerned about that.

Can you please respond to this concern.

[17:00]

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. I've had an opportunity to meet with the new president of the SSBA on budget day, and I'm looking forward to speaking to that sector in the coming days about the upcoming budget and other things that we're working on that I'm pretty excited about.

I guess I'll just say this: it is a 2.5 per cent increase, budget to budget. Obviously that distributes based on where the enrolment is for students. And so we will have a number of school divisions that will certainly exceed that 2.5 per cent when you look at their own individual budgets. And we would have divisions that would be less than that 2.5 per cent, but again that's largely driven by enrolment being the largest factor.

When there are enrolment pressures or increases, we have funded those, I think every budget, for 15 years. We have done that at mid-year to meet the school divisions' needs. We did that just in this past year, as you full well know. I will say this too: we've also, when we've had the opportunity to reconcile the enrolments based on projections and when school divisions' projections were higher than actual enrolments — and two years ago would be a prime example of this — we didn't claw money back. We funded based on what the estimates were that were provided to the ministry. School divisions were wrong. And we didn't pull money back from school divisions because of that.

The other thing I will say too, is I think that as school divisions look at not only their budgets and look at what their expenses are and what their revenue projections are from the ministry, we are going to see, I think, a number of school divisions . . . And I think they're looking at this now, and it's obviously not . . . It's difficult to make this really clear on budget day, but over and above the operating increases to our school divisions, K to 12 education is also benefiting from the establishment of the Sask DLC.

We have provided \$23 million as a grant. Most of that will be in operations. Obviously there will be some one-time start-up costs that the Sask DLC . . . But the majority of those funds will be used for the operations of the Sask DLC, which in turn will see a correlating reduction in expenses from a number of school divisions, mainly the public school divisions that up until this point have funded and have had expenditures associated with

providing distance learning through their online schools that will no longer have those expenses anymore.

I think it's going to be in the neighbourhood, certainly, likely \$10 million if not higher. I think I've used 13 million as the number before. Again that's an estimate at this point. But those are expenses that those school divisions will no longer have and will certainly free dollars up for those school divisions to be able to dedicate towards their budgets as they see fit.

So I don't think it's necessarily just an issue of looking at what is the income of the school divisions. I think school divisions and certainly all of us, including this committee, I think should be looking closely at what the expenditures are of those school divisions and see that for a number of school divisions, they will no longer have those expenses associated with providing an online school.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Minister. I do want to note that the school divisions are aware of that when they criticize this budget. They're fully aware of those circumstances, and yet they came out with a statement that expressed the reality that those 27 public and separate boards are facing as a result of this budget.

I'd like to ask you to respond to a comment from the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation. And I'll read it and looking for a follow-up comment please.

The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation is baffled by the government's disregard for students. Budget 2023-24 fails to provide adequate funding for increasing student enrolment and more complex needs. Government either doesn't understand the issues or doesn't think they are important.

I hear from parents and teachers every day, there is a serious concern for student well-being because school divisions simply don't have enough funding to meet students' needs. These decisions have a critical, lasting impact on the future of our province.

Can you please respond to those concerns from folks who know our system incredibly well, being our teachers.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you for the question, Mr. Love. You know, again I've had the opportunity on budget day to meet with the president of the STF and certainly read and heard her comments that you've reiterated here in committee. Again I think there is a lot of work that needs to be done before we get to the point where divisions are finalizing their budget.

Again this is a 2.5 per cent increase overall, which I think is really the initial budget when it comes to education. Knowing that we have a CBA contract that is going to significantly — again not knowing what that negotiation is going to look like and when it will conclude — but obviously that will have to be accounted for and we will fund that agreement. This doesn't, the 2.5 per cent.

And again I can't make a commitment beyond what is already in the budget, but this government has a track record of looking at mid-year adjustments when it comes to enrolment. We did that last year, over \$15 million, based on the fact that when school divisions did their projections early last year, and when we had

enrolment in September and enrolment continued in October and kids kept coming into school in November, we made adjustments to what the school divisions' budgets are. We'll see how close divisions have been on their projections for this year and whether or not there's an opportunity to make an adjustment. Again, time will tell on that.

You know, I know in my time being here, I remember my first budget as Education minister as a 1 per cent increase. And the president of the STF at the time, Pat Maze, said it was a good budget for education. And then last year it was a 1.5 and it for some reason got a little bit not as good of a reaction from the STF. And this year is a 2.5. So I don't know how, frankly, we've gone from a 1 per cent budget increase for education being good, and now a 2.5 is baffling.

But again, appreciate their positions and their perspectives and knowing that even that 1.5 per cent increase last year included funding a 2 per cent increase for the teachers' contract. And knowing full well that that took a big chunk of the . . . I think it was a \$29 million increase, and 23 million of that was for the CBA, for the 2 per cent on the CBA.

This is \$49.4 million plus fully funding the \$7 million EA, which adds a couple, on an annualized basis, adds . . . It's not the full 7 because some of that was already again based on the school year and the fiscal year. But in terms of operating, over \$50 million in operating. And we don't even have a contract to be settled yet.

Mr. Love: — You know, I think I can answer that confusion for you, Minister. I think that the difference between those previous increases and this year are two big things: inflation — we've discussed that thoroughly today; we know that that's a significant cost driver in the sector — and complex classrooms. Our school divisions know that we started this year, due to the impacts of last year's budget, with hundreds, hundreds of fewer caring professionals serving thousands more students.

Due to last year's budget, we saw several divisions reducing their FTEs on a number of lines, but I think mostly teachers, to address the lack of adequate funding from this provincial government. So I think that those are the two things that have probably changed that response from being happy about a 1 per cent increase during a pandemic.

And you're right to point out that your government didn't claw back money when enrolments didn't match projections. We would've been the only government in Canada to do so, I believe. I mean no one else is doing that. It was the chaos of COVID, and that was one of the things that just simply wasn't on the table.

But as far as, you know, the change in tune, what I'm hearing — again I don't represent these folks but it is my job as critic to listen to them — the changes are inflation and increasing complex needs in the classroom that divisions are struggling to meet.

For my next question, Minister, I'm wondering if you can explain on sort of a high level, Minister, how the education funding model works, if any adjustments were made this year, including adjustments to the supports for learning formula.

I know it's complicated, and if you have one of your officials that

would like to provide that comment, I'd be all ears.

[17:15]

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks, Mr. Love. Mr. Love, I'm going to have Angela Chobanik speak on the funding formula. I kind of joke with my officials that — and this probably didn't happen — when I first got briefed on the funding formula it kind of felt a little bit like, don't try to figure it out, Minister, because you probably won't be there long enough to understand the whole thing. That certainly was my perception. But I'm sure they didn't say that to me.

I will have Angela Chobanik speak to it but just a couple of points. In conversations certainly with the SSBA and their calls for long-term sustainable, predictable funding, I'm certainly very open to having that discussion. In the nearly two and a half years as being minister, I know that that has come up from time to time. If they have some ideas or want to put a proposal together, we certainly would entertain that.

I think, you know, I know some of the reaction, just as an example, some of the reaction to last year's budget was comparing the increase to what the increase in the EPT [education property tax] was in terms of a percentage. And I give this as an example, just as one example, that we probably don't have a proposal because there really isn't a perfect proposal out there. It's not like advanced education where there's tuition that you can have an offset with the universities to say, we'll guarantee you this much revenue so long as you cap your tuition rates at a certain amount. That really doesn't exist in our sector.

And the example of EPT that I give, the danger in pegging it to something like EPT is that, my understanding is that we were estimating as a government that EPT changes last year would result in about \$25 million in additional revenue. Turns out that revenue was only \$7 million. So you know, that's an example of something that it's not a certainty in terms of what that increase would be.

One other point that I want to make is . . . or two other points. When you add in the Sask DLC funding, the \$23 million, if that was added into the operating of K to 12 as presented in the budget, it's not a \$49.4 million increase. It's a \$72 million increase. And that's all K to 12 education that's being funded. So that's a 3.6 per cent increase in K to 12 funding if it was presented in the budget that way.

And again without a CBA being signed, which is the largest cost driver for school divisions and will be one of the largest cost drivers in the education sector when we do have a CBA. So that was the second point that I want to make.

And just tied to that too is that, again, what we tried to do is look at projecting out what actual costs were, or projected to be actual costs, not knowing what those projected costs are going to be around things like utilities and CPP and EI enhancements; and not looking at the overall inflation rate for the country because again that doesn't actually reflect for example, what the teacher salary increase is going to be. You know, whatever that number's going to be, you know, remains to be seen.

But simply looking at the inflation rate, when I think you know

and members will know — of the committee — inflation takes into . . . food and shelter and tobacco and alcohol increases, and things that really have no influence on a school division's budgets.

Knowing that obviously transportation is one of them, salaries is obviously the big one for us, but when we look at just what is the overall . . . And I got this question on budget day as I oft, you know, as I do: why not just give them an increase in terms of what the cost of inflation is? Because that's not really reflective of what the cost drivers are in our sector.

Ms. Chobanik, if you can speak on the funding formula.

Ms. Chobanik: — Good evening. Angela Chobanik. I'm the executive director of the education funding branch. So this funding model that we are using was implemented in 2012-13. Following the changes to education property tax in 2009, a new funding model was required to distribute operating funding to school divisions.

The funding model is based on the categories in which school divisions have their expenses. So school divisions have their financial statements, for example, and it lays out their expenses by their different functional areas. So you have governance, administration, instruction, transportation, plant operation, and maintenance, for example.

So when the funding formula was built, we looked at actual costs of school divisions in those different categories. It was based on a number of years of research and much consultation with the school divisions during the development of that funding model. And we found a lot of information during that time. We used a lot of third-party objective data. But we also worked with our school division people, our CFOs [chief financial officer], our directors, and our stakeholder groups during that development.

One of the things that we found out through that is that school divisions, the way they operate, are much more alike than they are different. So that allows us to have a funding formula that uses a set of calculations that are, for the most part, applied similarly to the school divisions.

School divisions have, on average, maybe 80 per cent of their expenses are on salaries, maybe another 10 per cent for plant operation and maintenance, 7 per cent on average for transportation, and 3 per cent for the other things. And most school divisions have a distribution of their expenses around that same. Most school divisions would determine their staffing levels for their schools on a formula. And most school divisions used a similar formula to determine their staffing in their schools.

So given that school divisions were acting . . . and their spending was more alike than different, we were able to determine a set of formulas. These formulas applied the same calculation to all of the schools and school divisions but also recognize where there are justifiable cost differences. So for example, areas that have additional costs for geographic dispersion — small rural schools — there is additional recognition of those higher costs, where there's justifiable cost differences.

The funding model is not done on per-student rates. That is, enrolments are used in the model but it is not a per-student

funding. The old funding model pre-existing this one relied heavily on per-student rates. We use enrolments but do not fund on a per-student basis.

Let's see here. So to give you an overview of the funding model itself, the largest component of the funding model is instruction. There is a number of sub-components within instruction. Base instruction provides the funding for essentially the schoolteachers. That looks at how many students are in each school and it does apply some factors for things like small schools, small schools of necessity, for example.

We've got supports for learning, which looks at the type of student needs based on a number of indicators, quite a few indicators, but some of the main ones are looking at vulnerability levels, which is measured in part by looking at low income. We look at EAL [English as an additional language] and immigration data. So supports for learning really considers the type of students that are in each school division.

Some of the other main pieces of the funding model include plant operation and maintenance, so that provides all of the operating funding for the schools themselves. Transportation is another large piece of the funding model, recognizing the costs for both urban and rural transportation. There's quite an extensive list of components which I'm happy to read and explain if you like.

So we do review the funding model regularly. There's been a number of review processes since its implementation in '12-13. In some of those we've looked at specific components; in others we have looked at the funding model overall.

There was an extensive review somewhere around 2015, 2016 that we worked with the school divisions to review the whole model, and the impact of that was a small change to some areas and refinement of the funding model. But generally the findings of that review showed that the model itself works pretty well. There was some tweaks around the edges, but most of it proved to be working in the manner it was intended, and that's to distribute the funds in as equitable way as possible.

We have established a standing committee, the operating grant advisory committee, which has representatives from our stakeholder groups as well. So as there's issues that arise, we have them to draw upon to have discussions about what might need to change for the funding model going forward.

So you had also asked about if there was any changes to the funding model this year. There was no formula changes to the funding model this year. We do update data in the funding model on a regular basis. This year was a year where there was updated census information available.

So the census is updated every five years, but some of the information that came to us in the data for the 2021 census seemed to have some kind of unexpected and unexplainable changes that we think were related to how people were filling out the census or not filling out the census during the pandemic years. So to ensure there wasn't a big shift in funding related to one point in data, we've used this most current census year data and then the census data from the previous, and used those as an average to measure non-official language spoken at home and lone parent status.

So when the next census comes in another five years, we will relook at that. So this was done just as a matter of ensuring that the data that we're using is reliable and stable.

Mr. Love: — Okay, thanks for that. That deepens my understanding. Minister, in your opinion does funding for education take into account senior citizens, folks over 65, who live in a geographic area of a school division? Are they considered at all in how you fund education?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. So certainly it's my view and my opinion that we do provide a high quality of education for young people in this province to be able to . . . in whatever endeavour they choose to do after their academic career is over.

I'm not sure of the reference to senior citizens, but certainly we provide a good education for kids to be able to pursue a career in Saskatchewan, including if they want to work in the health care field or any other field that they may be able to support seniors living in our communities.

Mr. Love: — I get that it's an odd question and I see some folks smiling around the room. Here's what it's about, Minister. You've referenced several times in the Assembly per capita funding for education. I see some nods. How much sense does that really make when we're talking about — you know, you've mentioned several times something that we're all happy to see — more kids in our schools, increasing number of young people in our schools, in particular families and young people coming from all parts of the world, especially Ukraine. And we heard that mentioned in the Assembly today.

So how much sense does it make . . . And I guess really the question is, does your government consider per capita funding for education or do you consider student enrolments?

[17:30]

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks, Mr. Love, for the question. So as you heard, we fund on the funding model. It's not based on a per capita. But looking at per capita is certainly . . . It's one way of evaluating education funding across the country, knowing that there are significant differences when it comes to how education is funded in different provinces, what funding formulas may look like in other provinces. So there's a variety of ways, I think, to measure comparatively to other provinces, and per capita would be one of a myriad of ways of doing it.

Mr. Love: — Is there any province in Canada that funds education per capita?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. I mean, while there are variations in terms of how a per-student allocation would be weighted in different provinces, we're probably talking . . . I think Alberta would be an example where per student it's weighted more heavily, say, than our funding formula.

I think it's a little bit difficult. Certainly we're not aware of any provinces that fund or design a funding model around a per capita type of allocation. But again, the funding formulas are a little bit like apples and oranges, I think, when you look across the

province.

But again when it comes to measuring and reporting funding levels in provinces, per capita is one way to report that, and it — certainly as you will know from hearing from me — it's one way that Stats Canada, for example, does measure across the country. And I think it's probably . . . Certainly it would be likely because it would be very difficult.

There are other ways, as you will know, there are other ways to try to make those evaluations. But knowing the intricacies and the differences with all of the different ways that funding is provided to ministries and departments of Education around the country, there are lots of studies and lots of reports. There's I think pros and cons to all of those. Per capita is one way to report it.

Mr. Love: — What message does it send to teachers who speak of triage in the classroom, to school divisions who talk about the erosion of the public system, when you use a metric in the Assembly that no one in the country uses to measure success in education? Do you think that that sends the right message as far as this budget's ability to meet the needs of our children and youth in our schools?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Well again, if the question is what the funding levels are comparable to other provinces, then the Statistics Canada data that is collected and reported publicly to the people of Canada is one way to indicate what funding levels look like here compared to other provinces without making any comments on, in your words, success in education. The same I think could be true for those that would maybe look at quoting other organizations that use different metrics to report on funding levels, that I think they themselves are absent when it comes to reporting on success in education.

So per capita funding is one way to demonstrate what funding looks like in education, but it's just one way. And again it doesn't get into the intricacies of how the funding formula has been developed here or in any other province, and it certainly . . . And I never claimed it to be, to use your words, an indicator of success in education. I think we could have a debate about what success in education looks like and at the same time have a debate about what funding levels look like. Two things can be true at the same time.

Mr. Love: — Sure. So how are Saskatchewan students doing in math, reading, and science compared to other jurisdictions?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. I'll just maybe begin by talking a little bit about our three- and five-year graduation rates. So overall, in 2019-2020 we have a nearly 80 per cent three-year graduation rate. Our five-year graduation rate in '19-20 was 85.5 per cent.

Our 2018 PISA [programme for international student assessment] results: Saskatchewan in math, reading, and science, we are below the Canadian average. So that's PISA. When you look at the 2019 pan-Canadian assessment, that's the PCAP [Pan-Canadian assessment program], we rank eighth in math, seventh in reading, and sixth in science. With respect to the 2018 PISA results, while we are below the Canadian average, we are significantly . . . Sorry. We are globally competitive. We did

perform above the international levels in reading and science, and we are similar in the international average when it comes to mathematics.

Results like these are I think indicative of the work that's being done of the provincial education plan. And a part of that, one of the pillars of that is developing a provincial assessment program for the province, and part of that intent is to see those rates improve.

Mr. Love: — What impact have you and the ministry seen caused by COVID and years of learning that were impacted by the pandemic?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question. I think one of the things that we've seen through the pandemic when it comes to reading at grade level, we did see a measurable decline, although I think it's fair to say that not as significant or severe as, I think, perhaps was anticipated at the beginning of the pandemic. But reading rates, reading results have seen a measurable impact during the pandemic. I think that's why certainly one of the reasons why, as a part of the interim education plan, divisions and stakeholders in the ministry did agree that literacy continued to be one of the goals of the interim plan over the last number of years.

Mr. Love: — I want to ask for a couple numbers here. Please let me know if your officials need any time to find these.

Can you provide an update on the number of students in Saskatchewan in need of intensive supports? And how many students you project, next school year, would be EAL students, students with EAL needs?

[17:45]

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So as of January of this year, divisions have identified just over 10,000, so 10,040 students that require intensive supports.

Mr. Love: — And EAL?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Sorry about that, Mr. Love. EAL, 18,606 students.

Mr. Love: — Sorry, can you share that number one more time? I'm having a pen malfunction.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Yes, 18,606. That's for EAL support and 10,040 intensive supports.

Mr. Love: — Okay, thanks, Minister. I just want to note that the number provided last year to this committee for intensive supports is 9,274. We're looking at an increase of, you know, 730 roughly.

That's a lot of increased needs in the classroom. Is it your belief that your government is resourcing school divisions to meet these increasing needs that make classrooms more complex?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Yes, I would say that that equates to about 5.1 per cent of the student population. Despite the fact that it is an increase, it is roughly the same per cent of students that

required intensive supports not only last year. It was about 4.9 per cent. So we're, you know, 0.2 per cent within this year versus last year. And that 5.1 per cent has remained pretty consistent. So that would be contemplated as a part of the, I think it's now over \$300 million in the supports for learning, that did receive a 1.5 per cent increase this year.

Mr. Love: — Does your government track which division these students are enrolled in and fund them accordingly? And if not, why not? Have you ever considered, why not allow school divisions to self-report where those students are attending school?

Ms. Chobanik: — So the funding model as we were developing it and also through the various review processes, we looked at this question to see if there is information that would tell us that the distribution of students that require intensive supports differs across the province.

We have not found any information that would let us be able to verify that the proportion of students differs from school division to school division. We have looked at information from different data sources including the Ministry of Health, and it's gone through the various review processes with our third-party stakeholder groups.

And so all of that has led us to this point of . . . The proportion of students requiring intensive support seems to be pretty consistent from school division to school division. We keep on looking for better and updated data, that if there's data that would tell us differently, then we are open to reviewing how the funding works for that portion of the funding model. It's important within the funding process itself that it uses third-party objective data rather than self-reported data to ensure that the funding model is maintaining a distribution as equitable as possible.

Mr. Love: — Would any of that self-reported data provide insight into where families are choosing to send their children to school, in particular perhaps choosing divisions where more supports are available and thereby concentrating the number of students receiving intensive supports? And by eliminating this data, does that eliminate important information that could allow you to adjust the formula?

Ms. Chobanik: — We're not eliminating the data on intensive supports. It continues to be something that the ministry tracks and looks at every year. It's just not one of the data pieces that's used in the funding model. The funding model uses third-party objective data whenever and wherever possible.

We have heard anecdotally that it may be the case that some school divisions feel like they have a higher pressure of these students. Again, we have not been able to find any data source that would verify that. We continue to look to see if there is data that would tell us that in order to change the funding.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister, are you able to table the answer to this question. Can you report on which school divisions the 10,040 ISS [intensive supports student] students attend and which school divisions the 18,606 EAL students attend? In other words, can you break that down by school division?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — I can provide . . . Do you want the

numbers? I can read them right into the record if you want. We have the intensive supports and the EAL, and we have the EAL. Here it is.

Mr. Love: — Whatever you're comfortable with. Either read them into the record or provide a written answer. I'd probably prefer the written answer if you can share that. But I'm not sure if this needs to be read into the record or not.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — No that's fine. I'll table them with the committee.

Mr. Love: — Okay, thank you. Probably my last question on the opening segment of school funding. In your opening comments, Minister, you said that this was the first year that the operating funding for schools exceeds \$2 billion. In July of last year, your government put out a press release that said, "With the additional funds for inflationary pressures, school operating funding exceeds \$2 billion for the first time in the province's history."

So just to clarify, are any of those funds announced previously coming out of this year's budget? Or is this the second year where operating funds have exceeded \$2 billion?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So just to clarify that, with the additional money in-year last year, that did bring the operating budget of school divisions to over \$2 billion for the first time. This is the first budgeted year where school operating would be over \$2 billion for the first time.

Mr. Love: — So I guess that brings me back to a previous point that this year's increase for school divisions is 0.7 per cent for their school division year. If they had it last year, we're over \$2 billion; we have it this year, over \$2 billion. To me that's a 0.7 per cent increase.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Well they had a one-time commitment last year. That commitment is now being made part of the base.

Mr. Love: — Okay. I'm going to move on to some questions about the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation, and I imagine this'll take us to the end of our time here today.

But my first question, Minister. Prior to announcing this — and I know that there was a very small mention of this in last year's Throne Speech — but prior to announcing the creation of the new model, the desire to create one, who identified this as a priority? You know, we began our time today talking about the priorities of classroom complexities. Who identified distance learning as a priority that you decided, as minister, you wanted to pursue aggressively?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. So you're right. There was a mention in a previous Throne Speech to developing an online learning policy for the province. In terms of the direction that we ultimately chose to go, I think a couple of things. One, most other provinces have already been embarking down this path, likely with the exception of Alberta. This path looks quite similar, that we've pursued, with other provinces. I think BC [British Columbia] began down this path about three years ago.

So it was looking at the experience in other jurisdictions. I know

that when we had sought input from stakeholders, including school divisions, one of the other stakeholder groups that we did hear from were parents and students that were looking for more consistency. Particularly more consistency, but also for additional opportunities in terms of the course selection.

[18:00]

And this is something too that had been flagged repeatedly by our provincial youth council. It's been in operation for or been established for about four years now, I believe. And so you know, these are, as you can imagine, some of our best and brightest students from all around the province, including in rural Saskatchewan. And I know that it had been flagged in previous iterations of the youth council. Partly, I think, maybe a lack of knowledge of what — or maybe to phrase it better — an awareness that they developed of what opportunities did exist but perhaps, you know, maybe it was too late for them or after the fact in terms of going through their . . . particularly their high school education. Or just maybe not having as full of an opportunity to pursue some classes as they might have otherwise.

So it did come up on a number of different fronts.

Mr. Love: — And with the \$23 million initial investment, what will those dollars be used for?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So the \$23 million grant that will be provided to the Sask DLC . . . So this will largely consist of the administrative functions, so running the head office, the administration, the infrastructure costs.

So there really will be two revenue streams that we envision for the Sask DLC, so the 23 million grant from the province. On top of that there will be tuition that will be remitted by school divisions who have students within their geographical school division that will be taking courses through the Sask DLC. And that likely will cover much of the instructional piece of the Sask DLC.

So it's a combination of grant from the government as well as tuition that will be remitted. But the 23 million will essentially be . . . the bulk of that will be the administrative infrastructure, the headquarter operating costs.

Mr. Love: — Will that cover all the other satellite locations as well?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Love: — Will the new DLC use a fee-for-service model in terms of charging tuition?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Yes, so it essentially would be on a course-per-student basis, so \$500 per course per student. That would be the tuition that would be paid by the school division. If the student is over the age of 22, it would be the same cost, that they would have to fund themselves.

Mr. Love: — Minister, is it true that funding for school divisions is projected to be reduced to account for potential students enrolling in the SDLC [Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation], including projections for full-time and part-time

students? And if that is the path that your government is choosing, will those numbers be reconciled when actual enrolment is confirmed?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question. So we do know, certainly based on the 2022-23 school year, we do know where the full-time students are. And we are estimating where we expect the part-time students as well to come back. We have made the commitment to school divisions that, while those are estimates at this time, we will be reconciling the budgets based on actual enrolment.

Mr. Love: — And how are you making estimates for part-time online students?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So we are projecting enrolment, looking at what historical data would look like or does look like and basing our enrolment projections on not only that but also especially on the experience, what happens when a student is exposed to the options that are available when it comes to online learning. So you know, if you look at Saskatoon Public or South East Cornerstone or Chinook or Sun West School Division that have had a robust offering of online courses and what the uptake has been over the years, that has grown.

And so trying to project out over time as students that may be geographically located in school divisions that perhaps they didn't have as many online options as other school divisions, what are we projecting in terms of what the enrolment uptake will be in those school divisions now that those students have access to online courses perhaps to a greater extent that they have in the past.

So we're trying to use all that data to project what enrolment might be, and again, making that commitment to school divisions that we will be reconciling based on actual enrolments.

Mr. Love: — Have your projections led you to have any concerns over schools with smaller populations and rural communities that may lose a large segment of their student population to online learning, what the impact on those schools may be?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question. You know, I do want to stress that for the vast majority of our students, in-class learning is the best option for them. What the experience has shown is that we actually have seen less students leave, particularly in those small rural schools, because online learning is really about augmenting and enhancing what can be offered through a local school, particularly in rural Saskatchewan.

So I think the example that I would use would be my own in South East Cornerstone, where we've had the Cyberstone online school for a number of years. That has helped to, I think, in fact do the opposite of what I think the fear is, is that this will lead to an exodus of students from those rural schools, that they will pursue all or most of their education online, and that would be to the detriment of that rural school.

But I think the example in Sun West, in South East Cornerstone, and in Chinook School Division, I think some of our . . . particularly in Chinook School Division, which you know would be among the more sparsely populated school divisions. But I

think what we've seen, and certainly the experience would be shared in Sun West and other school divisions, is that this is really about enhancing and augmenting what could be offered in rural Saskatchewan and not as a way to take away from education in rural Saskatchewan.

Mr. Love: — Why did your government set this up as a treasury board Crown corporation, and did you consider creating a new school division to deliver the new online platform?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question. So there were a number of options that were investigated and considered. I think we really came down to one of two choices. One was to essentially embed it as part of the ministry and then the other was a treasury board Crown.

My comfort level in terms of a treasury board Crown I think certainly came down to the flexibility that it would provide, particularly at start-up. So knowing that there will be some assets that will need to be transferred, for example, from the Sun West School Division, and not knowing kind of the timing of all those assets, the treasury board Crown does provide some flexibility kind of in the timing of things like transfers and asset allocations and purchases.

And that would be especially true when it comes to receiving funds. Treasury board Crowns can carry funds over the end of the fiscal year whereas if it's essentially a branch of the ministry, those funds would have to be returned to treasury board and then we would have to essentially ask for those funds back that had already been accumulated within a treasury board Crown.

So it is built on a model similar to the Water Security Agency, so that's separate. As a former minister of Environment as well as Water Security Agency, knowing that the Water Security Agency is a treasury board Crown similar to Sask Housing, and there are other examples, so we really looked at a couple of different options. And I certainly felt comfortable moving forward with a recommendation that it be a treasury board Crown.

Mr. Love: — What will be the composition of the board overseeing this Crown corporation?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — I believe we can have a board of up to three. At this point it's just me, as the minister, which is similar again back to my experience as minister of Environment having the Water Security Agency as a part of my file. I think it's still true today; the Water Security Agency minister is the board of that Crown and the same is true in this case. But I think there is the option to go to three, but at this point it's just one.

[18:15]

Mr. Love: — So one of the things that make our 27 public and separate school boards accountable is accountability to the public through local elections of trustees. How will this board, of which you're the only member, be accountable to the public for delivering high-quality education?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Well I think, similar to trustees of a school division, every four years I can be hired or fired. And probably more significant than that, I can be relieved of my boardship at any time by the Premier. So I think that that brings a lot of

accountability to it.

Mr. Love: — But not everyone can vote for you in an election. Only constituents of your riding can vote in that election. So then that's how . . . You know, school board trustees are accountable to the folks that are part of their electorate. In this case, as the sole member of the board, you would not be accountable to every person in Saskatchewan nor could you be. So I guess my follow-up question is, you know, what role will parents and the public have in influencing the Sask DLC's policy operations and student supports?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. You know, I think just as a normal operating, what will be an operating treasury board Crown, certainly there will be the different accountability mechanisms — annual report, 25 minutes of question period every day that we're in session. You know, I think that's probably a little bit more than the average school board trustee would experience.

But you know, whether it be this or other issues, you know, before I get there, I'll just say the quality assurance framework . . . So the Sask DLC, that was part of what we established as a result of wanting to develop a policy for online learning in the province. The quality assurance framework comes out of that. The SDLC will be, you know, there will be oversight provided by the Ministry of Education just like there will be in any other online school in the province.

Through the Sask DLC, there also will be a parent advisory network. And as a part of the Sask DLC's operations and things like strategic planning, parent engagement will be welcome, to give every single parent the opportunity to weigh in on development and implementation of the strategic plan.

So I think that there are a significant number of opportunities to hold me accountable for the Sask DLC.

Mr. Love: — I'll be here every step of the way, Minister. You can count on that.

You mentioned, in your opening comments, 150 educators. What will be the full staffing complement for the Sask DLC? Will it employ other professionals that school divisions employ? I mean obviously there will be some administrative work and that type of thing, but will the Sask DLC employ EAs, speech-language pathologists, counsellors, or any other of those professionals that make our divisions work so well?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Yeah, we will, Mr. Love. We'll table a full list of the different types of professionals that will be a part of the Sask DLC. We are estimating right now that there will be 368 full-time employees at the Sask DLC, so similar to what you would see in a school division or a school setting. So superintendents. There will be a principal at every single campus. The 150 teachers, roughly speaking, that we're estimating at this point. There will be EAs. There will be the support staff that you would see on a . . . like administrative support staff, finance, IT [information technology].

As well as, we're going to have a number of positions embedded right in the schools across the province, in the campus schools, that will be online learning facilitators. So they will work directly

with the principals, the teachers, but most specifically the students to ensure that we have good success for the students that are pursuing online studies.

Mr. Love: — So their work is sort of like instructional coaching? Similar to maybe how a consultant may be with a school division, in that kind of capacity?

Mr. Jensen: — Rory Jensen. So the online learning facilitators really are going to be an accountable adult embedded in the schools. They're going to help students ensure that they're completing their work and following up with students, making sure they're logging into their classes consistently, connecting with the teachers on how they're . . . teachers both in the school, at their home school, as well as the SDLC, to make that connection on what supports they need to ensure that those students are receiving those supports in a timely fashion. Also helping students with ensuring they can log in for exams, that they can log in to their classes, that any on-the-ground technical support is being met.

It's really that person that's in the building to help students and ensure that they're keeping up with their studies, similar to what a teacher would do in a normal classroom when they're interacting with students. Just someone that can help those students and be accountable to ensure that they're having their best chances at success when they're accessing courses.

Mr. Love: — Okay, thank you. Minister, can you detail what the actual process was that was followed in terms of what process you went through to determine which school division or organization or other agency would be selected to serve as the initiating organization? Did any other school divisions or organizations have the opportunity to compete in this process for what was ultimately awarded to Sun West School Division?

Mr. Jensen: — Rory Jensen. So when we were going down the path of establishing essentially . . . essential online learning provider, we looked around the province at where the majority of students were accessing online learning, and Sun West has the largest focus on online learning in the province. So really what we're doing is we were using Sun West School Division as the foundation for the centralized online learning provider, so the SDLC.

With that choice we also met with and consulted with all the school divisions to understand what their programs offered, the benefits, the strengths of their individual programs, and how that could be incorporated into the SDLC model. What we did find is that as programs matured, they all ended up down a similar path as where SDLC is.

So when I say that, that is there's a focus on having full-time dedicated online learning teachers, having them centralized in a central location so they can learn from each other. They can have professional development together. They also all end up with positions similar to the online learning facilitator where they have teachers accountable in those school buildings.

So based on that foundation, the consultation, we developed the model that is going into place this coming September. We also needed to find a facility suitable to house a head office, and really the only facility suitable for this was the facility in Kenaston.

Every other school division generally embeds their online learning program within an existing high school or school space where . . . We can't buy a part of Estevan Comp to operate an entire head office. Now those are very good sites for regional campuses to ensure that that local connection to those students is still existing with their . . . But really the model is really based off of where was the best foundation, and then how do we incorporate all the benefits of every other online program that's in the province?

[18:30]

The Chair: — Thank you. Having reached our agreed-upon time for consideration of these estimates, we will now adjourn our consideration of the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Education. I'd like to recognize Minister Duncan. Do you have any closing comments you wish to put forward?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Just very quickly, I want to thank Mr. Love for his questions today and the officials for helping provide the answers and support for me. And at the conclusion of tomorrow, I'll have some further remarks. So thank you.

The Chair: — Excellent. Thank you, Minister. And, Mr. Love, do you have any closing comments you'd like to make?

Mr. Love: — I just want to thank everyone for their time today, and looking forward to meeting again tomorrow to continue this discussion. Thanks for your time today.

The Chair: — Terrific. And again, I'd like to express our appreciation to the minister and all of his officials for being here this evening. And this committee is now going to recess until 6:45.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

[18:45]

The Chair: — Welcome back, committee members. I would like to recognize Ms. Mowat is substituting for Ms. Conway this evening.

General Revenue Fund

Health

Vote 32

Subvote (HE01)

The Chair: — We will now consider the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Health. We will begin with vote 32, Health. Central management and services, subvote (HE01).

Minister Merriman and Minister Hindley are here with officials. I would ask that officials please state their names before speaking at the microphone. As a reminder, please don't touch the microphones. The Hansard operator will turn on your microphone when you are speaking to the committee.

Minister Hindley, please introduce your officials and make your opening remarks.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee. As the Minister Responsible for Mental Health and Addictions, Seniors and Rural and Remote Health, I'm pleased to provide an overview tonight of the significant investments that we are making in these important areas.

First I want to recognize and just introduce some of our officials who are here this evening. Joining me at the front table is Deputy Minister Tracey Smith as well as my chief of staff, Elias Nelson; numerous officials from the ministry and the SHA [Saskatchewan Health Authority] of course, from the SHA led by CEO [chief executive officer] Andrew Will, who is here as well. So thanks to our officials from both the ministry and the SHA for being here tonight to provide some of the more specific details on any of the questions that may come up from the committee.

I also want to express my sincere gratitude to our partner agencies and to the health care staff across Saskatchewan. Their commitment and hard work to providing quality care to Saskatchewan people is greatly appreciated.

We recognize the challenges that we are currently facing, and we continue to intensify our efforts to address the need for additional health care workers here in Saskatchewan. We're taking some bold actions with the ambitious health human resources — HHR — action plan to grow our health care workforce and to build a stronger, more resilient health system. I'll speak a bit later to some of those initiatives for rural and remote locations.

To start with this evening, Mr. Chair, we'll focus on the area of mental health and addictions, and I'll begin by giving an overview of our record investment into mental health and addictions services in the budget year. Ensuring Saskatchewan people have access to these important services has been and continues to be a priority for our government. This year's budget will deliver record levels of financial support with an increase of \$12.4 million dollars for targeted initiatives for a total of \$518 million in 2023-24. Of the overall health budget, 7.5 per cent is directed to fund mental health and addictions initiatives, with \$438.4 million dedicated to mental health and \$79.2 million for addictions.

With this new funding in 2023-24, the government has invested over \$100 million in targeted initiatives in mental health and addictions since the year 2018. Funding for new initiatives in this budget will focus on the mental health of children and youth, addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, and adding more addictions treatment spaces so that more people can get the help that they need.

This budget provides \$2.9 million to fund the annualized costs of initiatives commenced in 2022-23, including 14 post-treatment spaces in Estevan operated by St. Joseph's. \$5.3 million is budgeted for addictions services and supports for vulnerable populations. This includes 2.275 million to continue to expand addictions treatment spaces as part of our three-year commitments to add 150 more treatment spaces as a minimum.

\$586,000 for housing supports through the Phoenix Residential Society. These wraparound services are making a difference in the lives of vulnerable people who require supports to be able to live independently in the community. \$300,000 for the Saskatoon Tribal Council mobile services in Saskatoon and area, an

innovative initiative that supports some of Saskatoon's most vulnerable citizens. And \$250,000 for a new program to provide grants to community level peer support groups.

Our government continues to make significant investments to support the challenging overdose situation. Every life lost to drug poisoning and overdose is a tragedy, and we extend our sympathy and condolences to those who have lost a family member, friend, or loved one through overdose. In this budget we continue to address this situation by providing \$1 million to support the continued actions of the Saskatchewan drug task force, such as overdose outreach teams. An additional \$900,000 will also be provided for continuation of the Saskatchewan Health Authority's opioid stewardship program.

I'm pleased that this budget provides \$3.5 million for new children and youth mental health and addictions supports. From this investment, \$1.7 million is budgeted to expand the brief counselling program offered by Family Services Saskatchewan to children and youth. This partnership has improved access to adult brief counselling, and we're excited to be able to now extend this service to children and youth starting with 11 locations across the province.

\$1.2 million is budgeted to partner with the Ministry of Social Services for the operation of three new residential homes to support youth with significant mental health and addictions issues.

\$436,000 is budgeted to support Sanctum Care Group in Saskatoon and their efforts to care for expectant mothers and other high-risk citizens. Our investment, along with a new investment from the Ministry of Social Services, builds on our past support for this important work.

This budget also provides funds to the SHA to improve access for children and youth through a new navigator in northwest Saskatchewan, a consultant nurse for psychiatry at Jim Pattison Children's Hospital, and a therapist for the Saskatoon children's centre for children who witness or experience abuse.

Two other important mental health initiatives will receive increased funding in this budget: \$240,000 for the expansion of police and crisis teams, known as the PACT teams, to two more provincial locations; and \$400,000 in additional funding for the University of Regina's internet-delivered cognitive behavioural therapy, or ICBT program. We're pleased to be able to extend additional funding to this innovative, nationally recognized program.

Increased funding in 2023-24 for established programs as well as new programming innovations will continue to assist Saskatchewan individuals, children, and families impacted by mental health and addictions issues. We are making progress in these areas, but we also know the work must continue in the coming months and years ahead.

Mr. Chair, in the area of seniors and older adults in our province, our government is also making significant investments in improving the quality of life for our senior citizens. Seniors will benefit from a \$39 million increase in this budget. Part of that funding will provide more standard long-term care beds in Regina with \$9.3 million in additional one-time funding to

affiliate long-term care providers as well. A \$39 million increase will also fulfill the government's commitment to add 300 additional continuing care aides, or CCAs, province-wide.

This year's budget promotes the supports needed by seniors to age in place by increasing funding for home care, and to support seniors residing in their own homes and communities by continuing to expand upon the facilitating independence in seniors program. As well there will be geriatric services expansion provided through some capacity enhancement that will allow for an increase of treating 300 individuals annually to now up to 1,000 seniors on an annual basis.

Rural and remote health. As I mentioned earlier, this year's health budget makes significant investments in strengthening our workforce throughout the province, and that includes in our rural and remote areas. Our government recognizes the challenge of attracting health care workers to these areas, and this budget will enhance our ability to meet that challenge.

Over \$22 million will be allocated for continued implementation of 250 new full-time positions and enhancement of part-time positions to full-time in rural and remote areas around the province. These positions were first announced in September of 2022 as part of Saskatchewan's four-point HHR action plan. As of this month, over 100 of these positions have now been filled.

Other HHR investments also include \$3.1 million to create a new registered nurse travel pool program to help mitigate rural and remote health human resource pressures. Also a \$2 million investment has been allocated to continue providing incentives of 30,000 to \$50,000 to recruit in nine high-priority classifications in rural and remote Saskatchewan in exchange for a three-year return of service.

This year's budget allocates \$4.3 million for the Saskatchewan international physician practice assessment program, otherwise known as SIPPA. SIPPA is one of the ways to recruit more doctors to Saskatchewan, and I'm pleased that this program continues to see success. As a result of the SIPPA program, 278 internationally trained family physicians are currently working in our province. The vast majority, 77 per cent, are practising in rural communities.

This budget also supports the enhancement of the rural physician incentive program. Starting April 1st of this year, the incentive has been enhanced to \$200,000 over five years, more than four times the amount that was previously offered. First launched in 2013-14 for recent Canadian graduates, this incentive will now expand to include international medical graduates who establish a practice in rural Saskatchewan. To incentivize retention, the length of the program is increasing from four years to five years.

We've also allocated \$1.6 million in this budget to continue supporting the four additional family residency seats in the southeast part of the province, first added in 2022-23 under the distributed medical education strategy. All of these initiatives will help attract and retain more health care workers where they're needed in rural and northern communities across Saskatchewan.

Emergency medical services. Mr. Chair, this budget also provides funding to other key commitment areas, including an

\$8.8 million increase to enhance emergency medical services and provide reliable emergency health care services. This funding will go towards supporting service in a number of rural and remote areas, additional support for contracted EMS [emergency medical services] operators, as well as EMS system and radio upgrades.

In conclusion, I want to thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to discuss these significant investments in our 2023-24 Ministry of Health budget. While we have accomplished a lot in the past year, we recognize much more work remains to be done as we continue to tackle the challenges before us.

I want to thank our partner agencies and all the stakeholders for their contributions. I believe there is much to look forward to in the years ahead. My officials and I will now be pleased to take your questions. Thank you very much.

The Chair: — Thank you very much, Minister Hindley. I'll open up the floor to questions, beginning with Ms. Mowat.

[19:00]

Ms. Mowat: — Sure. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I was just waiting to see if we were getting opening remarks from the Ministry of Health as well, but if today is a Minister Hindley day, I am happy to follow along with that as well.

So I want to thank the ministers and all the officials who are joining us here tonight, and also for the work that you do year-round in what is some really important work to the people of Saskatchewan. So much appreciated, and I'd like to echo the minister's remarks on that front.

So I'd like to start off talking about mental health and addictions. This year's mental health budget, as the minister identified, is 12.4 million. How much of that was federal dollars?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. To the member's question, of the \$12.4 million, none of that is federal dollars. That's all provincial dollars that we are investing in that amount this year.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. So just to clarify, none of the Canada Health Transfer is going toward that money?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Correct, yeah. None of it is.

Ms. Mowat: — So all of the Canada Health Transfer is accounted for in the rest of the Health budget?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So of the \$518 million overall budget that we have for mental health and addictions, we are including as part of that, you know, any federal dollars that would come that way. But as of yet we don't have that broken down line by line as to how, you know, how much specifically we'd be getting from the federal government that we could use to put towards that \$518 million in the budget this year.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. So it's just not broken out, and there's no targeted funding that's going directly to mental health and addictions that is earmarked specifically for that through the federal government?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. My officials inform me that we're still working on calculating those details as we work with our federal counterparts to figure out exactly, you know, the amount of dollars we're receiving and for, you know, this specific area. But that's still in the process of being worked out in terms of determining what that's going to look like and how much and to what areas that goes into.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. Specifically looking at children's mental health, I hear from folks in the sector that they see very significant effects related to cuts to the education system when it comes to school counsellors not being available for children and the mental health struggles that exist because of school counsellors sort of jumping from school to school and splitting their FTE into multiple locations.

We see kids falling behind or leaving school because of this and having major learning problems. A lot of this has to do with them not being diagnosed or having those learning challenges not identified.

So in terms of the lack of availability of school psychologists, I wonder if you can speak to what is being done to ensure that our kids have the supports that they need in schools.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. So just to the question about psychologists in the schools, a couple things on that. So that's funded by the Ministry of Education, not through our ministry, of course. So anything specific to that would be a question for the Ministry of Education.

That being said, we do partner on a number of initiatives. Well I shouldn't say . . . we partner with the Ministry of Education on some initiatives, but there are some other children- and youth-related mental health supports that we do fund through our budget dollars here in this ministry.

So as an example, in previous years you've probably heard us talk about the mental health capacity-building program in Saskatchewan schools. So we started that a number of years ago as a bit of a pilot with the mental health capacity building, and that's funded by us although it takes place in the schools. Started with five schools as the pilot sites: Dr. Martin LeBoldus Catholic High School in Regina, Hector Thiboutot School in Sandy Bay, North Battleford Comprehensive High School, and John Paul II Collegiate in North Battleford as well as Greenall High School in Balgonie.

In last year's budget we then expanded that program to another additional five schools under the mental health capacity-building initiative, bringing the annual funding for that particular program from this ministry to \$2 million. So that now has expanded to communities in La Ronge, as well as Prince Albert Collegiate Institute, St. John Community School in Prince Albert as well, Weyburn Comprehensive high school, and the Dr. Brass School in Yorkton for that particular program.

Earlier in my comments, I guess I'll just back up a little bit to some of the ministry-specific supports in this year's budget for youth and children. There would have been the expansion of the homes for youth with chronic mental health and addictions issues in partnership with the Ministry of Social Services. So that \$1.2 million we have for that particular program, which is a new

initiative, as well as the support from others with children at risk, through Sanctum. The prenatal outreach resource team known as PORT in Saskatoon, that's another one. The access for children and youth through the mental health navigator in the North, the consultant nurse for psychiatry at Jim Pattison Children's Hospital, that's some of the other areas.

[19:15]

And then the expansion of the brief treatment walk-in counselling, which we have in, I think, 31 communities right now across the province, but up until now have only been for adults. And we're going to be expanding that to children and youth in 11 of those communities, still to determine those locations specific to that program.

One other thing, and I would mention here as well, another area where we're trying to support children and youth when it comes to supports, you know, where we can in the school system is an additional million dollars that's provided to the SHA to reduce the wait-list for diagnostic services for autism. So we've recognized, through the work that we're doing in this ministry but also in consultation with our partners in Education, we've got some pressures there. So providing again a million dollars to the SHA to help reduce that wait-list for diagnostic services for children that may be suffering from autism.

But again one of these areas where some of that covers, you know, what we do in terms of funding through this ministry, but also other areas that are specifically funded by the Ministry of Education as well.

Ms. Mowat: — Is the ministry providing any guidance to the Ministry of Education in terms of ratios of students to school psychologists?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Not that I'm aware of, no.

Ms. Mowat: — Do you have a sense of what those ratios look like of how many students one school psychologist would be servicing?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — No, that would be data that the Ministry of Education would have. We don't have that.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. Minister, I've been spending some time with the Children's Advocate report from March 2022, *Desperately Waiting*, which I'm sure you're familiar with. What recommendations have been completed from this report?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thanks. So with respect to the question about the Children's Advocate report and the special report that was issued a couple of years ago, I think it would have been, or last year. So just a couple of things I would speak to first. Just in terms of the update though, our officials have been in regular contact with the Children's Advocate. As you'll know, we accepted all of the recommendations, and some of them have been implemented. Others continue to be a work in progress as well. I can kind of run through the updates on those if you'd like.

We have compiled a list or, you know, a database of all the areas where we're currently providing supports to children and youth, and compiled that as a children's strategy which is available on

the website. Additionally we've asked and have formed a committee of ADMs [assistant deputy minister] from across the various human services ministries that are working together specifically just on this area of children and youth. Because this is, you know, as we've touched on a bit in some earlier questions, some of this does happen not just in this ministry — Education, Social Services of course, and other areas as well. So we've got the ADMs working together across the various human services ministries to do that work and make sure that it is advancing.

Now in terms of the children's recommendations from that report, there are I believe it's 14 recommendations . . . Yeah, 14 recommendations, and I can walk through the updates on those if you'd like.

Ms. Mowat: — I would like that, yes.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Sure, okay. So recommendation no. 1 was the Ministry of Health and both health authorities develop and implement youth advisory councils to incorporate youth perspectives in the design of services, programming models, and evaluations, and to inform leadership about the needs of young people who obtain these services.

Progress as of February of this year, February 2023, the new integrated youth services initiative — that's the IYS that we've been talking about — will be establishing a youth council to support its developments. The youth co-design team will work actively with the backbone organization, and that's the John Howard Society of Saskatchewan. We worked with them to sign a contract with them. I think it would have been in December-ish, somewhere in there, to help lead this work for us across the province. There was a bit of a delay with respect to that.

If I could just for a moment, we're trying to find . . . We established a process, a bit of an RFP [request for proposal] process to try to find an organization that could help lead this work for us across the province. And as a result of that, the John Howard Society was the one that was successful through that. So I actually met with them virtually in December, I think it was, December or January after the contract was signed, just to have a bit of a conversation about the work that they've done previously in other areas and what we're expecting in this area when it comes to children and youth. And you know, very much looking forward to what they're going to be doing.

Anyway, so the John Howard Society is the backbone organization for the integrated youth services. They'll help co-design the sites, the programs as well, and service delivery, the staffing, and the branding for Saskatchewan's integrated youth services model. Other ministries have successfully implemented youth advisory councils and teams, and so we'll be considering that as part of our future efforts when it comes to that first recommendation.

Second recommendation: Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority satisfy without further delay the mental health and addictions action plan recommendation no. 2 which states, "Decrease wait times for mental health and addictions treatments, services, and supports to meet or exceed public expectations with early focus on counselling and psychiatry supports for children and youth."

So progress on its second recommendation as of February. Over the last several years, we've added capacity in many areas of the system through additional counsellors. As an example, in the 2019-2020 budget we added 12 full-time clinical staff in that budget for additional counsellors and also for teams as well. So there was \$1.75 million for youth community recovery teams that were established in the budget year 2020-2021. And so we're utilizing that as part of the work we're doing.

Something else I think that, you know, that we've recognized is that not every patient seeking care requires the expertise of a psychiatrist or a highly trained professional. So in late 2018 we implemented something called CanREACH [Canadian Research and Education for the Advancement of Child Health] which is a program that increases general physicians' and pediatricians' comfort assessing, diagnosing, and treating pediatric mental health concerns to their own practices, thereby mitigating, where possible, psychiatry referrals. And to date, 171 health professionals have completed that training in that program, and enrolment continues in that area.

The ministry has also approved additional positions, nine and a half FTEs and an additional child and youth psychiatrist, as well as enhanced nursing in Victoria Hospital in Prince Albert to support the recruitment and retention of child and adolescent psychiatry in P.A. [Prince Albert].

Recommendation no. 3: this one was the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, and the Saskatchewan Health Authority expand its mental health capacity-building initiative across the province. And I talked a little bit about that earlier. Last year's budget provided an additional 800,000 investment to expand the mental health capacity building in schools, bringing that annualized funding to \$2 million. As I mentioned earlier, the expansion started with five schools and expanded to another five in the last budget year, and all of those mental health capacity-building sites are operational.

Recommendation 4: the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, the health authorities, and school divisions work jointly to fund and implement a greater presence of mental health counsellors and Indigenous elders and knowledge-keepers in our schools. Progress as of this past February: the vision of Inspiring Success First Nations and Métis pre-K to 12 [pre-kindergarten to grade 12] education policy framework. That is a provincial pre-K to 12 education system that foundationally places Indigenous knowledge systems, cultures, and languages within the structures. It's set up to make sure that it's benefiting all learners.

My understanding of this one is through the Ministry of Education, but it's my understanding that the Ministry of Education has not yet started work on this recommendation. But they're currently collaborating with partners as to how to implement that recommendation when it comes to incorporating Indigenous elders and knowledge-keepers in schools. And again, the ministry will also work to increase mental health and addictions clinicians in Saskatchewan schools. But again that one specifically, some of that comes through the Ministry of Education, that they are specifically funding. And so any further, you know, specific questions would have to be directed to that ministry.

Recommendation no. 5: the Ministry of Health and the

Saskatchewan Health Authority expand outreach-based mental health and addictions services by the provision of service through a variety of modalities, hours of operations based on the need of children and youth clients, and inclusion of children and youth in the design of their individual service delivery. As of this February, I can report that we had an investment that was initially in the 2019-2020 budget for \$1.75 million for these high-intensity community response teams in Prince Albert, Saskatoon, and Regina that work to address the complex mental health and addictions needs of children and youth.

Additionally, this is another cross-ministry area here where in this particular case, the Ministry of Justice is funding something known as family intervention rapid support teams — acronym is FIRST for that one — and that responds to the families at risk of violent outcomes using an outreach approach.

[19:30]

And then just one other point on that recommendation: \$3.4 million annualized in the '22-23 budget directed at the integrated youth services. That's the cross-sector initiative to collate youth-focused services such as mental health and addictions, physical health, community, social services, and others with the emphasis on community partnerships and youth and family engagements. And we'll be starting by identifying a minimum of three Saskatchewan communities for the integrated youth services and hopefully have those up and running here later this budget year.

Recommendation 6: Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, health authorities, and all school divisions adopt a consistent approach to consent for children and youth to receive mental health and addictions counselling based on the evolving capacities of the child rather than age. What we've said on that one is, you know, we recognize that mental health and addictions need to be addressed by the right service at the right place at the right time with the right provider. So the ministry is undergoing work on this recommendation. Again this is one of these ones where we're having to work very closely with the school sector, the SHA, as well as the Athabasca Health Authority as well to make sure that we're aligned as we make progress on that particular recommendation.

Recommendation no. 7: the Ministry of Health and both health authorities provide in-home support services to families who require this service to maintain care for their children. So the SHA offers outreach treatment and support to meet the needs of families that have children with complex mental health and related concerns at home. One such example of that that we're currently doing is the Randall Kinship Centre in Regina as well as the new youth community recovery teams, the CRT teams, in Prince Albert, Saskatoon, and Regina. Work is beginning on that recommendation. It's under way I guess I would say, noting that the Ministry of Social Services is the lead on that one. But we have, you know . . . we're trying to be involved as much as we can on this one as it pertains to that recommendation from the children and youth advocate.

Recommendation 8: the Ministry of Health and both health authorities develop a middle-tier care option to provide therapeutic residential placements for youth with mental health needs that are greater than can be managed in their home and/or

with out-patient services but who do not meet the criteria for acute psychiatric in-patient treatment. So currently we don't have a formal middle tier or step-down beds in the community that functions with adolescent units. So where we're at right now is the Ministry of Health submitted that as part of a request for funding in the current budget year submission to help create some formal middle-tier supports in our urban centres. So we're just kind of working our way through that with respect to how that may work.

We've been informed through our officials via the advocate that there's been some information provided about something known as . . . the acronym is CASA [Child and Adolescent Services Association], C-A-S-A, which I understand is a similar service in Alberta. So our ministry officials are reviewing that model in Alberta and seeing, you know, how can we possibly implement something similar here in Saskatchewan.

Recommendation 9: the Ministry of Health and health authorities formally evaluate the current detox and addictions treatment model to determine whether it's appropriate for meeting current needs of youth in relation to evolving type and severity of problematic substance use, availability and accessibility of in-patient treatment, transitions between detox and in-patient treatment, and transitions from in-patient treatment to community.

So as of this spring or earlier this winter, currently we have 45 child and youth addictions treatment beds in Saskatchewan. So that includes six in Regina at the secure youth detox centre; 18 in Saskatoon, and that would be six at the youth stabilization unit and 12 at the Calder Centre; 15 beds in Prince Albert at the Valley Hill Youth Treatment Centre; and six beds in Swift Current at Dorie's House Treatment Centre.

The ministry has not started the work as of yet with respect to evaluating the treatment system, but I know it's something that we are monitoring closely, something that I ask for updates on in terms of how that is working. I would say that the wait times for child and youth addictions treatment services, they vary across the province, and that will fluctuate from sometimes being virtually no wait time at all, depending on what the service is that's required, to in some cases it will be more than five days, and that depends.

I'm informed that the occupancy rates within centres, dedicated child and youth addictions treatment, is in or around 50 per cent I think currently. And we're working closely with the SHA to make sure that we're analyzing the current treatment model structure as well as that we're maximizing that capacity.

Recommendation no. 10: the Ministry of Health and health authorities enhance and expand culturally appropriate services that are integrated within the continuum of mental health and addictions services including broader representation of Indigenous service providers in western-based models of treatment and greater availability of wellness and healing approaches grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing across urban, rural, and remote communities.

So where we're at on that particular recommendation is we continue to collaborate with our First Nations and Métis partners to provide both elders and cultural support workers. We're

coordinating services on non-insured health benefits and trying to increase cultural safety and awareness through training and knowledge-sharing sessions amongst staff.

The ministry, I'm informed, has not yet started work on all aspects of this recommendation, but work is under way in a number of areas. They're reviewing what the SHA does currently, how it can be successfully replicated in other areas of the province where it's needed, and making sure that we're implementing this as we address the health care worker shortage and are trying to . . . you know, knowing that that's affecting not just us, but provinces and territories right across Canada. But we're very cognizant, I would say, that we want to make sure that we're incorporating this when it comes to culturally appropriate services for all existing staff, but also new staff that are onboarded into the health system as well.

Recommendation . . . Actually I'll just back up just a second. One last piece on that recommendation. In October of this past year we did provide — this is just an example — but we did provide \$212,000 to the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations to host an on-the-land youth mental wellness camp for urban First Nations youth. I'm told that there were approximately 60 youth from across the province that attended that particular camp.

We continue to collaborate with the FSIN [Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations]. I try to check in regularly with Vice-Chief David Pratt who is kind of the point person on this file for the FSIN. As a matter of fact I was in contact with him not that long ago about some future plans for the partnership that we have with the FSIN and the funding that we target for some of the initiatives that are important to them.

Recommendation 11: the Ministry of Health and the health authorities improve transitions from child and youth to adult mental health and addictions services by increasing the age of transition to 25, and allowing young adults to maintain treatment by their child/youth providers until they're connected to a parallel adult service.

So on that particular one, I'd note that there are already, it's my understanding that there are some provider teams that maintain their services with clients of transition age until the next provider can accept care. So we're very cognizant of that, wanting to make sure that we're, you know, trying not to end those services just because an individual reaches a certain age.

So our provider teams are working very hard to make sure that that is happening — it's part of that patient-centred approach — and continue to explore through the SHA how we can implement that policy I guess, if you will, more broadly. And so again this is another area where there's, you know, a significant amount of work that has to be involved with other ministries as well as the SHA and the Athabasca Health Authority. So we want to make sure that before we make any more specific changes to how we do that, that we're consulting with those groups and taking that information that we're hearing from them and then incorporating it so that we're making the service better. But again, just to highlight that the teams are really trying to make sure they're providing that transition care until there's another provider there to accept that care for a youth that may be aging out. So still some work to be done on that recommendation.

Recommendation no. 12: the Ministry of Health and the health authorities complete provincial implementation of the electronic mental health and addictions information system to guarantee all those involved with youth mental health and addictions services across community, emergency, and in-patient services have access to the information required to provide seamless, effective service in the best interest of children and youth.

So I can report the update on this one. We did put in as part of our budget submission a request to have additional funding of just a little over a million dollars to advance the continued implementation of the provincial mental health and addictions information system. And this will, you know, help by improving information sharing amongst the health professionals from across the province. So that funding was included in the budget to allow us to continue to expand that system.

And I know, just having spoken to some of the front-line providers, when it comes to mental health and addiction, how important that system is, allowing them to streamline the work they do but also to be able to share information amongst providers specific to that patient care and being able to do so quickly and effectively so that they can have the necessary information they need to be able to have, you know, the treatment plan in place for that child or that youth as quickly as possible, you know, factoring in all the previous — or perhaps there hasn't been — but previous involvements with the system that that individual may have had.

So there's an implementation plan that's under way in terms of continuing to expand the mental health and addictions information system to make sure that we're including that and access to it in all out-patient sites, and as well as a number of selected in-patient sites across the province. Work continues on that. Priority work continues to include the sunsetting of some of the older legacy systems, moving some of the important data pieces into the new system, and the continued onboarding of Regina into that provincial system. So I think we're making fairly significant progress on that one, and we'll hopefully be able to get that completed fairly quickly.

Recommendation no. 13: that all child-serving ministries, including Health, Education, Social Services, Justice, Corrections, and both health authorities, develop and implement an integrated service delivery model to enhance communication and coordination to better support outcomes within the mental health and addictions continuum of care provided to children and youth.

This is one that's pretty significant, I think, for not just us in this ministry but I would say for probably the other ministries as well that are our partners in this. And this speaks to the collaborative, collective efforts to launch the integrated youth services model in Saskatchewan.

I would say that that's a pretty fundamental first step to a coordinated service delivery model, with about \$3.4 million that's been annualized previously to fund that dedicated work. There's a number of what are known as hub tables, supporting this integrated outreach for individuals and families that are experiencing some of these addictions and mental health challenges. The hub tables are community-led forums and they can act as a bit of a foundation as well for further integration of

services past the point of initial outreach.

And again I think, you know, the integrated youth services is something we're really keen on, getting these up and running as quickly as we can. And we're looking forward to the work that's being done right now by the John Howard Society to act as the backbone to get the initial three sites up and running.

You know, this is based off models used in some other provinces. And in November I had an opportunity when I was in British Columbia to visit one of the sites there that this is kind of based off of. And by all accounts from those that are not only front-line providers, but they also had youth who had been through the system there, spoke very highly of it. So I'm very, you know, excited to hopefully see the integrated youth services models get operational fairly quickly in this year.

Finally recommendation 14, which is the Government of Saskatchewan develop a children's strategy to address and improve prevention related to the social and environmental factors that negatively impact the well-being of children and youth. The strategy must include the participation of all child-serving ministries and a designated official to lead the process.

So the Government of Saskatchewan released what's called the Saskatchewan's children and youth strategy: strong families, strong communities, a better quality of life. That was launched in August of this past year, and a special advisor to Saskatchewan's children and youth strategy has joined the Ministry of Health to help lead the inter-ministry implementation, and work is ongoing on that.

But as a starting point, as I said earlier, compiled all of the current programs and services that we are currently operating in the province across a number of different ministries, collaborating to see where are we, where do we have overlap, where do we have areas of great coverage in terms of programs and initiatives, and where are there areas where we have gaps? So that work continues on enhancing that children's strategy that we have in place.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. I feel like I could ask full-out questions about every single one, but I'll try to focus my comments in the interest of time. And I appreciate the minister going through them all at once rather than making me read all of them out individually, which I was obviously prepared to do.

For recommendation no. 2, Minister, you had talked about the added capacity to the system. This is the recommendation around decreasing wait times for mental health and addictions treatment services and supports. I hear you talking about adding capacity, but what are the wait times and have they decreased?

[19:45]

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. So a couple of different charts here to report back, and this would be the percentage of clients seen within triage benchmarks for child and youth out-patient mental health services. And these are some provincial statistics. Again the most current information we have is for 2021-22, so we don't have the data past that point in time.

But first of all, in the area of youth out-patient mental health

services, they've broken it down here into four different categories, which I understand I think are national benchmarks in terms of waits. So for children and youth that are deemed to be very severe, the triage benchmark is 24 hours to have those very severe kids being seen by a youth out-patient mental health service provider, counsellor, that sort of a thing. The provincial, we're hitting . . . 84 per cent of those children and youth that are deemed very severe are seen within 24 hours.

Under the benchmark of severe, where the benchmark is to have them seen within five working days, 95 per cent of children and youth are seen within five working days. Under the moderate category for youth out-patient mental health services, the national triage benchmark is 20 working days, and 99 per cent of youth across the province — that's the province-wide stat — are seen in 20 days. And for the children and youth seeking mental health out-patient services under the category of a mild triage benchmark, which is 30 working days, 99 per cent of youth are being seen in those 30 working days.

They have a separate breakdown for triage benchmarks for youth alcohol and drug services. Again the same time frame, 2021-2022 and the same sort of benchmarks here: very severe, severe, moderate, and mild. Under the very severe category of youth seeking youth alcohol and drug services, the benchmark is 24 hours, and they're reporting 100 per cent of youth are seen in 24 hours that are deemed to be very severe.

For those that are deemed to be severe, the benchmark's five working days. Ninety-five per cent of youth seeking alcohol and drug services are seen within that five-working-day benchmark. Under the benchmark of 20 working days, which is the moderate benchmark, 100 per cent of youth are being seen within that benchmark. And finally, the youth seeking alcohol and drug services under the mild category of a benchmark of being seen within 30 working days, 100 per cent of youth in that area are seen by counsellors in that area when it comes to the supports that are available to them.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. So this is my question. If these numbers are for 2021-2022, presumably these are the same metrics that were available to the child advocate when she was creating the report. And so I wonder if there are . . . Like there's a few things here.

I wonder if there's a breakdown by community, if there are specific communities that are failing to meet those benchmarks.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. Yeah, just taking a closer look at the data here. So the data that I reported in the previous answer is broken down for 2021-22 by the former RHA [regional health authority] location. And so it varies, right. And as we're trying to, you know, get things standardized through, you know, a singular SHA, trying to do, you know, a more thorough job or a better job of compiling that information and to help make sure we get an accurate representation of what's happening out there.

But I identify, for example, under that chart that I gave earlier, the percentage of clients seen within triage benchmarks for child and youth out-patient mental health services by a former RHA for 2021-2022. You will see, for example, under the area of the very severe benchmark of needing to be seen within 24 hours,

you will have as high as 100 per cent of children that are presenting to an SHA out-patient mental health services — 100 per cent in the former Athabasca Health region, the former Heartland region, the former Kelsey Trail region, P.A. Parkland — 100 per cent of those being seen within the 24 hours.

And then you'll see, for example, in Five Hills where it was 50 per cent, or in Prairie North, 67 per cent. Again under the severe benchmark, a number of them were within those five working days, where 100 per cent of the children presenting to a youth out-patient mental health services provider at the SHA are being seen within five working days. But as an example, you'll see Five Hills, 73 per cent; or in Heartland, 87 per cent. So it really varies there.

And as you get into the moderate and mild categories, it's nearly 100 per cent pretty much across the board there. It's as low as 90 per cent in the one area there. But it really does vary by former region there when it comes to how those numbers are . . . how they're calculated and how they report back to us.

Ms. Mowat: — So can you table a document for the committee that breaks it down by region according to all of those criteria and measures?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, we can table these two charts here.

Ms. Mowat: — I'm trying to reconcile how the Children's Advocate had this information, yet was very strongly worded about the fact that there are not enough services and a lack of availability. So you know, I'm on page 43 of the report. She's quoting a psychiatrist in Saskatoon:

There's almost 800 kids on the wait-list to see a child psychiatrist in Saskatoon. Literally every month we fall further behind because we get more referrals every month than we have the capacity to see.

[20:00]

So how do you reconcile this quote with the numbers you've provided?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So the difference between what's being referred to by the children and youth advocate is that would be the psychiatry, child and youth psychiatry wait times, knowing of course that, you know, some of the other stats I gave were specific to the out-patient, and these are the more severe patients, I guess you would say.

And you're right, there is a waiting list, as you mentioned, in the city of Saskatoon. So some of the work that's being done that we can speak to in the new budget is providing some additional funding for more staff to help to deal with that wait-list. I think you mentioned it was 800 in Saskatoon, which is identified by the children and youth advocate as well.

So in the '22-23, in the new budget, the ministries approved additional positions, three FTEs, to support triage and wait-list management and as well as conversion of fee-for-service to contract psychiatrists in Saskatoon to help support that wait-list reduction. So an additional three FTEs, they are specific to Saskatoon, again some conversion of fee-for-service to contract

psychiatrists in Saskatoon. And that's one of the, you know, the things that we're doing in this year's budget to hopefully help reduce that wait-list.

Ms. Mowat: — What are the youth psychiatry wait times then?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So in Saskatoon we can go back a couple of years here. So in September of 2020, child and youth psychiatrists in Saskatoon had a 10- to 12-month wait time for physician-referred child and youth psychiatric services, and that is actually down. I should back up a little bit further. March of 2020, the wait time in Saskatoon for physician-referred child and youth psychiatric services was 12 to 16 months. So that was March of 2020. September of 2020, the wait had decreased down to 10 to 12 months in Saskatoon for child and youth psychiatry. Our most recent stats show that, as of this past February 2023, the average wait time is down to nine months for child and youth psychiatric services.

And just a little bit of background as to what we have specifically in Saskatoon currently. There are 11 child and youth psychiatrists in Saskatoon. There is the — and I mentioned this in the previous answer — the . . . Sorry, no, this is additional information. Three FTE mental health nurses have been triaging the child and youth psychiatry wait-list. That's one of the things that we're using to help reduce the wait times in Saskatoon.

We have 6.25 FTE child psychiatrists working in a clinical capacity. One child psychiatrist in Saskatoon's been spending one morning bi-weekly with the child team at the child and youth mental health services. It's reduced the need for referral to child psychiatry services.

One child psychiatrist has been co-located with the youth team at child and youth mental health services to be available for consultation. They were implemented in mid-September of 2018, so this is some prior work, an initiative called LINK, leveraging immediate non-urgent knowledge. That's a telephone-based service in which a child psychiatrist will provide advice and support to primary care physicians during child and youth treatments and care. So that's currently in use, and that is being used to help reduce some of the wait times that are happening there.

And I think I spoke about this one earlier. Late 2018, the CanREACH program, which is a voluntary program that is specific to general physicians and pediatrics, the knowledge they have when it comes to assessing, diagnosing, and treating pediatric mental health concerns. We've got 121 of those professionals that have completed that program, and enrolment is continuing in that area.

So that's again — just to go back to the start — trending in the right direction in terms of reducing the wait times in Saskatoon, but obviously some more work to be done there.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you for bringing up the LINK program. I think there's huge potential for this to be a tremendous resource if it was funded properly. But I understand that adult psychiatry has completely withdrawn from the program because it's essentially unpaid work. Specialists are expected to be on call for a full day of calls that can come in at any time for only \$25 a day. Are you looking at funding the LINK program properly?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. Just conferring with our officials here. We can take that feedback and have a closer look at it just to further take a look back at the, you know, history of the program from when it was started and where it's at today, and just take a closer look at what may or might be possible there. But we'll take that feedback and have a closer look.

Ms. Mowat: — Thanks. Referring back to psychiatry in general, we know that the fee code structure for family medicine is based on a flat rate per visit, which doesn't really work at all for a complex visit, to address anxiety or suicide risk for example, which people could access mental health care more readily from their family physicians if there was adequate compensation for this. Is that something that the ministry is . . . Is that a path that the ministry is going to go down?

Mr. Turner: — Good evening, I'm James Turner. I'm the executive director of medical services branch. So I'm the director, executive director of the area that is responsible for the payment schedule.

So we actually do have time-based codes for counselling, both in-person and virtual, for that purpose, and so basically the codes pay for an increment. So they do pay a flat rate for, say, a 15-minute increment. But if you have a complex case that takes 45 minutes or an hour, there are incremental billing codes that stack onto that to appropriately compensate for that time of that complex patient. And that's both virtual and in-person.

Ms. Mowat: — What is the increment? Like, what is the value of the increase?

Mr. Turner: — I don't actually . . . I would have to get that. I could get that, though.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. In terms of child psychiatry wait times, we talked about Saskatoon. Can you provide the wait-list for . . . the wait times for Regina and Prince Albert as well? I understand there's not a child psychiatrist in Prince Albert right now, so I think that work is being done remotely.

[20:15]

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Okay. Specific to child and youth psychiatry wait times, in the city of Regina as of February '23, Regina reported a wait time of three to four months for child and youth psychiatric services. And then also in terms of current staffing in the city of Regina, again as of this past February, there were nine child and youth psychiatrists, both contract and fee-for-service, in the city of Regina.

In Prince Albert in 2019, January 2019, Prince Albert was reporting a wait time of one month for child and youth psychiatry services. Prince Albert has been seeing increased wait times since that point in time. So the child and youth psychiatry services were previously unavailable due to a vacancy. And then of course as you likely are aware, a child and youth psychiatrist was hired in February 2021 and then left in August of this past year, 2022.

But that being said, maybe provide an update to the committee as to the work that's being done to stabilize, specifically in Prince Albert where we want to ensure that the children and youth in Prince Albert and area do have that access, consistent and timely

access to the help that they need. So what we've been driving here from the minister's office and in conjunction with officials with the Ministry of Health and our partners at the SHA . . . And we've had numerous discussions about this and strategizing plans to help deal with the issue. So we're currently actively recruiting or actively working to recruit at least two child and youth psychiatrists to fill the positions that are currently vacant in Prince Albert.

There are recruitment incentives that are currently in place including a practice establishment grant of up to \$200,000 from both the SHA and the SMA [Saskatchewan Medical Association]. The SHA is also developing an enhanced service model for child and youth psychiatry in Prince Albert in order to make that recruitment more attractive so that we're filling those multiple positions there.

In terms of progress so far — and we are starting to make some progress specific to Prince Albert — a visiting psychiatrist has been recruited and has agreed to provide in-person services for one week every five weeks with virtual appointments in between. So that has recently happened. The Saskatoon psychiatry group also continues to provide visiting services in Prince Albert for one day per week. The Linden Medical Centre of Saskatoon has established a new clinic in Prince Albert focusing on treatment-resistant depression. They're also providing psychiatry consultations and assessments for their children and youth patients as well. And as I touched on a bit earlier, the SHA's working on a much broader plan to enhance mental health supports for the children and youth of Prince Albert.

Beyond the psychiatry services that are currently available . . . And we'll be providing more details, you know, through the SHA as that plan continues to be worked on and developed. But again, noting like I said that we have had some recent positive developments with that visiting psychiatrist that's been recruited to provide some support there on a bit of a rotational basis. And important to have that support in between those visits virtually as well.

And again I think they're very, very actively working to recruit the remaining positions there so we can establish full-time child and youth psychiatry and re-establish it, and I would argue even build it up beyond what it was before to serve Prince Albert and that whole northern region.

Ms. Mowat: — What is the current wait time in Prince Albert? You mentioned 2019.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, we don't have that specific data available. Again, I think we can probably get that through the SHA.

Ms. Mowat: — So the most recent data you have on you is from 2019?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, that's my understanding. That's the most recent data. But our officials here from the SHA are checking right now to see if we can get more current data for you.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. We know that RPNs [registered psychiatric nurse] conducted a labour market analysis and needs assessment based on their current complement of folks that are

employed in Saskatchewan. It shows that they need 120 training seats to keep pace with demand and retirements. How many seats do they currently have?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — In terms of the training seats . . . And just for the record, you know, funded by Advanced Education, not by us of course. But you know, obviously we're consulting with Advanced Education on this. It's my understanding we have a total of 80 RPN training program seats currently, so there were an additional 24 seats added to the RPN training program in the 2022-23 year, bringing that up to an annual total of 80 seats in the RPN training program.

Ms. Mowat: — So this was their own needs assessment. Does the ministry conduct its own health workforce needs assessment? And how many RPNs does the ministry think that we need?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So just conferring with our officials on the work that's being done. As I mentioned earlier, through the Ministry of Advanced Education, they've added 24 more seats to the RPN training program, bringing the annual total to 80 seats. But always working and meeting with our partners, and not just in this health care designation, but I would say, you know, all of them. That's why we announced earlier this year the expansion, in conjunction with the Ministry of Advanced Education, the expansion of 550 more training seats across 18 health care designations. RPNs are part of some of the expansion that we've announced previously as well.

[20:30]

So we're also, you know, we're working closely with partners, with the Registered Psychiatric Nurses Association, RPNAS, in terms of what are, you know, what are the amounts that we need. And I would say that, you know, we're working to make sure that we're building capacity as much as we can through again the other ministry, the Ministry of Advanced Education, but working closer with this health sector partner and all of our other ones in terms of future training capacity requirements.

Ms. Mowat: — So I didn't get an answer to my question. Does the ministry conduct its own health workforce needs assessment, and how many RPNs do you think you need?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Well I would say that we need more based on what we're, you know, seeing for current pressures on the system and pending requirements, I guess, in terms of staffing in that area. So again this is not specifically led by this ministry, but in conjunction with Advanced Education, looking at what, you know, what numbers we might need for future training and enrolment.

Ms. Mowat: — In terms of *The Saskatchewan Strategy for Suicide Prevention Act*, it's been two years since the bill was passed. The suicide epidemic continues. Does the minister recognize that the Act required the ministry to enter into consultations with NGOs [non-governmental organization] and government entities? Did these consultations take place? My understanding is that they were to be entered into within 180 days of the bill passing.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. I wanted to get a little bit of background just on a number of the different initiatives that

are under way here in terms of suicide prevention and life promotion strategies.

So specific to the question about the consultation within about 180 days, that consultation has been occurring with our partners, with a number of different partners out there, as an example — and I think I've referred to this previously in other public statements — working with groups like the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations on partnering on some of these strategies when it comes to suicide prevention. There was, as committee members will know, a tri-party letter of commitment to address First Nations suicide that was signed between the provincial government, Indigenous Services Canada, and the FSIN. And that predates the passage of that bill that was September of 2020.

We find a number of suicide prevention initiatives in partnership with the FSIN. I think I referenced it in one of my earlier comments as an example of funding to them for a mental health and wellness land-based camp for urban First Nations treaty youth, designed to embed tradition and cultural ceremonies and teaching hunting, fishing, and cooking skills as well as peer supports for Indigenous youth regarding mental health and suicide prevention. There was \$288,000 for that particular initiative.

Just to delve a little bit further into some of the more recent work that's been done when it comes to not just a consulting with groups and organizations and communities across the province, but also the work that's being done in this area as well. So through Pillars for Life, the planning and oversight for that initiative is provided by what we refer to as the strategic planning and oversight team, or the SPOT team, which is a governance team comprised of organizations such as the SHA, law enforcement, patient and family partners, psychiatry, the coroner's office, Healthy Campus Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute, Crisis Intervention Services, Health Quality Council, as well as the ministries of Health, Government Relations, Social Services, Education, Advanced Education, Justice, and Corrections and Public Safety. So those are all a number of the various partners that are part of the SPOT team.

Now in addition to that, hearing from families who have been impacted by suicide and loss and supporters of those families, that's also important for this work as well. And so what we've established is a partnership with an organization called Caring Hearts, which is a community-based organization that has been contracted to help obtain feedback from families who've experienced suicide loss. And we have a representative from Caring Hearts that's reporting to the Pillars for Life oversight team. And that consultation is being used to help inform future planning as well. And so that's an important development by engaging with the Caring Hearts organization to specifically make sure that we're having engagement with families across the province.

One other initiative I just, you know, as another example that I might point to. Again this is part of the multi-ministry approach on this very important issue. I understand the Ministry of Government Relations has an initiative that they're collaborating on known as the Embracing Life initiative partnering across multiple jurisdictions to support the development of community-

based suicide prevention solutions and strategies.

So from what I've been told, that particular initiative again, not through this ministry but through the Ministry of Government Relations, but it's an affiliation of agencies, tribal councils, grassroots community youth mentors representing northern Saskatchewan. And they're important to that initiative because they provide that input and that feedback into strategies for community wellness and suicide prevention.

So the Embracing Life initiatives through Government Relations, they're working in partnership, I believe, with the federal government as well with respect to youth mentor training, northern forums on suicide prevention and community wellness. I think they've done some work creating a video as well as supporting a suicide prevention app launch, a number of other youth-led suicide types of pilots. And again, that's all through that particular initiative through Government Relations.

But just a number of the examples of not just, you know, the consultation that's been taking place, but then the actions that comes out of that consultation to help build upon the supports that we have.

Ms. Mowat: — The information coming out of those consultations was to be used to create a provincial suicide prevention strategy in accordance with the Act. The ministry is required to produce annual updates on that strategy starting in April 2023, which we are currently in. Where is that suicide prevention strategy that was committed to two years ago?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. So the strategy is Pillars for Life, which I've said consistently before. And just to speak to the Act itself and the 180 days that the member references in her question, the Act says:

Within 180 days after the day on which this section comes into force, the Ministry of Health must enter into consultations with relevant non-governmental organizations [and] relevant entities . . .

And then it goes on to say in terms of the reporting that:

Within two years after the coming into force of this Act and every year thereafter, the Ministry of Health must include in its annual report an update on its progress and activities related to the strategy for suicide prevention.

So the Act was passed in the spring of 2021 — April, May, somewhere in there; April, May, June, I think it was — and therefore that brings us to the two years. So it is . . . Yes, that will be included in the annual report that comes out this summer.

[20:45]

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. I have the date as April 30th, 2021 although I could stand to be corrected. So in terms of the plan being Pillars for Life, that document was created in May 2020, yet the bill was passed the following year. So what updates have happened to the *Pillars for Life* document to bring it up to standard? It was widely criticized at the time as not being a fulsome plan. So what updates in terms of a strategy have taken place?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So in answer to the member's question, so the Pillars for Life strategy is based on the five pillars which remain consistent and serve as the, you know, as the framework for the suicide prevention initiatives that we do in Saskatchewan. So the five pillars: (1) specialized supports; (2) training; (3) awareness; (4) means restriction and means safety; and (5) research, surveillance, and evaluation.

But the actual work plan itself, that's the part of the investments and the initiatives that is done on an annual basis as part of a work plan but is informed by the work of groups like the SPOT team and now informed by organizations like Caring Hearts, which we've partnered with to make sure that we're also consulting with families directly on this. We want to make sure that we're engaging, and that's why the engagement part is important, and being able to act as quickly as we can in terms of mobilizing some of these supports and initiatives.

So as an example, for '22-23 the amount that was funded for suicide prevention was about \$2.25 million but covered a number of different initiatives based on falling under the five Pillars for Life, under that framework, but based upon feedback developed through the SPOT team and now again in the coming months and years through the engagement with Caring Hearts.

But things like, you know, funding for LivingWorks Start training; a medication take-back initiative that's an example of something that was launched in the last number of months; the U Good public awareness campaign; the Healthy Campus Saskatchewan initiative; the Mental Health Commission of Canada tool kit; Provincial Auditor report actions; patient and family advisors as well; Roots of Hope initiatives at three sites that we fund; the FSIN initiatives to the amount of \$500,000 that we fund — all this adding up to the two and a quarter million dollars specifically for suicide prevention.

So again the Pillars for Life is the strategy. It sets the framework for it, but the actual work plan itself is developed on an ongoing and on an annual basis based on the current data and trends and information that we're getting through the strategic planning and oversight team, the SPOT team, and the work that we will, the feedback we'll be getting from groups like Caring Hearts as well, to help inform those future decisions.

Ms. Mowat: — So what I'm hearing is that there's no updated, formalized suicide prevention strategy.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So the suicide prevention strategy, as I've been saying for two years, is Pillars for Life. It is the five pillars. And again, that serves as the framework for it, that is informed by the work that is done by the SPOT team and through community engagement to make sure that we're continuing to build upon the initiatives we have, create new initiatives, and enhance the ones we have existing in place.

Ms. Mowat: — Why pass the bill if it doesn't change anything?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So as I would have said a couple of years ago and have said consistently, the bill was passed but was also an acknowledgement of work that's already being done, because we acknowledge that there's more to be done in this area, which is why we've enhanced the engagement through the SPOT team. It's why we've engaged groups such as Caring Hearts to help

inform the work that we're doing in this area. But there's a number of work or initiatives that are being done, work that's being undertaken already through consultation with groups like the FSIN, as an example.

And so it's important to acknowledge that work that is being done, but recognizing of course that we're always looking to build upon those initiatives and making sure that we're working as part of those consultations with groups and with people across this province to make sure that we're building upon what we have in place.

Ms. Mowat: — Looking at the year one actions in Pillars for Life, I don't think we'll have time to go through all of them, but one of the criteria in year one actions as part of pillar 5 was to develop an evaluation framework for Pillars for Life, with regular reporting to ensure that current activities have measurable indicators and outcomes. How have these been reported out?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So in terms of updates, and we've done a couple of formal updates already, we typically do these in May around the anniversary. So as an example — and this is where we provide some of the more specifics in terms of the work that's been done — so May of 2021 we would have reported out publicly through the press release and in the media some of the key actions during year one.

So in that particular update, we were able to provide specifics around one, the recruitment hiring by the SHA of a suicide prevention wellness coordinator; a mental health public awareness campaign to inform individuals that help is available; funds to support capital improvements within in-patient mental health facilities to modify those environments and implement measures to mitigate risk; support for the U of S [University of Saskatchewan] to build a post-secondary suicide prevention framework, to be replicated at other post-secondary institutions; engagement with Indigenous Services Canada and FSIN to identify collaborative work that aligns with the tri-party letter of commitment that I spoke about earlier; the continued support for mental health capacity-building initiative in the schools; the continued implementation of the Roots of Hope program in La Ronge, Meadow Lake, and Buffalo Narrows.

Last year, May, on the year two anniversary, we provided an update on the key actions from year two, which included the continued implementation of Roots of Hope, the engagement with our other First Nations partners; the work to address the auditor's recommendations regarding treating patients at high risk of suicide in the Northwest; customizing an online suicide prevention toolkit for adults and peers who work with youth to raise awareness about suicide and the services available; continued support for mental health and suicide prevention public awareness campaigns; the updates on the U of S post-secondary suicide prevention framework.

And then we reported last May exploring the feasibility of a provincial, safe medication disposal program, as overdose from prescription drugs is a common means of suicide. And that of course we've now since implemented. So again that's the updates from the past couple of years, and based on that schedule we would have another update on year three. Key actions on that would be coming out, I would expect, at around the same time, in early- to mid-May.

Ms. Mowat: — Before Pillars for Life, there was a 2014 *Working Together for Change: A 10-Year Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan for Saskatchewan*. Folks will recall that the province named a commissioner to oversee these consultations and plan. It's 76 pages. It was meant to be a 10-year plan. I think 4,000 people were consulted. We would be in year 9 out of 10 of that plan at this point.

And there are some quite extensive recommendations included in this plan. The executive summary, including all the recommendations itself, is maybe twice as long as the entire Pillars for Life plan, and this is just the recommendations themselves. So back in 2014 we knew a lot of the things that needed to happen, and this was one of the recommendations that came out in the *Desperately Waiting* report that we talked about as well. This report is referenced there.

Can you comment on these recommendations and, you know, specifically how they're being tracked, how progress toward these recommendations is being tracked? Because I think there's a lot of criticism out there that this report is sitting on a shelf.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Referring to the 10-year mental health and addictions action plan. Okay.

[21:00]

Thank you, Mr. Chair. So just a bit of background to the member's question around the mental health and addictions action plan. So the member's correct. So December 1st of 2014 is when the then minister of Health endorsed the commissioner's report for that 10-year mental health and addictions action plan, and that particular plan includes 16 recommendations and 30 recommended actions under seven different system goals. So that includes areas like enhancing access and capacity and support recovery in the community.

And I would just point out that a number of investments that we've made in terms of mental health and addictions since 2018 — as an example, the additional 100 million that's been spent in this area alone — a lot of those initiatives have been targeted towards items that have been identified by the mental health and addictions action plan. So that guides the work that's being done through the ministry and ultimately also through the SHA and our other partners when it comes to decision making when it relates to various programs and services.

But anyway under those seven system goals: enhancing access and capacity and supporting recovery in the community, focusing on prevention and early intervention. As an example, things like the mental health capacity building in schools and youth access or the expansion of youth access in the Family Services Saskatchewan as an example. On the previous one, enhancing capacity and supporting recovery in the community, we've been talking about that in terms of the addition of more treatment spaces in the province. So that work is under way.

No. 3, creating person- and family-centred as well as coordinated services. Integrated youth services is an example of that.

Responding to diversities. And that work is obviously under way, and we're making very significant advancements in that area. Partnering with First Nations and Métis people. I've spoken

about our existing relationship, both formally and otherwise, with the First Nations and our consultations with FSIN, Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, and others around the province in this area.

No. 6, reducing stigma and increasing awareness. A number of public awareness initiatives that we've already undertaken: the U Good? campaign, billboards, online advertising, a number of different areas where we've been investing into that area. As well as no. 7, transforming the system and sustaining change.

So those are the seven areas, the seven system goals that fall under that 10-year mental health and addictions action plan for Saskatchewan. It's comprised of 46 recommendations and actions, of which the Ministry of Health specifically has a role in 40 of those. And then we work in partnership with the other ministries — Social Services, Education, Justice, Corrections and Policing, and Advanced Education. Work has been occurring in all 46 of those recommendations through efforts led by this ministry and through our other partners. The ministry does track and is tracking the progress in those various areas.

And I would say, you know, finally on that, and as the member correctly identified, we're approaching the end of that 10-year action plan. So it's a matter of what's next. So through previous consultations and in meetings with our officials, I have directed our officials to begin that work to both renew and refresh that plan in anticipation of this one sunseting in 2024.

So work is under way on that as to what the success rate of the current 10-year mental health and addictions action plan would be and making sure that we're involving a broad range of partners and stakeholders that would be involved in that, but that work is under way. As I said, directed our officials to begin that work, and that is happening as we speak, as to what the success rate of the 10-year mental health and addictions action plan is.

And then upon, you know, once we get to that phase of what that success . . . what it looks like based on measuring what we've been doing over the past 10 years, what's been working? What are areas that we need to get into that perhaps didn't either exist or were not as prevalent perhaps, you know, when this plan was first envisioned? A lot has changed. I don't think I need to tell anybody here that, particularly in the last couple of years in terms of added pressure when it comes to this area of mental health and addictions and just everything else.

So at that time when we release the success rate of the existing plan, we'd then also be reporting back on, you know, all of the metrics that we've been used to tracking our . . . what we've been doing in terms of success, initiatives that have been undertaken as part of that 10-year mental health and addictions action plan.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. My colleague has a number of questions to ask about seniors and rural and remote health, so I'm afraid I cannot keep digging into these issues further, although I would like to. I want to thank the minister for his time on this front.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Vicki. And thanks to the ministers and the community members and all the officials that are here. I hope we're ready for a late night because I'm going to carry us through until 10:30. My first time doing this one in room 8 and I think,

Minister Hindley, I heard the same for you. We're used to doing this up in the Assembly, so it feels different in here.

As my colleague mentioned, Minister, I'll start with a number of questions related to seniors' issues, in particular long-term care, infrastructure. And then I'll move on to, you know, time permitting, to some questions about rural health care. So that's the plan for the next hour and 20 minutes.

First of all, questions similar to ones that I've asked in this committee in the past. Can you update the committee on how many continuing care aides, how many FTEs are currently working in Saskatchewan, and how many current vacancies there are that are currently posted.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — I'd be disappointed if you didn't ask that question.

Mr. Love: — What's that?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — I said I'd be disappointed if you didn't start by asking that question.

Mr. Love: — Always. Every time. We like traditions here, right?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Sorry. To the member, just to clarify, were you looking for overall current positions for CCAs, or were you talking like the 300 commitment or like province-wide?

Mr. Love: — Yeah, overall. And we'll get to the 300 commitment here. Again your expired . . . read notes from last year. Yeah, so what I'm looking for is how many full-time equivalents are currently working in long-term care in Saskatchewan, and that's across SHA, affiliates, pilot projects. How many work in long-term care in Saskatchewan, and how many vacancies are currently province-wide?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Vacancies, province-wide. Got it. Okay.

[21:15]

Okay, so number of FTEs, the most current stats we have for 2021-22: 5,071 is the number of FTEs that are working. That's CCAs, just for the record here. And in terms of the number of vacancies, the most current stat we have — and this is taken at the end of September of each calendar year — 2022 at the end of September, 177 CCA vacancies.

Mr. Love: — And what was the commitment in this budget year as part of the promise of 300? Was it 75? This should be an easy talking point for you, Minister.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — 75, yeah. I think it's 75.1 or something to that effect. Okay, yeah.

Mr. Love: — And that would be in addition to the 177 vacancies, or is that included . . . Are those positions currently posted?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Right. So yeah, just needed to clarify. So of the 75, just keeping in mind that that's a combination of home care and long-term care, 20 of those would be positions for long-term care.

Mr. Love: — So 20 in addition, since these numbers are from September 2022, that's an additional 20 would be expected to be posted now in this budget year?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Right, yes.

Mr. Love: — I know that we don't have up-to-date numbers. September, okay.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, it makes it complicated.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister, 5,071 is a drop from the number reported in this committee last year, which were numbers for 2020-21. And at that time you reported 5,118. So a significant drop in the number of care aides working province-wide. Can you explain the reduction in care aides working and how that, you know, supports your government's promise to increase the workforce by 300 continuing care aides?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thanks. And just with respect to the member's question, we're going to double-check the numbers here because we just want to see if we're comparing the same time frame in terms of the snapshot as to when that number was provided in terms of this chart. So we're going to have to double-check that and find out why there's a discrepancy there.

Mr. Love: — Yeah, I can give you some other numbers to check out as well if you're able to. And I'm going with numbers provided at this committee last year and the year before that. So as far as an apples-to-apples comparison, you know, it's my job as critic to hold this government to account for promises made.

In 2019-2020 it was reported to this committee that there were 5,054 FTEs working in long-term care. That appears to be an increase of 17 continuing care aides, not 300. And so if you can shed any light on the difference between adding 17 and adding 300, I think we can agree it's a significant discrepancy. So as you're looking for an answer to my previous question, if you can also shed light on that, it would be much appreciated.

Moving on, my next question is if you . . . Does the SHA or the ministry track how many people left the long-term care workforce, whether they be care aides, managers, LPNs [licensed practical nurse], you know, nutrition, laundry? Do you track how many people left the long-term care workforce over the last year due to retirements or resignations?

[21:30]

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. What I'm informed is the SHA tracks it, but we don't have it, at least not available to us at this very second. We don't have it broken down. The SHA doesn't have it broken down by facility. They track the staff turnover, but they don't track it by staff turnover in long-term care versus, say, acute care. So we're just checking to see if that data is readily available at this table. It doesn't appear to be, but we are just checking with our officials to see if we can get it for you.

Mr. Love: — Thanks. Can you commit to how you will get that information to me once it becomes available?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, we can table that information once

we get it compiled for you.

Mr. Love: — Okay. Does the SHA conduct exit interviews or gather information on why people are leaving the long-term care workforce? And I can offer a follow-up question to that that you can discuss. What retention incentives are currently in place as part of your health human resource strategy to retain, as we see numbers dwindling, what incentives are currently in place to retain those in a long-term care workforce?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. I'm informed that yes, the SHA does conduct exit interviews, not specific to LTC [long-term care] but I'm sure that would be a component of that. Secondly, in terms of retention incentives in place for HHR and the HHR plan specific to LTC, we would have announced back in September part of the 30 to \$50,000 incentive in exchange for return for service would include the designation or some of the designations that would apply to a number of the LTC facilities, so continuing care aides in facilities in areas where we've identified that we have service disruptions. And so that's one of the new incentives in place for recruitment and retention to areas where we need CCAs in LTCs.

Mr. Love: — I want to separate recruitment and retention. Are those incentives available to those in the long-term care workforce who are currently employed by the SHA or only to new employees?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — No, that's for new employees.

Mr. Love: — So is there anything in place to retain those already working?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Well no. They . . . You know, no and yes. You know, the employees that are working there are employees of the system and would be working under a contract obviously. They're salaried employees. I think in the case of continuing care aides I believe they're under a number of different service providers of which several of these would be renegotiating contracts, including salaries and benefits, in the coming months here. And I'm sure those discussions will be part of what that new contract may look like for those existing employees.

Mr. Love: — So the retention strategy is the salary?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Well that's what they're paid to do. And in addition to that I would say, you know, what I heard consistently when touring facilities and meeting with them, with front-line health care providers — and that included continuing care aides in long-term care facilities — and I would ask them point blank and say, you know, what is it that, you know, that we can do as a government? What can we do that would provide you with assistance? Because all of them, I would argue, are very . . . They're grateful for the work they do. We're grateful for the work they do.

But I can think of countless occasions where they would say to me, they would say they need more of us, you know, we're not fully staffed right now or we have . . . And I know I heard this on several occasions in rural and remote communities where they said, you know, this is where we're not fully staffed at this point in time or we have positions that are currently vacant that are our part-time positions or temporary positions, and we know of

people that are either (a) working those positions right now, or (b) would work those positions if they were permanent or full-time.

So that is where we derived the enhancement of the positions as part of the HHR plan to create more permanent and full-time positions, because again, I think that was part of the actual retention for the existing employees was they need more support. So they needed those . . . either positions that were vacant needed to have those filled so the staff that are currently working aren't working overtime and are able to work a more consistent shift. And thereby, in a roundabout way, it actually does lead to retention because it reduces the potential for burnout for those staff.

So again, consistently heard that having more staff in the workforce, in that particular facility, would then help towards overall retention of staff because they'd have a larger and a broader team of support there to be able to carry those shifts.

Mr. Love: — And, Minister, I think you're correct that there's incredible strain — and incredible gratitude for folks who serve residents of long-term care — but incredible strain because they've become accustomed to working short, and the strain that that puts on the workforce who care for those residents. They're professionals. They're trained to provide professional care, but also compassion and companionship when they can, when they're not run off their feet. So I agree with that statement, Minister.

Last year when I asked this committee how much the SHA is spending on overtime — I don't have the answer in front of me — I think that that wasn't something that was tracked specific to long-term care. Have you begun tracking overtime costs in long-term care? Or conversely, does the SHA or the ministry track how frequently a facility is short-staffed?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — We'll work in reverse. The second question about how frequently a facility is disrupted because of staffing issues, yes that is tracked by the SHA. And they have, you know, regular monitoring so that they're aware of which facilities in which communities, and when there are disruptions, you know, what are the staffing pressures that might be impacting that. So that is tracked on a regular basis.

To the first question about, specific to how much does the SHA spend on overtime in long-term care. I just chatted with the CEO of the SHA, doesn't have that information available right now. But we can see if we are able to break that down and provide that information to you.

Mr. Love: — And can you commit to how you'll get that information to me?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah. We can try to get that to you through the SHA.

Mr. Love: — Okay. Minister, in your opening comments you mentioned the plan for your government to increase access to geriatric care, going from serving 300 a year to 1,000. Can you provide details on what that looks like in terms of staffing, with an update on how many geriatricians are currently on the job in Saskatchewan, as well as details on the location where this care

will be provided, and other staff that you're hoping to onboard to increase to that level of care?

[21:45]

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So we have currently four practising Royal College certified geriatricians practising in the province, and my officials tell me that this time last year we had one.

So we have, in Saskatoon, two working there full-time clinical. They began practising in 2020. That's Dr. — I apologize on the names here — but Lagimodiere and Dr. Surkan. There's a third one there but is not practising but is acting in the leadership role at the SHA. So that's Dr. Basran in Regina. Two working here, Dr. Sharanowski and Dr. Diebel that are working.

I'm informed that there's still a posting for another position for a geriatrician. That's active right now, so we're trying to fill that position. The two in Regina that I referenced, they began working fairly recently; back on August 15th of last year they started their work. In addition to that, we also have general practitioners with additional training in geriatrics that are providing clinical geriatric services to patients. So that builds upon the actual practising certified geriatricians here as well.

On the \$900,000 in this year's budget for the expansion to geriatric services, what that encompasses is there's a team located in Regina that supports southern Saskatchewan with specialized geriatric assessments and services. And then I referred to, you know, those that were hired there.

So the expansion, what it will do is it will create a program similar to the one offered in Saskatoon which is known as the geriatric evaluation and management program. And by expanding that team here in Regina and building capacity around those geriatricians that we now have working in Regina, that's where we'll see an increase in the number of clients they see per year, from roughly 250 to 300 they see annually right now per year, to expand that to capacity to anywhere from, we're expecting, 975 to 1,000 clients per year with that expansion. So really building upon those two geriatricians that have been now hired and are working here in Regina to supplement and complement what it is they do, and thereby increasing more capacity and getting more seniors through that program.

Mr. Love: — I look forward to seeing that realized here, and it'll be meaningful for people. Will those geriatricians, or GPs [general practitioner] that receive extra training in geriatric care, will they be providing any physician care for residents of long-term care?

And I guess the bigger question is, how does a resident of long-term care see their family doctor? I understand that there have been changes in years previous that a doctor under a fee-for-service model can no longer . . . There's no longer the ability to be able to visit a facility. And I guess I'm just wondering if you can update the committee at all on providing access to a physician's care to residents of long-term care.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. So just to provide some clarity around this, because there was some discussion about this, I think, publicly a while back on this particular issue. I think that's maybe what the member might be referring to.

But it's my understanding that there hasn't been any change to the processes or the physician remuneration for the provision of medically required physician services to residents of either LTC or private personal care homes. Physicians have continued to be able to use their existing codes that are in place, including surcharges and premiums, for the provision of medically required services for LTC.

Mr. Love: — That's good to know. I appreciate that clarification.

One question on the agreement with not-for-profit affiliate care homes. I'm hearing from some affiliates — I certainly saw some of these concerns expressed at SARM [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities] and in other conversations — about the discrepancy in funding between affiliate and SHA homes.

I'm sure you remember the question that came from Wakaw, but as well as other folks that I've visited with in Saskatoon and, you know, other communities, that there hasn't been an increase in funds in seven years, and that that's creating strain on homes to find efficiencies elsewhere. And unfortunately sometimes the feedback I'm hearing from residents is that they see the effects in declining food and nutrition, you know, as they need to keep staffing levels at the bare minimum. And so there's concern out there. I met with a number of residents of Oliver Lodge who expressed concern in the media over this fact.

Can you update the committee on . . . And I also see there's some money in this budget, \$9 million maybe, to support affiliate homes. Is that like a bridge until a contract is signed? And so can you update on what those funds are for in this budget, and also where those contract negotiations are at to provide the sustainable, predictable funding and relief for these homes that haven't seen an increase in seven years?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. So yeah, the member is correct. So in the budget, we included \$9.25 million for the third party or the affiliates of long-term care homes. Specifically, as the member has indicated and that was our intention as well, was to provide some stabilization funding over the next 12 months or so while we work on a longer term strategy or update to the funding that's provided to our affiliate partners in this area.

So how this works is the LTCs are affiliated, or the LTC affiliates are funded by the SHA through a contract. And it's my understanding the SHA has already, since the budget, reached out to the affiliates by letter to begin those conversations here with respect to this. Again, this is intended to be short-term funding to help address some of the funding challenges that the affiliates have identified, while we've tasked our officials to work on a longer term financial solution to what the affiliates have raised with us.

And I think just in terms of . . . You know, the details are being worked out at the officials' level as we speak with respect to the amount of funding that would go to each of the individual homes. But by and large, we estimate the average increase to be about 5 per cent per bed for the affiliates.

I would point out that the member mentioned Wakaw. I've met with them previously through their MLA and met with them virtually on a couple of occasions to talk about the challenges

being faced there. And I've also met with other third-party affiliate providers as well who have raised this with us in government, which is why we proceeded through the budget process to secure some short-term funding to help identify some of the work that's being done there.

[22:00]

I think — and I'd point out here just for the record as well — one of those groups that we've been in consultation with, they provided and issued a media statement shortly after the budget. That came from LutherCare Communities, where the CEO of LutherCare, Gabe Lafond, says, and I quote, "We're pleased that 9.3 million of interim funding will be granted to affiliate not-for-profit long-term care providers, and we look forward to working directly with the Ministry of Health to develop a new funding model."

And that's exactly what we're intending to do here. Again as this member said, there's been some concerns raised. I've heard them. We've brought them forth through the budgeting process to do this on a short-term basis while our officials work on a longer term funding arrangement to recognize the good work that's being done by the affiliates in this important sector for us.

Mr. Love: — So would it be . . . or hopefully you have an agreement in place for next budget year so that this stabilization funding isn't required again.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, that would be our intention, right? So what I've asked our officials to do is to . . . and that's why in addition to securing the short-term or the bridge funding, or whatever you want to call it, for this budget year, knowing that this was done in order to provide some support to the affiliate sector. But yes, that is the intention is that we would have the work done so that we can have this included as part of our budget submission for the next budget year. And again, something that's an updated and revised and a long-term update to the arrangement that we have with our affiliates.

Mr. Love: — Maybe a bit of a complex question here, but I think you'll kind of get where I'm going. I'm wondering if you can update the committee on the plan for replacing beds lost through Regina Pioneer Village.

In the last several budget years we've seen money designated for planning. We've seen some funds for, I think, 375 standard beds — that's 17.6 million in this year's budget. I believe that that's gone out in an RFP, that there's been an RFP going back for 350 beds, I believe, in July 2021. And a commitment for 250 beds provided through the SHA dealing with complex resident needs.

Can you update the committee on what the plan is to replace all these beds? Where is that RFP process at? Did you receive any interest in . . . I know there was, if my memory is correct, looking for a private third-party provider for those standard beds while moving ahead with the SHA providing care for the more complex needs. If you can make a question out of that, Minister, please do. But I think you get what I'd like to hear.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — For sure. Yeah, I know exactly what you're getting at.

Okay, to the member's question about the plan for long-term care beds here in the city of Regina, so the member is correct. There's a couple of different streams that are happening at the same time here. One, an update on the specialized long-term care beds. So those are the ones that we've indicated would be owned and operated by the SHA. So that's currently going through the planning phase right now, working through the Ministry of SaskBuilds and Procurement in terms of . . . as we would do with any of these processes when it comes to new facilities here in the province. So that's working its way through SaskBuilds.

A 240-bed facility is what that would be for the specialized long-term care beds. So that would be the higher-needs patients — dementia, mental health needs, that sort of thing, acquired brain injury. And still trying to determine the, you know, again through SaskBuilds and that process, where that could potentially be located here in the city of Regina.

On the regular LTC beds, so we would have talked about a procurement process, as the member alluded to in his question. The procurement process in the neighbourhood of, I think we were saying 350 to 375 regular LTC spaces. So the RFP was issued in June of this past year and was open to both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations located within the city limits of the city of Regina.

It's my understanding we have a couple of proponents that have responded to that RFP and offered a number of beds, and I think we're in the final stages of the negotiation phase in terms of what that's going to look like. And then once that is complete, we'll make a public announcement as to how many beds, who's operating them, where they would be located.

Mr. Love: — Okay. So seeing how this, you know, these announcements and commitments have stretched over a number of years, has there been any delay in this process in seeking out a third-party provider as opposed to simply getting to work and beginning the process to build a facility owned and operated by the SHA? It seems like there's been a number of RFPs that have gone out and then, you know, waiting. Can you comment on that? It seems like this could have been done quicker had it been done in an SHA facility.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So just a bit of a background to it. So this would have started I think about three years ago is what I've been informed in terms of when some of the decisions were starting to be made about the future of Regina Pioneer Village. And then of course at that time there would have been some conversations taking place about what would be the best path forward. Then the pandemic hit and that paused a number of initiatives, this being one of them.

And then since that point in time, as we've been working in this . . . work has been happening over the past several months, but I think since that point in time have again been reinvigorating those discussions. And I think it would have been determined then that the path that we're currently on to actually go through this RFP to look for existing capacity, to see if that was even feasible within existing capacity within the city of Regina, it was determined that this would probably actually be quicker than having to go through the process of constructing and building, you know, a new facility from scratch, given where we're at in this point in time.

And again, I think that's where we . . . How and why we landed that decision to go through this route is that in the end, it will actually turn out to be quicker this way in terms of getting those beds operational.

Mr. Love: — And having gone through the tragedies of COVID in this province and seeing it, you know, wreak havoc on long-term care residents across the country and around the globe, what gives you confidence that offering this RFP to private, for-profit care is in the best interest of Saskatchewan people?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. So just with respect to the member's question, we would have . . . And the member, you know, committee members would . . . And they know that we launched a new inspection process here — launched December of '21, I believe it was — where we're inspecting every home in the province on a three-year cycle which is subject to the guidelines. So we've committed to enhancing the inspection process. And these homes would fall under that because they would be deemed as a level 3, 4 facility and they would be subject to that scrutiny.

And I would argue as a result of, you know, our learnings from the pandemic, from the Ombudsman's report, that there's I think even higher expectations and greater scrutiny on this area, more than ever before, to make sure that the special-care homes that are operating in Saskatchewan are meeting the guidelines, are meeting the standards that are set out by the ministry.

And I would say that from our perspective as ministers of Health, I think that a continuous improvement is an important factor as well. So that we're always looking at, you know, what are we hearing back from the inspection reports. Where do we potentially need to make changes? How do we better support better care for seniors and older adults in LTCs? So that remains paramount for this government and something we want to ensure is front of mind for this sector.

[22:15]

Mr. Love: — Minister, I could very well be corrected on this, but I believe that the Ombudsman recommendation calling for inspections was to be on a yearly basis. And I know the pilot project that began a little over a year ago, that you reference, started in I think 20 long-term care facilities. And I'm sure it's your plan to extend it, but I think that we could debate whether or not that meets the recommendations from the Ombudsman — I think it was from a 2015 report. Again I could be corrected on that — calling for yearly inspections.

But on that note, ensuring that those program guidelines for special-care homes are upheld and inspected as an accountability measure, what's the current status of the pilot project in the Regina region in terms of location, number of residents, and are those homes required to follow the program guidelines for special-care homes?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Just to clarify. You're referring to the Brightwater, the 100 beds there, that pilot?

Mr. Love: — Yeah. If there's 100 residents housed there, how many moved over from Emmanuel Villa? And again, are they required to follow the program guidelines for special-care

homes?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Okay, yeah. So there were — just double-checking — so there were 40 residents moved to Brightwater from Emmanuel Villa, bringing it up to 100 beds, which is what we have right now.

So that contract with Brightwater has been extended for an indefinite period of time right now, just as we work our way through this RFP process for the standard beds until we have some clarity as to what's going to be happening with that. And just in terms of the question around inspections and guidelines and all that sort of stuff, they would be subject to all of the guidelines and regulations that any other facility would be.

So they're actively participating with the SHA on that and making sure that they are following the guidelines that have been set out.

Mr. Love: — How many continuing care aides, certified CCAs, work at Brightwater?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — We don't know how many CCAs they have at Brightwater currently.

Mr. Love: — Do the program guidelines for special-care homes require CCAs to provide care to residents in long-term care homes?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, that is part of the guidelines. Just the other part that I was clarifying there is that because they . . . And this is one of the anomalies of this being a pilot right now because remember that they are operating or were operating previously as a personal care home. But now as part of a pilot operating again in this area of being a special-care home, just was clarifying with officials there though, that they are required to have professional nursing staff on staff at this facility to guide the care that's being done there.

Mr. Love: — So how many registered nurses or LPNs do they have on staff at Brightwater?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — We don't have their staffing numbers.

Mr. Love: — So I'm troubled by this, and I hope you are too, that we . . . You've indicated to the committee that they are providing long-term care to 100 residents. But we don't know if they have adequately trained staff on site, including registered nurses, who should be overseeing the care, and care aides providing, you know, the bulk of the care to 100 long-term care residents.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, well just to clarify. What I'm saying is we don't have, like I don't have the actual stats at my fingertips. We don't have exactly how many RNs [registered nurse], how many LPNs that are there today. We'll get that information. We just don't have that available here with our officials tonight.

Mr. Love: — Could we find out by tomorrow when this committee reconvenes?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — We can try. Yeah, we can do our best to

try and get that information.

Mr. Love: — Okay. How much is Brightwater compensated per long-term care resident?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Sorry, we don't have the . . . We were checking here to see if we had the per-bed breakdown, which we don't. So we'll endeavour to try to get that information as well for the committee.

Mr. Love: — So I have a request before we get to the end of our scheduled time tonight. Would it be possible tomorrow when we reconvene, Minister Hindley, to continue with some questions that I have for you and for the committee before Minister Merriman makes his opening remarks?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Sure.

Mr. Love: — So we'll wrap up and then turn things over to the Health minister?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Sure.

Mr. Love: — Okay.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah.

Mr. Love: — And hopefully at that time you can update on the number of CCAs and LPNs and RNs working at Brightwater as well as how much they're compensated per resident.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah. Our officials have kept track here just of the take-aways here for tonight. We'll try to get as much of that for you for the committee meeting tomorrow or as soon as possible.

Mr. Love: — Thanks a lot, appreciate it.

[22:30]

The Chair: — Terrific. Thank you, Minister. Seeing that there is no further questions, we're going to adjourn consideration of the estimates and supplementary estimates for no. 2, Ministry of Health. I'd like to thank Minister Hindley for being with us tonight as well as Mr. Love. Does the minister have any closing comments he'd like to make?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — No, just a thanks to the committee for their questions tonight and to the officials, both at the ministry and our offices and the SHA, for their assistance this evening.

The Chair: — Excellent. And, Mr. Love, do you have any closing comments you'd like to make?

Mr. Love: — Yeah. Thanks to Hansard and Clerks, committee members, all the officials. Thanks for your public service to this province and for all of your time going late into the evening tonight. We'll see you again tomorrow.

The Chair: — And I'd like to echo Mr. Love's thank you towards the minister as well as the officials, committee members. And also like to thank the Clerks, Hansard, as well as broadcast services for all the work that they do. That concludes our business

today. This committee now stands adjourned until Tuesday, April 4th, 2023 at 3:30 p.m.

[The committee adjourned at 22:31.]