



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Hansard Verbatim Report

No. 23 — April 4, 2023

**Published under the
authority of
The Hon. Randy Weekes
Speaker**



Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

Twenty-Ninth Legislature

Hansard on the Internet

Hansard and other documents of the
Legislative Assembly are available
within hours after each sitting.

<https://www.legassembly.sk.ca/Calendar>

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 15:32.]

The Chair: — Welcome to the Standing Committee on Human Services. My name is Terry Jenson. I'm the Chair of the Standing Committee on Human Services. And tonight we have with us committee members Ms. Meara Conway. We have Mr. Muhammad Fiaz, Mr. Joe Hargrave, Mr. Warren Kaeding, and Mr. Hugh Nerlien.

I'd like to table the following documents: HUS 19-29, Ministry of Education: Responses to questions raised at the April 3rd, 2023 meeting. Today the committee will be considering the estimates for the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health.

**General Revenue Fund
Education
Vote 5**

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. I would ask that officials please state their names before speaking at the microphone. And at this time, Minister, please introduce your officials, and you're welcome to make your opening remarks.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Good afternoon to committee members. Once again, I'm joined by Donna Johnson, deputy minister of Education, to my left; Rory Jensen to my right; and to his right is Jason Pirlot. Both are assistant deputy ministers. Mike Walter, assistant deputy minister, is here as well. And we have a variety of other officials as well that will be assisting us this evening. And so we look forward to the opportunity to discuss the '23-24 budget with the committee. Thank you.

The Chair: — Thank you very much, Minister. At this time, I'd like to open the floor to questions. Ms. Conway.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. So I'm Meara Conway. I'm the critic for early learning and child care, so my questions will focus entirely on that area. I want to thank the officials for being here today.

Looking forward to asking some questions about this year's budget. I think it goes without saying that a lot of my questions will sort of focus on the agreement, the Canada-wide agreement that was entered into last year, and get an update on the progress that's been made on that agreement. I will have a couple of other sort of peripheral questions as well.

But I wanted to start just by asking, just turning to the (ED08), the allocations, I was hoping you could take me through, for those allocations, which of those numbers are provincial dollars and which are federal dollars. So that's the operational support, the KidsFirst, the early childhood intervention programs, and child care allocations.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks, Ms. Conway, for the question. So looking at (ED08), the early years, so under allocations, operational support, the 4.461 million, that is provincial dollars; KidsFirst, 17.129 is provincial; early childhood intervention programs, 5.364 million is provincial.

Of the child care, 359.925 million, the breakdown of that would be 61.763, or roughly 17 per cent, is provincial; 279.419 is federal. That's the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement. And on top of that, 18.743 million is federal dollars from the ELCC [early learning and child care] bilateral agreement that was signed prior to the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-wide agreement.

Ms. Conway: — And could I get a breakdown of the child care? I just want to compare that number to the amount of provincial dollars that were allocated to child care, to the child care allocation for last year's budget and the budget year before that.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Ms. Conway. So you have the '23-24 numbers. In 2022-23, the provincial funding was 61.738 million. The Canada-Saskatchewan ELCC agreement, the bilateral, was 17.456 million. Last year there also was a one-time \$5.103 million workforce grant that was provided by the federal government, and the Canada-Saskatchewan ELCC, the Canada-wide agreement was \$203.534 million.

Ms. Conway: — And sorry, could I get those numbers for the 2021-22 year as well? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — In '21-22 the provincial allocation was \$61.681 million, and the only allocation from the federal government . . . We had already signed the ELCC bilateral agreement, and so the contribution from the federal government was \$13.845 million.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. How much are you able to . . . How much money is available to you under the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement this year. I understand you are able to carry forward 64 per cent from last year's, so do you know what that number is and whether you intend to be in a position to spend that total amount?

[15:45]

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Okay. Thanks for the question, Ms. Conway. So our projected spend under the agreement in '23-24 is 279.419 million. Of this that includes \$71 million in carry-over from '22-23. That represents about a 45 per cent carry-over. Under the agreement for '22-23 we were allowed a 30 per cent carry-over, but in February we got an agreement from the federal government to carry over an additional 15 per cent of the unspent allocation.

Ms. Conway: — Sixty-four was the year before.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — That's correct. Sixty-four would have been the first year of the agreement prior to the end of this fiscal year and higher carry-over percentage amount, because we signed the agreement in the middle of the fiscal year. So essentially we had half a year to spend the first year allocation. So that allowed us to have the 64 per cent — somewhere in that

neighbourhood; I think it was 60 to 64 per cent, somewhere in there — carry-over in the first year.

This year in the fiscal year that's closing, '22-23, the carry-over amount was 30 per cent that was allowed, but the federal government in February amended that to increase that to 45 per cent. So that brings us up to the 71 million that we're allowed to carry over in this fiscal year.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. How many federal dollars did you have to leave on the table last budget year, if any?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Yeah, so amending the agreement to allow for a greater carry-over of 45 per cent meant that we didn't leave any money on the table. So there's been no money left on the table to date.

Ms. Conway: — That is good news. What are you able to . . . Do you foresee having to carry over funds this year onto next budgetary year? And are you permitted to, under the current agreement?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question. So under the agreement for '23-24, we can carry over up to 10 per cent of the '23-24 allocation in the agreement. So that would represent about \$22.4 million, again subject to negotiations depending on where we're sitting at the end of the fiscal year.

So the intent though is to spend the \$279 million this year. And that's going to be done so by continuing to support the \$10 a day; some one-time costs for child care spaces that will be developed during this year; a continuation with the program of free training for ECEs [early childhood educator] through training and bursaries; enhancements that we have made to the wage increase; as well as developing a child care space expansion strategy, a workforce strategy, as well as a wage grid.

So the intent is to spend the entire allotment knowing that under the agreement we have \$22 million that can be carried over. And again that's 22 million of the '23-24 allocation, not the '23-24 allocation in the agreement plus the carry-over from this past year. So you know, we'll see where we're at towards the end of the fiscal year.

Ms. Conway: — Understood. Okay, thank you for that. Sorry, and this is my little bit of a brain fart on my end. Under the agreement, what is the number of child care spots that you're hoping to develop this fiscal year? And we can get into how close we came to that goal. I believe last year's goal was 6,100. What is the goal this year in terms of . . . the academic goal in terms of getting to that number of 28,000 spots?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Ms. Conway. So we are working on an action plan that will take us from '23-24 through to '25-26, over the course of three years. You know, I don't have a number that I would identify in the committee today other than to say that certainly we are looking at an expansion plan. We will be making further announcements as we get into the fiscal year. The plan is still under development. I haven't seen it at this point, nor has the federal government seen it at this point in order for them to have a comfort level with it.

So certainly I know "more" is not a number, but that is our goal.

And we will have a number but we're not to the point where today we would be announcing what the number would be for this upcoming year.

Ms. Conway: — So are there no targets outlined in the agreement presently? Like did those targets . . . I know there was a target for 2022-23.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So the agreement does call for 28,000 spaces to be created over the five years of the agreement. We did identify targets as a part of the first two years of the agreement, but we haven't identified targets as a part of the last three years of the agreement yet.

Ms. Conway: — And those first two years would take you to the 61? Or that was for the first year of the agreement, the target of 6,100?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — It was 6,000 in the first year of the agreement and 6,100 in the second year of the agreement.

Ms. Conway: — So my next question is, how are we doing on those targets? How many spaces have been created since the last time I was here speaking with you? Just by way of reminder, I believe that last year around this time the number I got was that we had 18,112 spaces. Significantly few of those spaces were filled or staffed or . . . I mean, there are different reasons for that number. But where are we at at this point in time?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question. So under the agreement, so if you go back to April 1st of 2021, as of December 31st, 2022, 4,696 spaces have been created under the agreement. As of December 31st, 2022, we have 19,790 operational spaces in the province, and that's an increase of 2,124 spaces as of . . . since March 31st of 2021. So 2,100 of the spaces are operational; 4,696 have been allocated and created. And obviously there's a bit of a time lag between when we're able to approve the spaces and when they become operational.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry. I just want to make sure I have that right. Can you just repeat those numbers?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Yeah. So 4,696 spaces have been created under the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-Wide Agreement since April 1st of 2021, so between April 1st of '21 and December 31st of 2022.

So the other number I gave you was the total number of operational spaces as of December 31st, 2022 is 19,790. And that's an increase of 2,124 spaces since March of 2021. So 2,124 spaces are in operation; 4,696 have been created but are, I guess, in the process of becoming operational.

Ms. Conway: — I just want to make sure that I'm comparing apples to apples. At that point of time, April 1st, 2021, just so I'm comparing the spaces that we have now and the spaces that have been created in a way that's fair, how many licensed child care spaces did we have at that point in time when we entered into the agreement?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — We would have had 17,666.

Ms. Conway: — Seventeen . . . Sorry. Say it again.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — 17,666.

Ms. Conway: — And this is over . . . Just so I know where we're at, based on the agreement our target was to create by this point in time 12,100 new spaces?

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

[16:00]

Ms. Conway: — That's a little concerning. We've created 17 per cent of the targeted child care spaces under this agreement. Is that correct?

And I'll just add one more thing. Just to be as generous as possible, with that 4,696, like best-case scenario, we're at 38 per cent of the target child care spaces under the agreement.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Yeah, that would be fair. Thirty-eight per cent, approximately 40 per cent of the target for the first two years have been allocated. A portion of those would be operational; the 2,100 would be operational. But you know, your point is well taken. That's why we are focusing on the expansion strategy this year as well as the workforce strategy as well as things like a wage grid.

We knew when we signed the agreement, 20,000 spaces over a five-year period of time was going to be a lot of heavy lifting by a lot of parties. And I think we've made some good progress, but we haven't hit the targets in the first two years. And we're focusing on the things that I've laid out already to increase our numbers over the next three years of the agreement.

Ms. Conway: — The last time we spoke at estimates on early learning and child care, I believe that the hope — or your hope, Minister — was to have a wage grid in place and some of these strategies in place and hopefully well under way. Can you speak to some of the delay there?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks, Ms. Conway, for the question. So work has been done moving towards a workforce strategy. A consultant had been hired. The work of the consultant has been used as we are consulting with the sector, and that work is continuing.

At the same time, we have been making progress in working towards a funding model. I think one of the important things to note is that it's important that the work of developing a funding model that is appropriate for the sector is being done kind of lockstep with the work on the wage grid. We want to make sure that, you know, we're building those, kind of, as we create the system at an appropriate pace.

In the meantime, we have done things like the wage enhancements of up to \$5 an hour for ECEs that are working. So knowing that this is taking some time, we have made some interim steps to provide support for people that are working in the sector or those that are looking to get into the sector. We have two funding model working groups that have been established — obviously knowing that there is a difference between centres and homes — that are providing advice on the funding model review. This provides the sector with a forum to engage and identify and resolve issues and allow the sector partners to bring forward

issues related to the funding model.

We began work, the working groups began work on this in February. It includes representatives of child care centres, family and group family child-care providers, as well as ministry staff and other organizations. The funding model review and development is expected to be complete by the end of this fiscal year. So I think we are making progress on, I think, a couple of important areas as we move forward as a part of this year of the agreement with the federal government.

Ms. Conway: — Just concerned that the progress is very slow and the clock is ticking. I guess it sort of begs the question . . . \$10-a-day daycare, that was a priority for you, for your government to do that earlier than maybe other provinces. What I'm hearing on the ground is that there have been some issues with how that was rolled out. I think the hope is that further changes or announcements come with more consultation before they're announced to avoid some of that.

But I'm also hearing that this \$10-a-day daycare has only increased the pressure for spaces, and of course we have wait-lists across the province. I'm looking for an update on, maybe a breakdown of those new spaces in terms of how many new licensed centres, how many new licensed homes. How many of those spaces are in licensed family homes, licensed centres?

You know, when we spoke last year, you were having some challenges identifying home providers. And of course it made sense to go there, but I think the feeling at the time was that was some of the low-hanging fruit. Wondering if you could give us an update on the success of that initiative.

And I'm anxious to hear the plan. I mean, this is a lot of child care spaces that have to be created. Is the feeling that you've maxed out the existing centres? I mean, from what I hear from current centres is they're pretty maxed out. Is there a plan to, you know, make some capital investments? I don't know. What is the plan?

I mean, we're well short of that 28,000. We're well short of the target — 17 per cent of the target on operational; 38 per cent of that target on allocated spaces — so if you could just speak with a little more detail to the plan to create more spaces.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Ms. Conway. So a couple of the areas that you have raised . . . So I'll maybe just provide a breakdown of the nearly 4,700 spaces that have been created or allocated since the agreement was signed: 3,402 of those are child care centre spaces and 1,294 are home-based spaces.

We have just completed a campaign to raise awareness and to try to raise interest in home-based child care operators to come forward. It's going to take some time obviously to contact all of those potential interested parties, but I believe there was over 4,000 inquiries that were made as a part of that campaign. So we are hopeful that that will help to be an avenue that we can use to create additional spaces.

And just before your next question, you know, I think what we've tried to do is balance understanding the significant need of achieving 28,000 spaces . . . And I probably have said this at a

previous committee meeting or in questions that you have had in the past. I know that when we first signed the agreement, I wasn't really sure where we would get the 28,000 kids. I quickly have disabused myself of the notion that it's not for a lack of interest in child care. It's going to be the workforce side.

And so I think as we've tried to address, you know, looking at where we had, prior to the introduction of the federal money, where we had interest from communities that essentially we had a wait-list for child care spaces, but we just at the time didn't have the allocation to satisfy the wait-list. You know, I think we have quickly moved through that and knowing that communities and organizations have continued to make inquiries in terms of how they can receive an allocation.

[16:15]

But I think as we've tried to build out the spaces, knowing that the workforce side obviously was going to be a large component of this, and likely one that was going to take a lot of effort and frankly more time than simply just providing dollars to the existing child care spaces to lower the fees to \$10 a day.

So I think, in short, we knew early on that comparative to other jurisdictions, getting to \$10 a day was likely going to be the easier part of this for us. And so you know, I certainly don't want to delay getting to \$10 a day knowing that we have other challenges to address. And I think that's, I guess, a long way of saying, had we focused less on getting to \$10 a day . . . And you're right: we did achieve that three years in advance. And certainly that was the federal target to get to \$10 a day. They were certainly encouraging us and other jurisdictions to get to the \$10 a day.

I think if we had not pursued the balance that we have pursued in terms of workforce strategy at the same time as achieving \$10 a day — yes, three years early — because of the nature of building the workforce, the workforce strategy, the wage grid, and things that come along with that, including training spaces, including raising awareness and interest for people that may not have in the past seen this as a career for themselves but now see a path where this could actually become a career for themselves, I think the risk for us would be . . . We have to date not left any money on the table. And I think our challenge would have been we would have likely left money on the table in the first two years had we not pursued this balance that we have over the first two years of the agreement.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you for that. And I want to get to some of the meat of what you've been doing on the wage grid and the workforce strategy.

One of the strategies that you identified last year was going to facilities on wait-lists to see if they could expand. You thought at the time that would offer about 1,000 spots. Can you just speak to whether you feel that's been exhausted, what your success was on that, and if you can offer any other, like, specific strategies that you're going to be working on in the coming year around the space issue? I would appreciate that.

Mr. Jensen: — Rory Jensen, assistant deputy minister. So some details of going through the expansion strategy and some of our timelines. So as you had mentioned about identifying kind of

those low-hanging fruit and the wait-lists, so we've gone through all of the applications for child care spaces and we went through to determine their readiness to operate, to open. And every application that has been determined that is ready to begin development of those spaces, we've provided approval. And that's included in our allocation of the 4,696 spaces.

So saying that is identifying kind of a current state and how we can expand as quickly as possible. We've identified all the low-hanging fruit. We've provided that. So now we're into really the planning cycle of how we're going to develop a strategy, how we're going to implement that strategy. So through the last quarter of the '22-23 year, we've begun work and finished work on identifying just the current state of where all of our child care spaces are, where the supply and demand is, if there's any child care deserts within the province.

We've also conducted a national environmental scan and jurisdictional review to see what other counterparts across the country are doing.

And we've also identified what are the current obstacles for expansion such as readiness, willingness, space, space availability within existing municipalities. So we've done a lot of work to identify and get us ready to move forward with what is our modelling, what's our vision for the entire expansion of child care, how we're going to determine where the spaces should be, what that percentage and allocation between child care centres and home providers are. And really that's the work we're undertaking right now.

So with that vision and modelling, it's really determining demand, identifying all the stakeholders that need to be involved in developing this strategy from child care providers, home providers, existing unlicensed child care home providers to municipalities and other community organizations that have interest in development in their communities that have other development happening in their communities.

With that, we're really using that to determine what that split between what our expansion strategy should be on the home side versus the centre side, where families are looking for demand, be it through home care or through centre space. So over the next year, we're going to be working through that modelling, that vision, preparing that strategy on where we're targeting child care space development, the communities that we're targeting, the type of child care expansions.

During that we also are consulting with various partners within the sector, be it the associations that are existing such as SECA [Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association], such as the Leaders' Caucus, the regional associations for child care centres, for home providers. So really making sure that we're doing a lot of consulting with those groups for determining where we can bring that in, what is needed for them to encourage their members, for encouraging other providers to step in and develop some child care.

With that we also need to develop the policies that go along with transforming an entire sector and industry with child care. So it's trying to really get through over the next year the identify of spaces, the policies that are needed to ensure those, to do the appropriate consultation to identify the funding that is going on.

With that expansion strategy we need to ensure that we have an appropriate funding model that can make sure that centres are viable for the long term going forward.

So that's a lot of the work that goes on through the next year. And then we need to do change management with the sector to ensure that, as we implement this strategy, that people are ready for that change, ready for the work that needs to be done and how we implement an entire new strategy to expand the existence or the availability of child care.

Ms. Conway: — I just want to be clear. That's not a strategy that exists; it's a strategy that you foresee developing over the next year?

Mr. Jensen: — Yes, that's correct.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. So that's, Minister, that's a bit concerning, because it's hard to act on a strategy until we have it in place.

I guess one of my questions will be, federal government introduced Bill 35. It seems like the main characteristic of that bill is the national advisory council. It's a group of stakeholders that will meet quarterly and release public-facing reports, annual reports.

Minister, will you commit to making this strategy, which is going to identify challenges, publicly available so that the public can get sort of a sense of where those challenges are and the government's progress on tackling those challenges?

[16:30]

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Ms. Conway. I would just say that, you know, I want to make sure that the committee knows and is aware of the fact that — and I think you will know this as well, but it's worth for me saying — while we're developing workforce strategy, while we're developing wage grid, certainly doesn't mean that we're pausing on any of the work that we're doing on the ground to increase spaces.

I've just been informed that there's, you know, approximately 400 spaces that are moving their way through the process that we think are likely ready to be allocated here shortly. So you know, that work does continue.

I think with respect to essentially sharing our challenges, I have no problem with doing that. We share our challenges with the federal government on a frequent basis. We do that as provincial-territorial colleagues that are most responsible for the child care system across the country.

We'll be meeting in July. That'll be an opportunity for us to, I think, share challenges that we are, you know, uniquely facing, perhaps in our different jurisdictions. But no doubt there's some things we can learn from each other, and perhaps that will lead into an opportunity to work with the federal government in the event that changes need to be made or additional amendments need to be made to the agreement.

You know, they certainly know our challenges. We make them aware of our challenges. And I don't have an issue of making that

public as well. I think it's not a secret of the challenges that we are working through in creating additional spaces, at the same time having a workforce that is supported and one that hopefully will be growing over the next number of years.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. There are a few items of interest that I have that I think are just sort of hard data points, numbers that you would have provided me last year. And I'm just looking to get an update for this year. I don't think it's the best use of our time here because I'd like to cede the chair to my colleague, the critic for Education, as quickly as I can. So I'm just going to list a few numbers that I'm looking for and see if you'd be willing to agree to table those numbers at a later time. I don't think any of it will be controversial.

Last year, you provided me the average wage of the workforce, ECE I, II, and III, so that doesn't count supervisors, directors, or assistant directors. I'm just hoping to get an update on those wages if it exists.

Last year, you provided me with the number of folks working in each ECE I, ECE II, ECE III as of March 31st, 2021. Hoping for an update this year.

Last year, when you had the wage top-up of up to \$3 as opposed to 5, you provided me a breakdown of who was accessing those wage increases. So 78 per cent of ECEs last year were getting at least some raise, and 22 per cent didn't see any. And that was just a first step. So just to get an update on that up to \$5 top-up would be great. And I understand these are numbers that might take some time to find.

Wondering about any update in terms of current graduates per year in terms of the certificate or the diploma program. I'm assuming that no change has been made to the exemption policy. Last year, you weren't contemplating that. No, okay. I just want to make sure that those are like my hard data points.

Also wondering the number of kids starting kindergarten that are not ready, any updated data on that. I know that there was some suspension of data collection during COVID, so the most recent numbers on that would be great. I think that's it in terms of that. Are you agreeable to provide those numbers at a later point, Minister, recognizing just the ones that actually exist, of course?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks, Ms. Conway. We were noting all the different questions that you had, and I don't think any of those would be an issue to table later with the committee.

I can quickly though, I have it at my fingertips. ECE level I as of March 31st, 2022 is 16.68 per hour. ECE level II is 20.52 per hour, and ECE level III is 24.77 per hour. In terms of the percentage of staff that receive the top-up, ECE level Is, 75.2 per cent received it. ECE level IIs, 81.8 per cent received it, and ECE level IIIs, 79.7 per cent received the top-up. And the rest we'll endeavour to provide. That's just quickly what we could find.

Ms. Conway: — Wonderful. Thank you. Minister, are you able to say when you hope to have a wage grid in place and . . . Sorry, I had another question. Are you able to say when you'll have that workforce strategy and that wage grid in place?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Ms. Conway.

Yeah, I would say that certainly the intent is to do so in this fiscal year. The funds are available as a part of the allocation for the child care sector to do so.

But I think, as you can appreciate, this all moves in lockstep. It's not just a matter of implementing a wage grid, obviously a funding model that's appropriate for the sector, implementing the funding model at the same time that we're doing an expansion strategy. Even just the . . . You know, it's one thing to announce what a wage grid is, but then the administrative work that all of the centres and child care providers will have to do to implement that wage grid in their own setting and the work that the ministry will be doing in working with all of the centres as they implement the wage grid, you know, we are mindful that that's going to be not only a lot of work for the ministry but a lot of work for the centres themselves.

So we are funded for a wage grid being implemented in this fiscal year. I don't have a date in terms of when in this fiscal year I expect that to be done. Again, there's a lot of moving parts at the same time, and it's difficult to do one kind of without the others following in pretty quick succession.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. Part of the reason we're pushing hard on this is we support the goals outlined in this agreement. The opposition is supportive of expanding accessible, high-quality, affordable child care across Saskatchewan. And so my questions are in no way to undermine or undervalue the work that's being done, merely to hold the government to account, which is our job. And just we're cognizant of the fact that again the time . . . the clock is ticking.

I do have one more question I want to pose. There's never enough time, at least on our side, we feel sometimes in estimates. And I do have some stakeholders that, you know, pass along issues that they want me to raise. So I am going to undertake to pen a couple of letters to you, Minister.

[16:45]

But just in fairness to them, a couple of the issues that I'll be raising by way of letter to you are questions around kind of a universal approach to the wait-list issue, whether your government would consider a plan for including community preschools to be included as another early learning and child care option as is the case in Alberta, British Columbia and Manitoba. Specific questions around resources for children with intensive needs, children living with disability, and the specific challenges faced by those families.

The issue that I'm sure you're aware of, of when kids who are in kindergarten not full-time and turn six and are not eligible for this \$10-a-day daycare so their families end up, you know, footing that considerable bill. That's a big issue that our office is hearing about. I'm sure you've heard about it too. And then just hoping that there's work being done to address the fallout from the part-time space issue, as I know you undertook to look into that.

And then just a general sentiment from the stakeholders that I have conversations with that they really want to hear a commitment to before-the-fact consultation as opposed to after the fact. So those are some of the issues I undertook to raise here today. Of course there's never enough time, but in fairness to

you, I just wanted to put that on the record, if you had any comments. I will follow up by way of letter. And then I just have one more short question when you're finished.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Yes. Thank you, Ms. Conway, for the heads-up and look forward to receiving your letters. I'll just maybe on a couple I can quickly comment. So we have made a commitment to the sector as we are working through the funding model. I know that there were some concerns with centres in terms of the allocation between full- and part-time spaces, and so we've made a commitment to the sector.

I think there's, if it hasn't already happened, I think there were going to be some webinars that were going to be planned with the sector. So we are making a commitment that we will address the issues that the centres have raised because of the changes that were being implemented in time for April 1st.

The other one I will quickly raise is the issue of when children turn six and are not yet in full-time school. This is something that certainly I know you've said that you are receiving correspondence from. I am as well, as are a number of MLAs [Member of the Legislative Assembly] that I'm hearing from. We have raised this with the federal government. This is one of the areas that we are looking for some more flexibility from them.

I raised it with the minister when she was here in the lead-up to the April 1st announcement. I guess that was the beginning of March when she was here in Regina. So I've personally raised it with her. I will be following up with her, and our officials have as well. And so we share your concerns with the situation that that puts upon families that are enjoying \$10 a day and then all of a sudden they are not because their child has had another birthday. So we'll be addressing that.

Ms. Conway: — I guess another solution to that would be universal, full-day kindergarten but maybe that's not on the table at this day and time. Thank you, Minister, for that.

My last question is whether public funds are going to funding child care spots at Grace Capstone Ministries in Saskatoon in either this year or last fiscal year?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you, Ms. Conway. So Grace Capstone Ministries did receive funding in 2022-23. However we did inform them that anyone named in a lawsuit involving the Legacy Christian Academy or what it was formerly called, could not be involved in either a school or operating child care. So they were informed that that was one of the stipulations in order for them to continue to be a child care operator.

We did rescind an agreement that would have added 36 additional spaces. So that agreement for an expansion was rescinded.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, when was that . . . So the expansion agreement was rescinded. When was that rescinded? And how many spaces do you currently fund at Capstone Ministries, Grace Capstone?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you. I believe the existing number of spaces is 20, and the additional spaces, the agreement was rescinded in September of 2022.

Ms. Conway: — But at this time, you're still funding spaces at Grace Capstone Ministries? Twenty spaces?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Twenty spaces.

Ms. Conway: — What would be the dollar figure that you'd be . . . I mean, what is that cost per space for the Government of Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question. It's approximately \$220,000 that they receive. Approximately half of that, about \$105,000, would be the affordability grant through the Canada-Saskatchewan to lower the fees.

And I will note we do have a child care consultant that does inspect Grace Capstone on a monthly basis to ensure that they are providing appropriate care, as well as ensuring that what was stipulated in our letter to them, that they are abiding by those conditions.

Ms. Conway: — So Grace Capstone Ministries is a registered charity listed as operating a Christian school and a preschool and a daycare. Its current directors are John and Simbo Olubobokun. John and Simbo are accused of . . . are named defendants in the class action suit involving Legacy Christian Church involving allegations of abuse against children. John and Simbo specifically are accused of performing an exorcism on a student due to student . . . to deal with, "gay demons," verbal and emotional abuse of students, physical abuse, corporal punishment with an instrument.

Now the publicly available information is that these two individuals are the directors of these operations. So can you just provide a bit more information about why you're confident that they're not involved in the running of this charity and the daycare that it runs?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you for the question. So again, we'd stipulated by letter to Grace Capstone that the Olubobokuns were not, as a condition of their approval to operate, were not to be involved in any aspects of the child care centre.

We do have a consultant that does monthly monitoring of this particular child care centre. As well, at the time when the Olubobokuns were removed from operating this child care centre, the ministry also sent a letter to all parents that had a child registered with this child care centre informing them of this development, as well as offering through the Saskatoon office that if any parent wanted assistance in relocating their children out of Grace Capstone that we would provide that, the ministry would provide that assistance through the Saskatoon office and the consultants that work out of that office.

[17:00]

So at this time the child care centre is operating under their existing 20 spaces, and the Olubobokuns are not permitted to be a part of the operations of this particular child care centre.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, I just have another question. Why cancel the expansion but continue to fund 20 child care spots?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question. So I think at the

time particularly when we were essentially removing the directors, the Olubobokuns, from the operations of the child care centre, like we do with all expansions, we look to see if a child care centre is ready for an expansion.

And considering the amount of turmoil that would have been involved in essentially removing the directors, we wanted to ensure that parents were informed of what was happening, that they did have the option of removing their children but those that wanted to stay there could stay, but just felt it likely wasn't the best time to be adding an expansion while at the same time removing the directors.

Ms. Conway: — So the cancellation of the expansion was because of logistical issues, not because of the lawsuit? I'm just not entirely clear.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — I think the logistical issues of removing the directors and the operators of the child care centre, we wanted to ensure that again parents were informed. Parents could make that choice to remove their children if they wanted to. Those that didn't want to remove their children, we were able to still provide the funding to continue with monthly monitoring, with ensuring that the Olubobokuns were no longer a part of providing the child care.

In the midst of all of that turmoil that you can imagine would be going on, adding additional spaces . . . Part of what the ministry does is determine a readiness for a centre to take on an expansion, and in light of all of those factors, we determined that they weren't ready for an expansion because we were removing the directors.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, those are my questions. I want to thank the officials and the minister for the answers that were provided today. And I'll cede the chair to the critic for Education, Matt Love.

The Chair: — Thank you, Ms. Conway. And on that note, Mr. Love is now substituting in for Ms. Conway. And I just want to also make note that Marv Friesen has also joined the committee this evening. So with that, Mr. Love, you have the floor.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. Good to see everyone here again as we resume. When we concluded yesterday, I was asking questions about the new Sask DLC [Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation]. I'll resume on that topic at this time.

Minister, can you update the committee of what is the arrangement with Sun West School Division in terms of the financial arrangement for facilities, any, you know, proprietary funds paid out for their online platform? Can you provide as much detail as possible for the financial arrangement with Sun West?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Good evening, Mr. Love, or good afternoon. Feels like it . . . Yeah. Okay. So we are currently in negotiations with Sun West School Division with respect to the building as well as assets as a part of the building. There wouldn't be any negotiations related to any proprietary information. We're working with Sun West to essentially be able to offer the catalogue of courses, but that would be . . . The same would be true with other school divisions as well that perhaps were

offering courses that weren't a part of the Sun West DLC [Distance Learning Centre] that we think are a good fit with the Sask DLC.

So it's really the building and the assets contained within the building that will make up the negotiations, and that they're ongoing at this point.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Minister. In previous years the Provincial Auditor has raised some concerns with online learning delivered through Sun West. Now far be it from me to criticize a division, but now that this is the model being used for the province, what steps have you taken, as the sole board member overseeing this Crown corporation, to make improvements to address those concerns raised by the auditor?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you, Mr. Love, for the question. I guess I'd make a couple of comments with respect to the work that was done by the Provincial Auditor that you've cited. I know that there was a focus on graduation rates, and I think it's an important metric, but it would just be one metric or one indicator that I think as a ministry we look at — so graduation rates, on-time graduation, credit attainment.

I think that, you know, we find a lot of value in credit attainment. I think credit attainment obviously is an indicator that a student is on track or on pace to graduate. I think one of the . . . I guess I would just say for the committee to kind of note in terms of graduation rates.

So the way the system is set up is that, for example, for me as a student, I went to Weyburn Comprehensive. So once I enrol at Weyburn Comprehensive and take, let's say, my first class or take my first semester of classes, I am in the system then as a Weyburn Comprehensive student. Even if I decide in grade 11 and grade 12 to take all my rest of my courses through, at the time, Sun West DLC and graduate, you would not find a graduation record from Sun West for me because I'm logged in the system as a Weyburn Comprehensive student. So the way that the system operates is there will be a bit of a gap in terms of where a student will take courses and where they would show up as having graduated.

And I think that some of that was captured in the auditor's report because of, I think, a narrow focus on graduation rates. So credit attainment is something that we look at closely as a ministry and, you know, I think the record at Sun West DLC has been over 90 per cent credit attainment — which I think shows that students are on track for success and on track for graduation.

One of the other things that Sun West has also done as a part of the DLC is that idea of a responsible adult in the school to provide that support to students. And as we talked about last night, that's one of the things we will be building in as a part of the new Sask DLC model, that there will be those supports throughout the system in the campuses.

Mr. Love: — Minister, I want to read for you the definition that comes from the federal government of a Crown corporation: "A Crown corporation is a government organization that operates following a private sector model but usually has a mixture of commercial and public policy objectives."

So my question for you, what is the commercial objective of the Sask DLC Crown corporation? In other words, you spoke yesterday of revenue streams and, you know, the language of business. Is there a desire for this to earn a profit? Or what do you project the commercial goals to be of this Crown corporation?

[17:15]

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. I think that I would just point out a distinction between a commercial Crown corporation and a treasury board Crown. The goals or the objectives of the treasury board Crown, the Sask DLC, are a public policy . . . have a public policy objective.

There is not a profit-generating objective as a part of this. And that's, I think, borne out in the fact that fees that would be generated are really restricted to providing a service to students across the province. So there is a public policy objective, not a profit-generating objective.

Mr. Love: — Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that answer. According to *The Crown Corporations Act*, cabinet has the option of transferring related assets and obligations of this school to the private sector. Would you agree with that statement? And is there . . . Why create a school, a distance learning centre, through an entity that could be transferred to the private sector?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you for the question, Mr. Love. So the Sask DLC will be governed by *The Education Act*. The authority to do so will be granted by *The Education Act*. We will be ensuring that that is reflected in *The Education Act*, so we will be making some amendments to *The Education Act* to reflect that. So it will be governed by *The Education Act*.

Mr. Love: — Okay, thanks. Thanks, Minister. I think my last question on DLC. The ultimate question is, how will students be grouped into courses? And what my question is about here, we know that teachers are professionally good at making decisions to increase engagement. And we know that engagement is a precursor for learning and success. Teachers do this by developing local . . . by connecting outcomes and indicators to local content, local resources, local experiences, including connections to the land and culture.

So again to my question: how will students be grouped? And how will teachers in the distance learning centre be able to develop their own lesson plans to do what teachers do all around this province, which is drive up engagement that leads to success?

Mr. Gasper: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. My name is Darren Gasper. I'm with the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation. In terms of your question and the local connection, we heard loud and clear in the consultations with divisions on the importance of maintaining that local connection and local context in the program. That was one of the drivers behind ensuring we had regional representation with those campuses across the province.

In our registration system our goal is to keep that local connection as much as possible. So students in a particular area of the province, we are going to link to the teachers in that local school who are very familiar with their local schools and

maintain that relationship with them. So that's how we're going to keep the local context together.

In the other part of your question around some of the programming pieces, one of the examples I would cite is in Northwest School Division. There's a program called northern lifestyles that's offered that includes lots of land-based opportunities for students, opportunities to travel around the world in the program. Just a spectacular program that they run there. That program is going to continue in a good, strong partnership between the Sask DLC and the Northwest School Division so we can ensure that those programs continue to be available, not just for students in that area but our goal is to open that up so students in other areas are also able to experience a fantastic program like that as well.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Mr. Gasper. It's good to see you again. I've got lots more questions on the DLC and I may, as my colleague mentioned, send these to you by way of a letter in the future. But just due to the time that we're at with little over an hour left here today, I'd like to turn my attention to independent schools in Saskatchewan.

First question, Minister: yesterday it was explained to this committee that Saskatchewan does not fund schools per student. Can you please explain how your government . . . how the funding formula works to fund independent schools, including QIS [qualified independent school] and certified independent?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you, Mr. Love, for the question. So I think as we heard yesterday, there are a lot of factors that go into the funding model when it comes to developing the budgets for the school divisions across the province.

So we essentially take that number. There are some pieces that are excluded from that number, including debt repayment, language and culture, some other funding adjustments that are taken out of that number. It's a pretty simple formula largely due to the fact that we only have 22 what would be considered independent schools in the different categories. And so it's really . . . We break that larger number down into a provincial per-student funding and allocate it based on the enrolment at those 22 schools.

So it's complex when it comes to the over 600 schools that are funded by the government through the 27 school divisions. It certainly is, as we heard last night or yesterday, it is a complex formula to come up with that funding. For the fact that there are at this point only 22 what we would fund in terms of funded independent schools, we just have a pretty simple formula to provide the funding.

Mr. Love: — And what is the provincial per-student average that you're using to fund at different percentages for those independent schools?

[17:30]

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you, Mr. Love. So this year for the '23-24 budget, for a qualified independent school, their funding level is \$5,567 per student. Any students over . . . So basically if their enrolment exceeds 399 students, for student number 400 and above they receive an incremental amount of 3,340.

For certified independent schools, this year their per-student allocation is 8,351, and again that's for the first 399 students. Anything over . . . Basically the 400th student and above would be \$5,010. And for historical high schools and as well for associate schools, it would be 8,907. And again the incremental amount for 400 and above would be 5,480.

Mr. Love: — How many certified independent schools do we have in Saskatchewan? And which schools are they?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So currently we have none, although for the school year that begins in the fall we'll have one. It'll be the Saskatoon Christian School that will have qualified for certified independent status.

Mr. Love: — But there were none in this current school year?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — That's correct, yeah.

Mr. Love: — Okay. Which qualified independent schools do we have that are above that threshold of 399 students?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Currently we only have one qualified independent school above that threshold, and it's the Flex Ed online school.

Mr. Love: — Okay. Thanks, Minister. Minister, you've made several of your officials available for questions here, which is greatly appreciated. And we have the good fortune of having an esteemed educator, someone who has a reputation around this province that's certainly well respected, and he's also spent significant time administering the Legacy Christian school. Would you make that official available for questions this evening?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — He's here this evening, and certainly we will be pleased to take your questions.

The Chair: — I'd just like to caution the member that any questions regarding that have to pertain to the estimates.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister and Mr. Walter, thanks. Looking at the funds that are directed towards qualified independent schools, including those that were caught up in the allegations that have been prevalent in this province and the media nationally over the last number of months, Minister, on August 22nd, 2022 a press release from your government indicated that the administrators were put in place of three schools where individuals with allegations included in the lawsuit were working, that these administrators would be placed.

And it was stated by your government that they will be reviewing school policies and procedures as well as reviewing historical documentation in order to make recommendations for any changes that might be appropriate or necessary. In addition to ongoing communication, they will provide formal reports to the Ministry of Education at least monthly to ensure the schools are teaching Saskatchewan curricula.

So the question I have is, will you make those reports public?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you very much for the question. I will say, Mr. Love, that certainly there would have been contact

between the administrators as well as ministry staff that included verbal as well as written updates on their work at the schools. That information would have been used to bring forward regulatory changes that we have made since that time. I've been informed that there is an FOI [freedom of information] requesting documentation on this matter. The ministry is responding to that FOI, and we will be following the Act accordingly.

Mr. Love: — Minister, you've commented publicly that you believe that Legacy Christian Academy and the other . . . Well one of these schools was closed when the director — also calling himself a principal, but of course we know did not have a professional A teaching certificate and should never have called himself a principal — refused to co-operate.

So I'll note for the committee that that school was closed down by your ministry, but their daycare is still being operated without their involvement. My question is, you have upheld with public statements that these schools are following Saskatchewan curricula. I'm wondering if you'd make your official available to comment on what he witnessed in his time administering Legacy Christian school and the depth to which the curriculum is followed there.

Mr. Walter: — My name is Michael Walter. I'm the assistant deputy minister with the Ministry of Education. In my time at Legacy Christian Academy, part of the work that I conducted was to review the instruction and curriculum that was being followed at the school. I worked with staff to ensure that they did unit plans and yearly plans that aligned with the Ministry of Education curricula.

So that was the work that I took on with staff at the school. And there were some adjustments that were made, but by and large the work that they're doing was aligned with the ministry's curriculum. Those kind of adjustments are not unusual in schools when you . . . My experience has been that sometimes when curricula changes, teachers don't necessarily do everything exactly in the curriculum and then they need support to make that transition. So it's no different that what I've seen in other schools as well in my experience.

To their credit, they're very open to working with me in supporting that transition in terms of any changes they had to make to ensure that they were following curriculum. So overall I was confident that what the students were receiving were instruction that was aligned with the Ministry of Education curriculum.

Mr. Love: — Minister, did you have any of the administrators flag any teaching materials, resources being used in the classroom flagged for you in their reports that were indicated by these administrators — and I'll say, all three extremely well-respected educators in the province — did they flag any teaching materials, workbooks using the A.C.E. [Accelerated Christian Education] teaching methods, textbooks, including those that were waved around this Assembly, that raised the alarm that our Saskatchewan curriculum was not being followed?

[17:45]

Mr. Walter: — Thank you. So in response to your question, as I

was doing my work and working with this ministry, we were fully aware of some of the information that was being provided in terms of some of the references. And so part of my work was to go through and to make sure that those references were actually in the resources that were available. And for clarification for this committee, the curriculum is what drives the instruction that goes on; the resources are what are used to support that work.

So the resources in this case were in some of these incidences — these PACE [Packet of Accelerated Christian Education] materials, they were called — where students would work independently to complete their work. So part of my work when I was there was to go through all of them and to see whether or not there were, you know, resources that I would consider to be significantly inappropriate. And I never did find one that I removed or asked to be removed from the school.

So you know, with respect to that, I felt that the materials they were using were appropriate, and I was confident that the materials they were using were supporting student learning.

Mr. Love: — And, Mr. Walter — and I'd certainly invite the minister to engage here as well — is it your professional opinion that workbooks that utilize rote memorization, fill-in-the-blank answers achieve the depth of outcomes in the Saskatchewan curriculum?

And I'll provide an example from social studies 6 curriculum. I chose a course at random; I've never taught grade 6. But it uses words like "evaluate," "examine," "develop an understanding," "explore," "analyze," "analyze," "appraise," "relate." These are the first words in a number of outcomes that of course have supporting indicators that get at a depth of learning.

Is it your opinion that that depth of learning is achievable when students find an answer on one page and record it in a following page in the style of rote memorization that's utilized in these workbooks?

The Chair: — Just prior to the answer, I'd just like to remind the member to address the minister.

Mr. Walter: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. So any time a teacher's preparing for instruction, there are multiple ways in which students learn. Yes, they did use that approach at Legacy Christian Academy where for part of the time for their learning they were working from workbooks and self-checking questions and then getting feedback when they do a test and so on. But that wasn't the only way they were engaged with learning at that school, and there were multiple opportunities for students to dive into learning deeper beyond the way you explained and the way you talked about learning that goes on.

For deep learning I totally get that and understand that, and I think we're always working with teachers to move in that direction as much as possible, and that's certainly the work I did there as well.

Mr. Love: — Great, thanks. I appreciate that. Minister, the independent school regulations were established in 2019. They were changed in 2022 and then changed again in March 2023. You clearly learned something in 2023 that you did not know when those regulations were changed in 2022. What did you

learn that precipitated these changes?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. I think the changes that were made in the fall in response to the allegations that had been raised by former students, you know, I think I would classify or characterize . . . We took an immediate, an emergent response to the allegations in the fall, so things like providing for the ability to appoint a trustee, providing for the ability to increase the amount of supervision of schools, ensuring that schools were notifying the ministry in the event that they were made aware of an allegation of a criminal nature within 24 hours. So it was really in a short amount of time putting together a package to go to cabinet and change to those regulations, was really to respond to an emergent issue that we were facing.

The regulatory changes that we made earlier this year, I think, were more in the vein of modernizing the regulations, so ensuring that there are safeguards in place when it comes to public funds, that there's good governance practices when it comes to independent schools. For example, ensuring that the principal of a school isn't on the board of directors to ensure that, for example, the employees of the organization have a conflict-free individual or individuals that they can take their concerns or their complaints to.

So I would really classify the two regulatory packages, one more relating to the emergent issues that we were dealing with, and then one taking our time and working with the sector to bring forward a modernization of the regulations.

Mr. Love: — You mentioned financial accountability, Minister. Well recently we submitted access to information request requesting budget documents submitted by all qualified independent schools for the '22-23 school year. The request came back that no such documents exist. So you changed regulations to provide greater financial oversight of schools. And I invite you to make any officials available to answer this as well. But did any of those administrators placed in the schools flag any concerns over financial reporting oversights or lack thereof in the schools that they were overseeing?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So part of the changes that we did make earlier this year along the lines of modernizing the regulations when it comes to independent schools is one of the regulations does speak to ensuring that there is a clear separation between the parent organization and a school that the parent organization may be involved in operating. So in part to ensure that there is clarity when it comes to public funds, and transparency in terms of the use of those public funds. So that was one of the modernizations that we did do.

Mr. Love: — Minister, you speak of modernization, but this is in a very slim timeline between when you changed regulations in 2022 and early in 2023. During the same time period you have, again, well-regarded professional educators in place in schools where there is a track record of having very few professional educators, in some of these cases, principals who are not educators acting as directors.

So now you have folks in place and you change the regulations again. So if it was about modernization, that should've been done in 2022. So again that time frame that I'm looking at is, when these folks are in place, did they report on any irregularities that

would not be typically witnessed in our 27 public school divisions?

[18:00]

Ms. Johnson: — Donna Johnson. So to your question, I think if I can rephrase it a bit, you're asking why or what happened between the beginning of September and in 2023 when the second set of regulatory amendments were put forward. And essentially that was time that we took in order to be confident that we'd captured all of the regulatory amendments that we thought needed to be made.

We had drafted regulatory amendments in September. Of course, the administrators were put in place in September and we, having issued what I'll call the emergency regulations in August, we'd covered a number of bases with that and we wanted to make sure that we took a thoughtful, more measured approach to ensure that the next set of regulations captured everything that we need to capture.

So we spent that time or we took that time to consult with our colleagues at the Ministry of Justice and sought and received their advice. We also took the proposed second round of regulatory amendments and shared that with the qualified independent schools, sought feedback from them as to the proposed amendments.

And you know, in addition to that I did have other conversations with other stakeholders like the SSBA [Saskatchewan School Boards Association] to see if they thought there was anything else that was important for us to do in terms of ensuring a good regulatory environment for the independent schools.

So all in all, I would say nothing came forward during those four months that triggered a new round of regulations. We very purposely went about this in two rounds, knowing that we would do the things that needed to be done immediately and that we would be a bit more thoughtful and take a little more time to make sure that we had all of the regulatory amendments made that were necessary.

Mr. Love: — Thank you, Ms. Johnson. Minister, are these schools now subject to review by the Provincial Auditor with the new regulations for financial reporting?

Ms. Johnson: — Well thanks for that question. It's a good one, and it's got us all testing our memories. I need to confirm the approach that the auditor takes in determining which organizations she audits.

My recollection — and I'm, you know, it's got to be tested here — is that organizations have to be largely funded by the government. And I don't know if these non-profit organizations meet the threshold for the auditor to step in and audit, knowing that these organizations can and do charge tuition to supplement the funding that they receive from government.

Mr. Love: — I'm interested to know. Also, Minister, can you commit to finding an answer that, with \$17.6 million in this year's budget going to a variety of independent schools who receive a minimum of 50 per cent per-student funding — you know, by and large; there's different categories there — but can

you commit to finding out if this is within the Provincial Auditor's purview and reporting back?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Minister. New question. With the latest amendment to the independent school regulations includes a change to subsection 36, which strikes out “the church” and substitutes in “the religious order or society.” What was your intention with regard to this change? And is it your vision to expand independent schools in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you, Mr. Love, for the question. So the amendment that . . . The change in language that you've asked about, I think it was advice to ensure that our language is more inclusive. I think obviously “church,” for most people, would denote a particular faith background, knowing that we do have other faith backgrounds, faith traditions that do operate schools in the province. So it was really just making the language more inclusive.

Mr. Love: — So in a general sense, Minister, do you support the expansion of certified and qualified independent schools in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — I do. If the interest and the need arrives from the public, from communities, certainly this government is supportive of that and I am as well.

Mr. Love: — Minister, can you provide a table of funding allocations for independent schools similar to the one that you provide for operating funds for public and separate school divisions? And can you table that table for the committee?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — That's for next . . .

Mr. Love: — For the upcoming school year. The allocations for next school year.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So we do base the budget on the '22-23, what we do know in terms of what their enrolment is. We won't know, obviously, until the enrolment is known for the upcoming school year. But we can provide, I guess, the current information, knowing that it will change for the upcoming school year based on whether their enrolment goes up or down. So we'll provide what we can, knowing that those numbers likely will change once the school year does begin.

Mr. Love: — Yeah, I know that that's reconciled with those independent schools. But I know last year in this committee, you were talking about projections for how many, you know, what the increase might be to historical high schools qualified, certified independent. So whatever is the most current projection that you have based off this year's numbers, and what's anticipated for next year that you've used to calculate that \$78,000 increase in this budget line. If you can provide that in a tabled answer, that would be appreciated.

I think last question here on the independent school front. Earlier in the conversation, Minister, when I asked for the release of the reports from the administrators overseeing all three of the independent schools caught up in allegations, you said that there was an FOI. Is there a reason that you would not be able to release

those reports now, make them public, as opposed to waiting for an FOI that can often take weeks or months?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you, Mr. Love. So as a part of the FOI process, obviously there is a process to go through in terms of ensuring that personal information is redacted, that sort of thing. So I can't make the commitment today. One, because I haven't seen the reports myself. And so I don't have the reports, but as well we would certainly have to confer with our legal advice in Justice as they may or may not pertain to the lawsuit that the ministry's been named in. So we'll take your request under advisement.

Mr. Love: — Okay, thanks, Minister. I'm going to proceed with a few just kind of scattershot questions in the limited time that I have left.

Category is capital funding for school divisions and the question is how are boards, school divisions, 27 public and separate school divisions, expected to meet cost overruns and redesigns for previously announced projects when those costs have been estimated to have risen by 25 to 30 per cent? I'll leave the question there. What's the expectation from the ministry for those several projects announced in previous years?

Ms. Johnson: — Hi. So your question about capital, we are obviously operating through some very unusual times right now. With our capital projects we've seen tenders come in quite a lot higher than what we have done so historically.

And because of that circumstance we do have, in working with SaskBuilds and Procurement, we do have the ability to take what would have been a normal budget for a school and inflate it by 25 per cent and essentially go to tender with that as our base expectation, if you will. When prices come back in above that 25 per cent over normal budget, then we are typically working with school divisions, and if the project has already gone to tender, we're working with the bidders to see what other options there are to make the project more affordable.

[18:15]

Now that process of looking at the projects, whether it's before they go to tender or after the tender has been released, has been a process that we've used in the ministry for many, many years.

There's always been some level of a differential between the base budget and, you know, the first cost estimate following a design review or the first bids that come back in after tender. And when there's a significant difference, it's always been the ministry's practice to work with the school division, with the architect, and if we're far enough along the road then also with the bidder to ensure that we build the schools as close to budget as we can because we're very mindful of the fact that we have more than 600 schools that we need to maintain and replace over time. We cannot be going significantly over budget for any one of the schools. It puts the ability for us to address other schools at risk when we do that.

So we work very diligently with school divisions and with the other parties involved in designing and building schools so that we can get them built as efficiently and effectively as possible. And sometimes that does mean making design changes but not

program changes.

Mr. Love: — School divisions are expressing frustration in a 9 per cent reduction in PMR [preventative maintenance and renewal] funding in this budget. Minister, can you comment on that? And can you clarify if minor capital funding comes out of PMR funding in this budget?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. Yeah, so the PMR was reduced to \$50 million this year, down from I think \$54.9 million last year. That number does fluctuate from year to year. I think in the first year the PMR was introduced, I think it was about \$14 million. I might be wrong on that. But certainly, PMR overall in the last 10 years has been \$436 million. So in the last 10 years it's averaged, you know, roughly 40, \$43 million.

So the other thing to note on PMR is that prior to the changes in how education is funded in the province, PMR, preventative maintenance and renewal, really was . . . that came out of the operating budgets of divisions. PMR didn't exist at one point, and so you know, I think that this is an area that, you know, we think is an important investment for the province to make. So it is \$50 million this year.

Minor capital, we created that program last year, and I think we just found that, and divisions were finding that, you know, typically preventative maintenance and renewal projects largely are under a million dollars projects. In some cases, divisions would have to save PMR up over a number of years in order to be able to do a larger project. But we really had a gap between major capital and PMR, and so the minor capital program is to try to address and fill that gap.

We announced two projects last year, École St. Margaret, I want to say . . .

Ms. Johnson: — Yes. And Kyle.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — In Moose Jaw, and Kyle Composite. So those continue this year. We've added just over \$6 million to the minor capital program to bring that up to 11.25 million, so that's an increase of 150 per cent. I think it was four and a half million dollars last year.

And we're able to announce three additional projects this year. So there's five minor capital projects in the renewal program, and \$50 million available as a part of the PMR for school divisions.

You know, I know we've separated that out in terms of no longer putting that as a part of the capital budget, but even with that out, it is \$147 million that is in our capital budget this year, a 24 per cent increase.

Mr. Love: — Minister, I understand that the new provincial education plan will be rolled out this spring. Did any school divisions or organizations communicate conditional support for that plan pending adequate funding and resourcing for school divisions?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks, Mr. Love, for the question. I don't have a number. It would take probably a couple of minutes to find that. But my understanding is that there were a number of

school divisions that did conditionally approve the provincial education plan.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Minister. Looking for an update. Yesterday we talked about classroom complexity and the task force. On November 6th of 2019, the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* quoted your predecessor, Minister Wyant, in an article headlined "Government aims to have class size, composition fix by budget time," which would have been the spring of 2020.

We're still waiting for that today, three years later. Do you have an update on when these serious issues long identified by teachers, school divisions, administrators related to class size and complexity, when those will be addressed by your government?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. I guess as a response to your question in the preamble, I think it's important just to note and recall that in fairness to former minister Wyant — who made the comments in November of 2019 indicating that he hoped for a resolution to this issue by budget time, which would have been the 2020 budget — I think members will recall that we had to cancel the legislative session, I think the day of or the day before the budget was supposed to be introduced, because of the declaration of a global pandemic which didn't see us return to this legislature and pass a budget until some time later in the spring of 2020.

And obviously everyone's focus shifted on managing through the pandemic over the last number of years. That being said, work continues on this. I know that there has been a great deal of work that has been done by the committee, by the ministry, by stakeholders. I think there's been a great understanding that complexity may look one way in urban Saskatchewan, which may not look the same way in terms of what complexity looks like in rural Saskatchewan, and the same could be true in northern Saskatchewan. So this in and of itself is a complex issue.

We want to ensure that the committee concludes their work. So I won't put a timeline on when that will be done, other than we look forward to the conclusion of that work.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Minister. On February 16th, 2023 a special warrant, order in council 34, was signed which allocated \$9.4 million to your ministry. What was that money used for?

Mr. Pirlot: — Jason Pirlot, assistant deputy minister. So that money was basically covering off pressures that we were seeing in terms of the inflation dollars and the enrolment growth. And it was offset by some fall-off of the carry-forward money on the year-to-year side.

Mr. Love: — Thanks. It might be my last question; we're getting close to the end of time here. Certainly we see a number of newcomers coming to our province, and we heard in the Assembly this week the announcement of 4,000 Ukrainian newcomers. It's wonderful to see.

But with that type of growth, we need to recognize the impact on our schools. In what way does this budget support your own government's growth agenda when it comes to supports in our schools?

As a supplementary question, did your government provide funds

for newcomer assessments for the Regina Board of Education? And did you prescribe how those funds would be used within the division, and where did you prescribe those funds to go?

[18:30]

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Love. So in the base in the budget there is \$500,000 that school divisions have access to for newcomer assessments, knowing the numbers of newcomers that we did continue to see throughout the school year, at the start of the school year into September. And I know I had the opportunity to meet with a number of school divisions that indicated that they had really not seen that sort of continued pressure past the September 30th enrolment when we confirm enrolment, and that students were continuing to enrol well into November and even later, October and November.

So there was an additional \$200,000 that was provided, not specific to Regina Public School Division. But of the \$200,000, we had asked that associate schools also be funded, so the associate schools in Regina Public, Saskatoon Public, Regina Catholic has an associate school, Prairie South has associate schools. Sorry, I don't have the list off the top of my head, but we did ask for associate schools to be included in that second tranche of the \$200,000 as well, not specific to Regina Public.

Mr. Love: — And did you prescribe for them how much at each of those associate schools?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — So we did on the basis of the EAL [English as an additional language] enrolments of those schools.

The Chair: — Having reached the 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.

At this time, I'd like to recognize Minister Duncan, if he has any closing comments he'd like to make.

Hon. Mr. Duncan: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I know that the work of the committee is not over even though our time is complete, and so I will try to keep my remarks brief.

I do want to thank Mr. Love as well as Ms. Conway for their questions, both certainly in the case of Mr. Love yesterday and today. I do want to — and there are far too many people involved and stakeholders involved in the work that we do as the Ministry of Education — but I do want express my thanks to everyone in the province that work in the education sector, not only for the government but also for all of our agencies and all of our organizations that we do fund.

I do want to thank the officials that are here this afternoon and yesterday. Obviously they are representative of a dedicated civil service that provide support to me and to my office each and every day and provide support to a myriad of stakeholder organizations, Mr. Chair, and that for us begins at the top.

And I want to especially recognize Donna Johnson, my deputy minister. I've had the opportunity to work with Donna in two portfolios now, first as Minister of Environment a number of years ago. It has been an absolute pleasure to be supported by

Ms. Johnson in the work that she has done as my deputy minister. She is well regarded and well respected by everyone that I encounter in the sector as well as by her colleagues in the public service and by, I think, all members of the House and especially the cabinet, Mr. Chair.

And so I do want to thank Donna for all of her support and all of her work and wish her all the best. Thank you.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. And, Mr. Love, do you have anything for closing comments?

Mr. Love: — I'll keep it brief. As the minister noted, we are not done for the night, although I think he is. But yeah, thanks to all members of the committee, Hansard, Clerks, and all those important folks who serve our province in the public service.

Ms. Johnson, I expressed my appreciation in my opening comments, but I'll reiterate again appreciation on both sides of this Assembly for your decades of work and your career in service to the people of Saskatchewan. Thank you.

Thanks for everyone for the six hours that we spent in here considering estimates for Education and early childhood learning, child care, and for all the discussions that we've had. Thank you, Minister, for your answers. And thank you, Mr. Chair, for seeing it through.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Love. I'd also like to express our appreciation as a committee to Minister Duncan for being here as well as all the officials. And this committee now stands recessed until 6:45.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

General Revenue Fund Health Vote 32

Subvote (HE01)

[18:45]

The Chair: — Welcome back, committee members. We will now consider the estimates, the 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 their officials. I would ask that officials please state their names before speaking in the microphone, and as a reminder please don't touch the microphones. The Hansard operator will turn your microphone on when you are speaking to the committee.

At this time I'd like to invite Minister Merriman to please introduce your officials and make your opening remarks.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. I'm pleased to have this opportunity to speak about the Ministry of Health's budget.

Ministry senior leadership team here that is joining Minister Hindley and myself is, beside me, Tracey Smith, the deputy

minister of Health. We have Rebecca Carter, assistant deputy minister; Norm O'Neill, the assistant deputy minister and the birthday boy; Ingrid Kirby, assistant deputy minister; and Greg Gettle, assistant deputy minister.

Joining us as well are a number of the other senior officials from the Ministry of Health. I will ask them to introduce themselves as they are called upon to address this committee.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the hard work and dedication our health care workers have demonstrated during another challenging year. On behalf of government, I want to express our appreciation for their commitment to providing high-quality health care to Saskatchewan's patients.

As the Minister of Finance has recently announced, Saskatchewan is experiencing solid economic growth that is strengthening the province's finances. Government's commitment is to ensure the growth we are experiencing works for everyone, and this includes making record investments to strengthen health care services for Saskatchewan people. With the recently announced details of the 2023-2024 budget, government is making a record investment of health care to benefit patients and strengthen health care teams throughout the province.

The Ministry of Health will receive a total of \$6.867 billion, which is an increase of \$431 or 6.7 per cent over '22-23 budget. This record budget will provide a strategic investment in health care to hire more health care workers that will ultimately strengthen health care teams. Government has committed nearly \$100 million to our four-point health human resources action plan to recruit, train, incentivize, and retain health care workers and physicians. This budget will advance capital projects, support seniors, and build a stronger, more responsive health system through improvements to critical and acute care.

This year's budget also provides record operating funding for the Saskatchewan Health Authority. The SHA [Saskatchewan Health Authority] will see an increase of \$191.4 million in '23-24, which is a 4.5 per cent increase from last year. Their total operating budget will now be \$4.433 billion.

As Minister Hindley spoke in more detail yesterday about mental health and addictions, as well as investment for seniors and rural and remote health, Saskatchewan is ready to build on our infrastructure system, including hospitals, clinics, and other care facilities. This budget provides \$337.6 million in funding to ensure physical spaces and IT [information technology] infrastructure are in place and prepared to meet the needs of our growing and thriving province. This is the largest single-year investment in health care capital in Saskatchewan's history, and represents an increase of \$181 million from last year.

Specific project investments include \$98.6 million for the Victoria Hospital redevelopment project in Prince Albert; \$38 million for the Weyburn General Hospital redevelopment project; \$20 million investment for the La Ronge long-term care project; \$10 million each for the Grenfell long-term care replacement project, and specialized beds for long-term care in Regina; \$5.2 million for the St. Paul's Hospital front entrance redevelopment in Saskatoon; and \$2.6 million in new funding to

initiate work in other key infrastructure priorities including planning for the replacement of the Rosthern Hospital, Battlefords District Care Centre, and St. Anthony Hospital in Esterhazy.

Nearly \$66 million will also be available for maintenance and improvement projects for facilities across the province, which is a 15 per cent lift over last year. These funds will be directed at replacing building components, addressing health and safety risks, and preventing disruptions in services due to infrastructure issues.

The 2023-2024 budget also includes specific investments in IT infrastructure. eHealth will be receiving an operating increase of \$9.6 million, or 7.1 per cent increase to support priorities such as security initiatives, MySaskHealthRecord, and health card renewal data centre enhancements.

However, we realize that while upgrades to physical spaces are important, the health care workers in those spaces are the foundation of our health care system. This is why the Ministry of Health's budget includes \$55.5 million to continue with our aggressive plan to recruit, train, incentivize, and retain more health care workers and physicians.

Across all of government, including the ministries of Advanced Education and Immigration and Career Training, the total investment in the action plan is \$98.8 million. This is a \$44.9 million increase for the HHR [health human resources] compared to last year's budget investment.

Key investments by the Ministry of Health include \$15.6 million in recruitment initiatives to support a number of ongoing efforts. Of this investment, \$11.9 million will continue supporting work under way to recruit 850 internationally educated health care workers to provide regulatory assessments, navigator services, immigration fees, and settlement supports.

Saskatchewan is also providing \$1.3 million in 2023-2024, increasing to \$1.7 million annualized to hire up to 12 physician assistants. Physician assistants are being introduced for the first time in Saskatchewan to provide key health services under a doctor's guidance, which will be beneficial in a variety of settings.

In addition to the substantial investment made by the Ministry of Advanced Education — over 550 new training seats in 18 high-demand occupations and the 150 nursing seat expansion — the Ministry of Health will also allocate training dollars in specific areas. We will provide \$2.6 million for continued implementation of the four specialty medicine residency seats and the four new family medicine residency seats for the southeast part of the province first announced in '22-23.

Two million dollars in new funding is also being allocated for the rural and remote recruitment incentive which has continued offering packages between 30,000 and 50,000 to recruit in nine high-priority classifications in rural and northern areas of the province in exchange for signing a three-year return-to-service agreement.

Finally, this budget will also provide nearly \$35 million for retention initiatives through the Ministry of Health, including

over \$22 million in funding for ongoing implementation of 250 new full-time positions and the enhancement of part-time positions to full-time in rural and remote areas across the province, first announced in September of 2022.

[19:00]

There is also \$3.3 million included in the budget for seven additional academic research positions at the College of Medicine, further bolstering medical education being offered to students in our province.

We also understand the importance of adding international medical graduates to Saskatchewan's health care system. And this year's budget includes \$4.3 million to continue funding the Saskatchewan international physician practice assessment, also known as SIPPA program, which assesses the readiness of international medical graduates to practise family medicine in our province once they sign a three-year, return-to-service agreement as part of their full licensing.

To further entice graduates, this budget includes \$1.8 million in funding for rural physician incentive program which offers up to \$200,000 over five years to recent Canadian and international medical graduates who establish a practice in rural Saskatchewan. This incentive has more than quadrupled from \$47,000 to \$200,000 as of April 1st.

Minister Hindley spoke about rural and remote health care, and I also want to mention the registered nurse travel pool that is funded in this budget. Over 3 million in new funding has been allocated to develop a travel pool of RNs [registered nurse]. These nurses will temporarily fill nursing vacancies and provide coverage during nursing absences from the communities' regular RNs.

Key commitment in the 2023-2024 budget will focus on enhancing critical and acute care for patients across the province. The additional investment of \$42.5 million for the surgical program will provide 103,000 procedures for individuals on wait-lists throughout the province by increasing funding for surgical teams, operating rooms, equipment, and in-patient care.

With the projected increase of surgical volumes this year, we are on track to meet the goal of returning to pre-pandemic wait-list by March 31st of 2024, one year earlier than first anticipated. This is good news for patients throughout Saskatchewan. A faster surgery date will mean improved quality of life for them and their families.

A \$19.8 million increase will be provided to support 64 permanent acute and complex care beds. Of these beds, 36 are located at the Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon and 28 beds will be located at the Pasqua Hospital in Regina. This funding will help address capacity issues on medicine and surgical units, as well as improving patient flow in both Regina and Saskatoon. By opening these additional beds, patients will not spend as much time in acute care wards in hospitals.

In Saskatoon, where the 36 beds allow for permanent staffing of a complex alternative level of care or behavioural ward in the RUH [Royal University Hospital], patients will be in the hospital for shorter periods of time, therefore reducing wait times for

other patients requiring in-patient beds.

This budget also makes an investment of intensive care unit beds. Six million dollars has been allocated for year two of a multi-year ICU [intensive care unit] expansion. This investment provides an increase to staff to allow existing beds to be used to their full potential, resulting in better coordination of care with our ICUs. This is especially important when we remember that ICU bed supports are the sickest patients in the province, including those requiring surgery and advanced procedures.

Funding is also being made available to help recruit wait-lists for specialized services such as cardiology, neurology, and specialized medical imaging services. This budget increase of \$6.9 million will improve access to enhanced cardiology and neurology surgeries, such as the TAVI [transcatheter aortic valve implantation] and electrophysiology procedures, and the establishment of the mitral clip program in Saskatchewan.

An increase of \$2.6 million in provincial endoscopy, endoscopy . . . I can't get that one out. Endoscopy, is that right? Endoscopy — I can't get that one out; my apologies, Mr. Chair — services will help patients currently waiting on these procedures whose health may require this type of procedure in the future for diagnostics or surveillance of health concerns. Reducing wait times for both of these procedures will help expedite diagnostics and treatment, leading to better outcomes for patients.

Finally a \$7 million increase will be put towards increasing the capacity and decreasing wait-lists for specialized medical imaging services. This includes CT [computerized tomography] scans, MRIs [magnetic resonance imaging], IR [interventional radiology] scans, including throughout Saskatchewan. Funding will be widely distributed to sites across the province, including community-based services, based on wait times and availability of capacity within a given area. Demand for these services has increased in the last number of years. This budget increase will help keep up with the growing demands for medical imaging and address wait times.

Saskatchewan is also moving forward to establish more comprehensive pediatric gastroenterology program. The additional \$2.3 million in funding will help create a stable pediatric GI [gastrointestinal] program in our province. Investment into the required programming, equipment, and staffing, including physician coverage, means more children will be able to receive care closer to home.

This funding is in addition to the funding committed to support three full-time pediatric subspecialties in the province. The increasing funding will also help the SHA recruit the highly specialized individuals needed to meet patient volumes, including pediatric gastroenterologists.

While we are making significant investments in critical and acute care, this budget invests in services that will act as an alternative for individuals needing to visit emergency departments, which will help alleviate ER [emergency room] pressures. The Regina urgent care centre will receive \$5 million in operating costs for '23-24, providing treatment of ailments, injuries, mental health illnesses that are not life threatening and require immediate treatment. Additionally we will work to continue on the development of Saskatoon urgent care centre in partnership with

Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation.

This year's budget makes further important investments for individuals' health with increases to the prescription drug plan. An additional \$25.7 million will be provided in 2023-24 to fund utilization pressures, including growth in the number of patients needing coverage, increase in prescription volumes, and higher cost drugs.

This budget also provides a \$6.5 million increase for cancer care in our province, including \$2.9 million increase for the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency. This funding will go directly towards oncology drugs for patients, as well as additional direct care support staff. This increase for the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency brings their total funding from the Ministry of Health to over \$222.7 million for this fiscal year.

A \$6.6 million increase will focus on public health as well as primary and community care initiatives. Highlights include: \$2.7 million for HealthLine 811, including \$1.7 million to fund five additional virtual triage physicians who provide virtual care to patients, and \$1 million to increase HealthLine 811 staffing levels; \$1.1 million to support the Regina Chronic Pain Clinic; \$1 million to increase programming to reduce communicable diseases, including sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections; \$500,000 for early childhood immunization campaigns; \$500,000 for the development of the province's primary care strategy.

I want to thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to outline some of the significant initiatives in the '23-24 Ministry of Health budget. Minister Hindley and I would be more than happy to answer any questions that the committee has to provide. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: — Thank you for your opening comments, Minister Merriman, and I'll open the floor to questions. And Mr. Love.

Mr. Love: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister Merriman, for your opening comments. I want to begin by voicing my displeasure with the order in which we began this evening. I'd like to read from *Hansard*, yesterday in this committee when I made an agreement with Mr. Hindley on the order that we would follow to ensure that both myself and my colleague, our Health critic, would be present. Reading from *Hansard* record, I said:

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?

Minister Hindley answered, "Sure." So I'm disappointed that we've changed that order tonight as I think it's impeded, you know, the presence of both of our Health critics. And certainly I'm not here to debate this widely but I want to put that on the record as we had an agreement, and I think it's disappointing to see that changed.

Minister Hindley, at the end of our discussion last night you commented you're unable to provide a number of points of data in responses to my questions. You commented, "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 . . ." Can you please update the committee on any of the points that you were unable to answer yesterday?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Where do you want to start?

Mr. Love: — As I just quoted, you indicated that your officials kept track of all of the take-aways and the points that they were unable to answer, so I'll turn it over to you to provide any of that information.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Okay, sure. We'll start with the questions that the member had about CCAs [continuing care aide] and FTEs [full-time equivalent] in long-term care. So just to reiterate some of the information that we had last night and provide some additional details, again our commitment to 300 CCAs includes the 180 FTEs to long-term care and 120 to home care. To date we've added 160 of the 180 FTEs in LTC [long-term care], and all of those have been filled. The remaining 20 FTEs are being added in the new budget year here in '23-24.

I would point out that even though we added 160 FTEs in the past two years, due to things such as turnover, vacancies, unpaid leaves, etc., the paid FTEs reported may not reflect the number of FTEs added and budgeted. So that's just some clarification on that point.

I just want to go back here. Any additional questions on that topic?

Mr. Love: — Yeah, absolutely. We can pause there, Minister.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Sure.

Mr. Love: — Are there more continuing care aides working in the province now than there were one year ago, using the numbers that you've provided to this committee yesterday and one year ago?

Ms. Smith: — Good evening. Tracey Smith, deputy minister of Health. So just thank you for the question. And further to some of the numbers that we discussed last night, so specifically we were looking at the CCA FTEs within long-term care. And so what I wanted to just explain, the number . . . So I'll maybe just back it up a little bit.

In the summer of 2021, we ran sort of the data and did the analysis, which resulted in us reporting 5,118 FTEs. So that point in time there was in summer of 2021. In fall of 2021 we had a request, sort of an ad hoc request to take a look at the CCA data again. And it was at that point that the team found a small discrepancy in one of the formulas it was using. And so it reran kind of the data for the CCAs at that time, which when corrected brought the total '20-21 FTEs to 5,037. So we've confirmed that number since that point in time.

So the information that we had provided last night . . . So what I will just confirm is that using the same methodology that we've been using throughout all of the years when we were analyzing this data, in summer of 2022 we did the data analysis based on the '21-22 year, and that resulted in 5,071 FTEs.

[19:15]

So based on that confirmed number, so '21-22, it is confirmed at 5,071; '20-21, the confirmed number is 5,037. So to answer your question, do we have more CCAs working in long-term care this time versus last year, the answer is, yes.

Mr. Love: — The first time I asked this question in this committee two years ago, Minister Hindley, you reported that there were 5,054 FTEs. I believe that would have been 2019-2020. Did you revisit that number as well and apply the new methodology? And do you have an update on where that number was when the promise to hire 300 was made?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, we've checked that and that number remains the same.

Mr. Love: — So why was there just an anomaly for the one year in question? And I suppose if that number remains the same, then the point that we explored in question period today remains. This is an addition of 17 FTEs over a three-year span.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So Tracey will speak to looking at that number again that we had talked about last night. But I reiterate what I said earlier. Our commitment is to add, and has been to add 300 more CCA positions. So these are new positions that were not funded before, that are now funded and are in the health care system.

But as I said, even though we've added 160 FTEs in the past two years, there are always vacancies in the system, right? There's turnover, there's vacancies, there's unpaid leaves. And so therefore the number of paid FTEs may not actually reflect the number of FTEs that have been added to the system and that have been budgeted for in the budget cycle.

Ms. Smith: — And just to your question around sort of the validation, so just in talking to the team today, at that point in time when we were looking at the data for that 2020-2021 year, they did confirm and sort of just validate the data that we've used in previous years and the approach. And so it is the same approach that we've used year over year, so that we are in a position where we can replicate and we can report out sort of the year-over-year changes as a part of, you know, a number of questions that we get asked throughout the course of any given year.

Mr. Love: — Okay. We can return to the other data points that were missing. I can go through questions for you, Minister Hindley, or if you had anything that you're prepared to report tonight, I invite you to do so.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Go ahead.

Mr. Love: — I asked about how many folks have left the workforce, specifically in long-term care, and you said that you would look into getting that information. Resignations, events.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — That data we don't have yet. My officials tell me that they're still working on compiling it.

Mr. Love: — Can you commit to how that information will be provided to the committee?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — We can table it through the committee Chair once we have the data for you.

Mr. Love: — Thank you, Minister. Another question that we concluded with last night had to do with the pilot project at Brightwater Senior Living here in the Regina area. I asked you how many continuing care aides work at Brightwater.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, so at the pilot project with Brightwater, they have — and we did get some numbers back — they have 44.5 FTEs under the classification of personal service workers/medication techs. They also have 11.9 FTEs, LPNs [licensed practical nurse], and one FTE as an RN on site.

Mr. Love: — So would that be zero continuing care aides?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, so for point of clarification for the member, so Brightwater does not have continuing care aides because the facility is licensed as a personal care home under *The Personal Care Homes Act*, and therefore, because of that, they're not technically a special-care home or a long-term care home. And that was understood by all parties involved as part of the pilot project.

Typically a facility governed under the special-care homes regulations requires that, in practice, non-CCAs need to take the training within two years of taking on that role. But again, this is a unique situation where they're involved in a pilot project and so therefore they're allowed to maintain operating with the staff that they would have had previously as a personal care home. So they have those, as I said, 44.5 FTEs, personal service workers, plus 11.9 LPNs and one FTE RN that's part of the current existing staff at that facility.

Mr. Love: — So I asked yesterday, Minister, if Brightwater would be required to follow the program guidelines for special-care homes and you said yes, they're providing long-term care to 100 residents. And I asked yesterday — and I can read from *Hansard* if I'm required to — I asked yesterday if providing long-term care requires them to employ continuing care aides to, you know, provide that care. And you said yes. Today it sounds like you're saying otherwise and that they are exempt from following the guidelines. Could you please clarify that position?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, they're personal service workers which is what they have because they are licensed as a personal care home. And they're participating in this as a pilot project for this particular initiative.

Mr. Love: — How much training does a personal support worker receive and what would be the average pay for a PSW [personal support worker] in Saskatchewan?

Mr. Havervold: — Hello. Brad Havervold, executive director of the community care branch of the Ministry of Health.

So I believe your question was related to the training required of personal services workers. The term "personal service worker" really isn't standardized in Saskatchewan. You know, it really depends on the role that they provide within individual personal care homes. We do, as a matter of principle, offer a personal care worker course provincially that is offered to all personal workers in personal care homes, all 200-and-some of them. That involves

a didactic portion of study as well as a supervised period of time where they have to be able to demonstrate their competencies to a registered nurse and have that signed off. We have additional medication modules that they would take in order to be able to safely dispense medication.

So I can't say specifically what the training program would be for the personal service workers at Brightwater Senior Living. Many personal care homes go well above and beyond what is kind of the basic requirement. And of course they would have their own internal training programs around, you know, transfer, lifting, and repositioning; occupational safety; you know, appropriate medication administration — that sort of thing.

Again the personal service workers are always, just like the CCAs, under the direct supervision of a licensed health care professional, either a registered nurse or an LPN. And that happens in this home as it does in every other special-care home.

Mr. Love: — Would any of these folks . . . Minister, a question to you, by all means if your officials want to answer. Would any of these personal service workers have training in two-person lifts, toileting, other highly skilled areas that continuing care aides receive extensive training in?

Mr. Havervold: — Yes they would as a matter of fact. If they were responsible for transferring or repositioning people that required two-person, they would be trained in that through the TLR [transferring, lifting, repositioning] training that is offered either through their employer or through, you know, other training mechanisms. But yeah, that's for both the safety of the resident but also for the safety of the individual.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister, does it concern you in any way that we have 100 Saskatchewan residents receiving long-term care in a facility without any continuing care aides?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — No it does not, because as the officials have stated, there is a framework in place. They are operating with personal service workers, as has been indicated here tonight. They operate under the supervision of RNs and licensed practical nurses as well, plus there's a number of safeguards in place. The contract with the SHA requires that the core standards for care for LTC services are in place. The SHA has significant oversight to ensure that they're following that to ensure the quality of care.

[19:30]

Mr. Love: — So do you want to revisit your answer from last night, and do you believe that Brightwater Senior Living, providing long-term care to 100 residents, are they required to follow the program guidelines for special-care homes?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So as I mentioned earlier, it's a unique situation because it's a pilot and they're licensed under *The Personal Care Homes Act*. But that being said, because of the nature of the project here, they essentially are following the guidelines that are in place, the special-care home guidelines. And Mr. Havervold might be able to explain a bit further as to what that encompasses.

Mr. Havervold: — Certainly. The program guidelines cover all facets of care in a special-care home: everything from

appropriate record-keeping to quality assessments of the individuals, regular assessments by nurses, documentation, charting, safe medication administration, etc., to guide all facets of care.

In this situation this home is required to participate in all of our quality monitoring activities. They're subject to inspections through the long-term care inspection process. They do quarterly assessments and feed information into Canadian Institute for Health Information as all other homes do, that allow us to monitor quality of care. And I think, as the minister mentioned, they're under significant oversight from the SHA, with SHA staff providing regular visits to the home, working through case management of individuals, you know, that are being placed in the home, working with families, etc.

So the program guidelines themselves are, as I mentioned, all-encompassing for all facets of care, and they are required to comply with those guidelines in accordance with the contract that they have with the SHA.

Mr. Love: — Minister, yesterday I asked how much Brightwater is compensated per resident or per bed. Can you update the committee on those numbers?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — We don't have that information.

Mr. Love: — Can you ballpark it?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — No.

Mr. Love: — Can you . . .

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Can you ballpark it?

Mr. Love: — Yeah, I can. Somewhere in the area of — I've received correspondence — somewhere in the area of \$9,000 per month per resident.

When this pilot project began I believe the budget number was \$2.3 million per year. Can you update the committee on the actual expenditures for this pilot project in the last year? And what's budgeted to fund the 100 long-term care residents of Brightwater in this budget year?

Ms. Smith: — Thank you for that question. Just in talking to my team, we don't have that information with us, but we will endeavour to work with the Saskatchewan Health Authority and get that information.

Mr. Love: — Minister, can you commit to how you will provide this information to the committee?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, we can table it through the Chair of the committee here.

Mr. Love: — Thanks again for that.

Minister, I previously asked, and it kind of got lost in the shuffle here, how much a personal support worker makes with the average wage or salary as . . . I'll just kind of cut to the chase here. What I'm told is that typical wages for a PSW, which again as your official mentioned isn't a recognized classification in

Saskatchewan as it is in other jurisdictions, but typically those wages would be in the range of \$17 an hour. A continuing care aide in Saskatchewan would make somewhere between 20 to \$25 an hour.

So, you know, in a privately owned facility providing long-term care to 100 individuals that doesn't employ any continuing care aides but yet they're being subsidized at rates that are long-term care rates, it stands to reason that they're making a tidy profit by employing folks that don't have the same levels of training and education that the rest of the long-term workforce does.

Is this what people in Saskatchewan can expect in terms of your government's interest in pursuing private providers for long-term care, that the motive of profit will lead to you supporting a workforce that doesn't have the same skill level and training as the public system?

[19:45]

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — So just to explain again the background on this. In January 2020, the SHA entered into a contract for 100 beds from licensed personal care homes to address the need for, the immediate need for . . . to address the long-term care pressures as a result of reduced capacity at Regina Pioneer Village.

The 100 community-based LTC beds are now all at Brightwater Capital Crossing and in that particular . . . The reason for that was because of, you know, the situation, the need to find beds for these residents. Therefore this was developed as a pilot. An interim decision was made to make sure that we would be . . . to do this. And we'll be reviewing the, I guess, results of that pilot, if you will, in the coming months to determine what the next steps are here on this with respect to long-term care beds in the city of Regina.

But again, this is a pilot project and therefore under constant review. And again, as I said earlier, we'll make some decisions here in the coming months as to what happens next.

Mr. Love: — Okay, thanks, Minister. I'm going to wrap up with just a couple questions before I turn things over to my colleague, our Health critic. Can you update the committee, thinking of rural and remote health facilities, how many service disruptions are currently, as in today, facing health facilities in Saskatchewan? Including those shorter than a week that will not be reported through your website.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — The most recent data we have — not today, it's not today because we don't have it for today — but the most recent data has listed 22 acute care sites with closed or reduced beds, nine ERs with reduced hours of service.

Mr. Love: — Are there any lab or X-ray disruptions to report?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — The only one we can see that has a lab disrupted is Ile-a-la-Crosse. It's causing the disruption.

Mr. Love: — And can you provide a list of the 22 acute and 9 emergency room disruptions, of the locations?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Just one addition, that we missed Wadena.

Also a lab disruption there.

In terms of the list of communities that are temporarily disrupted, we'll compile the list and have it tabled here tonight.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Minister. Why are you no longer posting any service disruptions, these short-term ones, on your website if you know the locations, where they are, and specifically what's happening? And I'll say I'm asking on behalf of . . . We've encountered throughout our time visiting communities in the province, municipal leaders who have described encountering people who came to a community, they see the sign on the road directing them to a hospital, they arrive, and they're knocking on locked doors. And these leaders aren't there to step in and let them know that that hospital isn't open, and folks are frustrated that they had no way of knowing that when they came there in their time of need. So why are you no longer posting these service disruptions on your website, or finding another way to inform people where care is available?

Mr. Will: — Hello. Andrew Will, CEO [chief executive officer] from the Saskatchewan Health Authority. So just to describe our process here, we certainly have any longer term disruptions posted on our website, so those, you know, we're aware of and predictable. Short-term ones are a little more challenging because sometimes it can happen last minute, someone becomes sick, and you know, we don't have the appropriate coverage.

So we do work hard to notify community leaders, and of course EMS [emergency medical services], you know, is aware if there is a service disruption. But it's very, very hard to sometimes communicate these because they can change quickly. So you know, we might find a nurse is sick; we don't have nurse coverage. People will keep working on that and then we may find someone and then the nurse will come back in. So basically we try and find the right balance of making sure people are aware when we have longer term disruptions, but manage the short-term unpredictable ones in sort of real time.

Mr. Love: — Okay. Thank you, Mr. Will. Minister Hindley, what's the current status of services offered at hospitals in Kamsack, Canora, and Preeceville?

[20:00]

Mr. Will: — So Kamsack is scheduled to open three additional acute care beds as of April the 30th, so we have some good news there. And this is in addition to the four alternate-level-of-care beds and one palliative care bed that we've been able to open in the community. With Canora, we have the emerg services open there, and we have seen some intermittent RN challenges, but open as much as we can in that facility. And the other one was Preeceville, and we have four alternate-level-of-care beds and one palliative care bed open in the facility. And emergency services are also open.

Mr. Love: — Thank you. What's the current status of health services available in the town of Watrous?

Mr. Will: — We're open seven days a week from 08:00 to 19:00 hours.

Mr. Love: — And of those four communities that we've

mentioned now, how many are currently admitting acute patients?

Mr. Will: — None of those are currently admitting, other than Canora may be depending on their situation with registered nurses. And as I mentioned, you know, we're excited that Kamsack should be in a position to be able to open three beds end of this month.

Mr. Love: — Thank you, Mr. Will. Minister Hindley, we may revisit some other communities later . . . [inaudible] . . . myself or my colleague. I've got one final question for you before I turn things over to our Health critic. This one is not health related, but as Minister for Seniors, I committed to this individual that I would bring this to your attention. But it's not . . . I guess what I'm asking for you to do tonight is to see if you can work with the minister who oversees SaskTel. This individual who, on behalf of her elderly mother, has indicated that . . . would like to know if there's anything in the budget or that could be done by your government to support seniors living independently when SaskTel connects home internet. And her mother had home internet connected but was unable to access any services because she needed support connecting her devices to the modem. The technician was unable to do that. What I'm asking you this evening is if you could have a conversation with your colleague to consider if there's any programs that your government could bring forward to support seniors living independently to make use of technology in the home that is so important in this age.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, I can raise it with the minister if you haven't raised it through casework channels or regular channels as well. But we can make the minister aware of it. But yeah, I'd encourage you to follow up directly with the minister's office too.

Mr. Love: — Yeah, he has received a letter from my colleague Aleana Young, from her office. So I'm just asking you, as Minister for Seniors, if you would follow up with Minister Morgan to see if there's any solutions that you can help. I know that we've discussed in many ways the need for home supports, and I'm highlighting for you the need for assisting seniors with accessing technology in the home to improve their connectivity, whether that's for health needs, independent living needs. If you can commit to solving this problem with that minister.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — I'll talk to the minister about it. This would fall under the budget of SaskTel, not our ministry, but I'll follow up with the minister.

Mr. Love: — I appreciate that. And I'll turn things over to my colleague, Vicki Mowat, at this time.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you . . .

The Chair: — Make sure that we do this properly. So substituting in for Meara Conway is now Ms. Vicki Mowat. Okay, the floor is yours.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you . . .

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. I'm just wondering if, for the future questions, if we can keep it to the health budget and not casework. There's a normal process we do for casework

and usually we don't do that in committee. So I'd just like to keep it on what our budget is here and what we have allocated for this time to be able to speak tonight. Thank you.

The Chair: — Okay. The floor is yours, Ms. Mowat.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Moving right along into the global health budget a little bit, based on some of Minister Merriman's opening remarks, in terms of the federal funding that has been provided with the recent funding agreement, was that reflected in the budget or did it come out too late to be reflected? Will we see a boost of health care funding as a result of those dollars, or did we catch that in time?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think the Minister of Finance addressed this, and we've addressed it in the media, that this was in our budget submission with the 6.7 per cent lift. That did include federal dollars, a lot of them one-time dollars . . .

Ms. Mowat: — Sorry, I didn't hear the last part.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — There was 61 million that were the one-time dollars.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. In terms of the health infrastructure dollars that are specifically dedicated to maintenance of facilities, so not the capital dollars, I wonder if you can speak to what the current health infrastructure deficit is for all SHA facilities.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you for the question. The most recent information that we have is the deficit is at \$3.5 billion. But I do want to note that we've invested \$2.4 billion in health infrastructure to ensure our health care system is prepared to meet the growing needs. This was in the last, I guess it is sixteen and a half years now, which was three times as much as it was spent in the previous 16 years.

And we also have \$337 million in capital health budget, which include \$181 million to support ongoing capital projects, including planning and development, which is, as I touched on in my opening comments, was 98.6 million for the Victoria Hospital redevelopment project in Prince Albert; 38 million for Weyburn General Hospital redevelopment; 20 million for La Ronge long-term care project; \$10 million for Grenfell long-term care; \$10 million for Regina long-term care, specialized beds; \$10 million for urgent care centre, Regina and Saskatoon — Regina receiving seven, Saskatoon receiving three — \$5.2 million for St. Paul's Hospital front entrance redevelopment and healing centre in Saskatoon; and 2.6 million in planning dollars for future projects, including La Ronge health care, Regina General and RUH master planning, Saskatoon long-term care, Rosthern Hospital, Esterhazy hospital, and \$250,000 for the replacement of the Battlefords District Care Centre.

We also have a million dollars for Estevan long-term care redevelopment, \$1 million for the Quill Plains lodge in Watson redevelopment, \$500,000 for Yorkton Regional Health Centre replacement project, \$500,000 for the Regina General Hospital parkade project. And there's some other smaller projects, but that's the majority of them.

Ms. Mowat: — So the answer is 3.5 billion. I would appreciate if we can stay focused on the maintenance costs rather than the

capital as well. So 3.5 billion, when was that accurate as of? So it was the most recent number, but as of when?

[20:15]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you. The 3.5 billion is as of 2019. We did an assessment in 2013, 2019, which is the most recent numbers. We're in the process of doing a current update on that right away.

As far as your specific question of . . . We have almost \$66 million in funding will be available for maintenance and improvement projects for facilities across the province, which is a 15 per cent lift over last year's budget.

Ms. Mowat: — How long does the minister expect that this work will be ongoing? I recall back to last year's estimates committee and, you know, I think we got the same answer last year.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — You would have got the same answer last year because it's still 2019 numbers. Just looking back at the numbers, it was done in 2013, so six years later it was done again. So we're in the process of doing that right now. I would assume it would be five to six years. It seems to be on that kind of cycle right now. We've been stating this number since 2019 so it would be the same number.

Ms. Mowat: — Is the ministry keeping track of the facility condition index of SHA facilities? I know previously we'd had a conversation I think about this being transferred into SaskBuilds, so just wondering where to ask those questions.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sorry, I just had to get clarification on that. SaskBuilds is actually the best place to ask that question. We are transitioning that over to SaskBuilds so they can be managing that on behalf of the SHA.

Ms. Mowat: — What work is being done to ensure that facilities with a critical or red condition index are being prioritized within health infrastructure maintenance dollars? I think that's the question. Yeah.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you. The SHA has a base maintenance intake process and rate to prioritize projects based on factors such as safety compliance and condition and return on investment. The higher the point rating, obviously, the higher the priority. The project, the submission window is open from August to September for SHA programmers and year-round for building services teams throughout the province. And I'll maybe get Andrew to touch on any specifics.

Mr. Will: — Yeah. Thanks, Minister. So as the minister said, we have an intake process each year that allows our facilities maintenance staff as well as site leadership to submit priority items for consideration. And they've got a scoring matrix that includes things like, you know, is it a life safety issue? Is it a service delivery improvement that's needed in terms of patient flow or other criteria?

And we certainly do, throughout the year as we are making improvements, we do update our facility condition index information for each of the buildings. So there are some small updates made throughout the year. And then of course certainly

throughout the year, if there is an issue that arises in a building we prioritize those as well.

And I would also just say in terms of the delivery of that maintenance budget, I think of the threshold as any project larger than \$3 million, SaskBuilds takes the lead on the work. Anything less than that our own maintenance, facilities maintenance staff, manage those projects internally.

Ms. Mowat: — What is the plan for Battlefords District Care Centre? I had a chance to tour the facility a couple of times, heard from folks that work there about the condition of the facility. I know it's been red for a number of years, and this year I believe we've seen an announcement for some planning dollars.

Is the plan that there would be an entirely new facility built? There is quite a large number of residents there. So just trying to get a sense of what that plan is because I haven't seen, outside of the budget, I haven't seen any announcements of this sort.

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Thanks for the question. Yes, to the member's question, that would be a complete new build. So that would be one of the new facilities that was announced in this year's budget: a long-term care project in Battlefords which is in need of replacement; as well as the new integrated facility in Esterhazy, replacing the long-term care facility and hospital there; as well as a new hospital in Rosthern. But yes, to the original question, it would be a complete replacement and a complete rebuild of the long-term care facility in Battlefords.

Ms. Mowat: — What kind of timeline should folks in the community expect until complete operation of that facility?

Hon. Mr. Hindley: — Yeah, it's just the, you know, just double checking here with officials. But as this was just announced in the budget, we're just barely in the early planning phases. So there's a lot of work here to be done yet to determine what that schedule would look like. And it would be premature to give a date on that, in terms of what the completion date and opening-of-the-doors date would be.

Again it's a pretty substantial process. And we strive to ensure that, on any of these projects, whether they're the new ones or ones that are currently under way, that we're working closely with local communities, with the leaders, with the foundations — all those that are involved in the project — so that they are fully informed as much as they can be on the various steps to the project between the announcement day, whether that's budget day or whenever the announcement has been made with respect to the project moving forward, and then when the actual, whether it's tendering, you know, posting requests for proposals, site selection, the actual needs analysis that's done around it. And, again, there's a whole gamut of things that are considered.

So again very early stages here, but we'll make sure that, as we have on any other project, that we're fully engaged with the local community to make sure they're in the loop as to what those time frames are. And as we get into a better position of being able to narrow what that looks like, then we'll communicate that both to the community but also publicly as well.

Ms. Mowat: — So in my experience being here for I think five and a half years being elected, like I've seen some projects have

been drawn out for quite a few years. I'm just trying to make sure that, you know, not just specifically to highlight this facility, but if there's a facility that isn't up to par and the only reasonable action is to replace that facility, what is being done for maintenance in the interim to make sure that work can still be ongoing there? That's what I'm getting at here, Minister.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you for the question. As I identified before, we've got an additional \$66 million in this year's budget, which is a 15 per cent lift to be able to do maintenance across the whole system.

The SHA does prioritize this with SaskBuilds as to what needs to be done. If there's something that's urgent or emergent that happens within the fiscal year, we certainly work with the SHA, with SaskBuilds, if we need something that is unforeseen. But we do have very robust preventative maintenance.

And we also . . . A lot of these areas, we work with the foundations and their communities to be able to leverage some of the community dollars for these facilities. That's why we've laid out the \$250,000 for Battleford and the other ones that I've identified in previous answers.

Ms. Mowat: — So just to lay this out a little bit, Battlefords District Care Centre has had a critical facility condition index for years now. We are looking at a process that is still years down the road. You know, how do we reconcile the lack of maintenance that's happening in these facilities? How do we ensure that there is safety under these conditions?

I think it would be helpful to go back to the definition of a severe facility condition index, just to highlight the importance of this. Can the minister identify what state a facility would have to be in before it would be granted this status?

[20:30]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you for the question. This one is a little bit of an anomaly, within . . . This one isn't actually owned by the Saskatchewan Health Authority. It's actually owned by SaskBuilds. They are the owners of this and they were providing the dollars for the maintenance on it. But they actually own the building and they would have a better assessment of what it actually is rated on the FCI [facility condition index] range. I don't have that information right now, because it's not under the SHA's asset management.

Ms. Mowat: — I had just asked about what the FCI rating would have to be for a facility to be classified as red.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — After many consultations, we're going to have to defer this over because SaskBuilds has taken this over and I don't want to . . . We had our process that was somewhat established in 2013 that we recreated, and there's going to be a different process. So I don't know if we would be comparing apples to apples without SaskBuild's expertise on what they are doing on this new process going forward. So I think we'd have to defer to SaskBuilds.

Ms. Mowat: — So I would hope that they wouldn't be changing the definitions. I understand FCI, facility condition index, is a benchmark that's used industry-wide. It would be shocking I

think if there was a departure from that system of classifying deferred maintenance.

I think it's a simple equation of the deficiencies divided by the overall value of the facility, and that typically if that value is greater than 30 per cent, that's what makes a critical FCI.

I'm in disbelief about why this took this much of a conversation, but what I'm trying to highlight here is that for a facility to have this rating is a severe rating. And I wonder, out of the \$3.5 billion of deferred maintenance, how much of this maintenance is considered to be critical?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As I had mentioned before, we have . . . The process is being redone right now. We have done this in 2013, 2019, and my officials have told me that this should be completed in towards the end of 2024 to reassess where all of our . . . I think it's at about just over 290 SHA facilities, so it does take time. This is not simple of just taking the value of the building because it has to be all reassessed as the value of the building. As things change over time, we have to reassess what those values are. So that process has begun, and it should be completed by the end of the calendar year in 2024.

Ms. Mowat: — So even considering the past work that has been done on the current deficit of deferred maintenance, you know, I think some quick napkin math shows us that the annual investment we're talking about here is under 2 per cent of what's needed in terms of the deferred health infrastructure budget. I could stand to be corrected on that as I was calculating it out here, but I suppose the question is, is 2 per cent maintenance on 290 facilities, you know, how long is that going to be sustainable for?

I've heard significant concerns from both folks that work in health care and folks that utilize these facilities that, you know, they're described as crumbling in front of them. I've seen some of the crumbling in front of my own eyes. You know, at what stage does this become irresponsible to not be maintaining these buildings?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I'm having trouble reconciling that we're spent \$2.4 billion in the last 16 years, three times what the previous government did, and being called reckless. I reject that. We have \$181 million, additional dollars that are going into our budget, \$337.6 million in health capital. These are significant dollars. These are rebuilding hospitals in Victoria, Weyburn; long-term care in La Ronge, Grenfell, Regina. These are huge dollars that are going in, record dollars that are going in.

This isn't irresponsible or reckless; this is a significant investment. We do invest in our facilities. I'm not sure which facilities you are specifically talking about, but if you are specifically talking about one facility that you referred to as "crumbling," please let me know.

[20:45]

Ms. Mowat: — So I'll let folks do the math for themselves, 66 million this year into an infrastructure deficit of 3.5 billion. I am certainly not indicating that all of that needs to be put in this year. I am just submitting that under 2 per cent into what's needed begs the question of sustainability.

The Provincial Auditor previously studied the former Saskatoon region and recommended that the government create a process for how to prioritize what maintenance work is being done. The latest assessment of conditions in Saskatoon and surrounding areas indicated that overall facilities are in critical condition. “Not completing timely maintenance increases the risk that an asset may fail and cause harm to residents, patients, visitors, or staff.” That’s an excerpt from that Provincial Auditor’s report, which I’m sure the minister will remember.

Has this process occurred in Saskatoon? And has it occurred elsewhere?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As I identified, and Mr. Will identified, there is a process in place to prioritize this. It comes from each individual facility, up through their management, up to the Saskatchewan Health Authority executive leadership team.

I’m struggling with this, that this isn’t a significant amount of dollar invested. It is a significant, and we need to also understand not just what we are doing with . . . and I think it’s being minimized as \$66 million. It’s a \$337 million investment into capital because when you replace the Weyburn General Hospital at \$38 million, that starts it new. That means there’s no deferred maintenance at Weyburn anymore. When you do a \$20 million at La Ronge or at Grenfell and \$10 million of Regina long-term care, those are all dollars that are going into, not just maintenance, but new builds. When we have a new build, that means that we don’t have any more maintenance on, for example, in the Weyburn hospital. If we had general maintenance on the Weyburn hospital, we rebuild a new hospital, there is no general maintenance on that anymore.

So I think it’s being minimized that this is \$66 million when it’s really \$337 million in capital overall for the health care which is a significant, and as I’ve said, \$2.4 million in the last 16 years, we’re still playing catch-up from years before. And I know that’s not something that member wants to talk about, but the aging infrastructure that was left, we’ve been investing billions of dollars into this to get it up to speed — not just on maintenance, but on new builds as well.

Ms. Mowat: — I have to manage my time appropriately so unfortunately I have to move on here. I wonder if the minister can comment on the allocation for physician services. I see that there is an estimated reduction in this upcoming budget, and I wonder if you can speak to why that is?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Just for clarification, you’re looking at the allocations for physician services. That’s the 626 versus the 636, is that correct?

Ms. Mowat: — Yes.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — There isn’t actually a reduction, and I’ll just go through this because what it is, is we’re moving from one service to another service. It’s still being paid for physicians.

Decrease in physician service allocation is primarily due to the reallocation of existing funds to the SHA global grant for a physician position that has been recruited and established by the SHA. The decrease is partially offset by the increase of \$4 million to provide new physicians and \$1.7 million one-time

funding to provide an extra day of physician billing during the leap year. So it’s just moving from one area to another. It’s not a decrease in physician services.

Ms. Mowat: — What is the need to move it into a new area?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Because we have physicians moving from fee-for-service to salary.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. So where are those additional dollars allocated? Where would I see that show up in the line-by-line?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — So because it’s going, as I mentioned, from one to the other, it goes into the Saskatchewan Health Authority for targeted services and programs.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. In terms of the Saskatchewan Healthcare Recruitment Agency, I see that there’s 2.4 million to support continued building of the health human resource plan and agency, I should say. And I understand that there are resourcing efforts under way for the agency with a board of directors in place and ongoing recruitment of a new CEO. Can you identify how these dollars . . . what the breakdown is for the \$2.4 million in spending? You know, if there are different FTEs, what this looks like?

[21:00]

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks. The \$2.4 million was actually pulled out of the Saskatchewan Health Authority. This would have been the dollars that would have been allocated for saskdocs. When the SHA was formed, saskdocs was incorporated into the SHA. This was the budgetary amount that they had to recruit individuals within the SHA. Those dollars have been pulled out for this new agency.

Ms. Mowat: — So there’s no breakdown of how those . . . how the agency will be spending those dollars?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well all of the dollars would be administrative, as far as hiring a CEO, staff, any travel that that team needs to be able to do to go recruit doctors from around the world. So I don’t have a specific breakdown on that, but we can see if we can provide that for the committee at either later on today . . . We’d have to go on what was allocated within saskdocs. It’s going to be different, but we can get some rough numbers for you.

Ms. Mowat: — Can you speak to the independence of this organization from the ministry?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I’m just not understanding the question. Independence from what?

Ms. Mowat: — Just what is the mandate of the organization going to be? I think a lot of people have a lot of questions about the agency because it is new. So can you speak to whether this is going to be an independent organization? Are they going to be, you know, responding to direction from the ministry or will this be led by the board?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It does have an interim board right now with a deputy minister and a CEO, which has been very public.

I'm not sure what the independent question is. I'm not understanding. Independent from the ministry? Independent from the SHA? Independent from the government? This is a treasury board Crown that does have a board and will have a CEO very soon. I'm not sure what the independent . . . from whom or from what?

Ms. Mowat: — I think another way of asking this question is, you know, what was the rationale for creating it as a treasury board in the first place, rather than keeping it within its current form?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — The current form was within the SHA. There was a decision to strengthen this agency to focus, so the SHA could focus more internally on their human resource strategy internally. This was the agency that was previously outside the Saskatchewan . . . or I guess the individual health authorities that operated for the province. When the SHA was formed, this was brought in within the SHA and now it is being a very focused agency on recruiting internationally, obviously in conjunction with the SHA, our affiliates, the ministry in providing guidance as to the positions that we do need filled.

There obviously has to be a link between the SHA and this recruitment agency as far as getting the information as to who we need to recruit, when we need to recruit them, being proactive to be able to recruit prior to somebody's retirement or departure. That's exactly what this agency is done.

This was put out in an OC [order in council] a while ago that this was where the agency was going to be focused on, to get individuals recruited from Saskatchewan. So they were a very focused team, but not just for saskdocs as it was before, but all positions within our health care system that are very challenging to recruit, not just in Saskatchewan but around the country right now.

Ms. Mowat: — So why the rationale for creating a completely new agency? I think that's what I'm asking.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sure. Sure, I'll go through it again. Because the agency was absorbed within the SHA when the SHA was formed, we want the SHA to focus on a lot of their internal human resources. This agency is a very focused group of individuals, or will be a very focused group of individuals, that do nothing but recruitment of challenging positions. So that's why, because we are being proactive to recruit people that need to be able to come to our province to strengthen our health care system. I'm not understanding the questions of the . . . Are you questioning the validity of the agency?

Ms. Mowat: — I'm just questioning why the change, because it's unclear to a lot of folks.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well I think we've been very clear with this with the media. We've had very good response from doctors on this. We've had very good response from our other providers that we have this agency. We've heard very positive feedback from physicians specifically, saying that saskdocs was working extremely well. And they would like to get back to that, where they have a specific, dedicated agency to go and recruit positions. These are people that know the positions. These are high-end recruiters that are going to go and look for individuals around the

world, around the country, and recruit them into Saskatchewan just as we were very successful with saskdocs. And we want to duplicate that but in a larger scale of not just doctors but all health care providers.

This is something that has very good support from the medical community, from managers in specific facilities. When Minister Hindley and I go out and explain this, there's a lot of support for this, this human resource agency. And again I'm not sure if you're questioning the validity of it or you're questioning the process or the treasury board Crown.

This was the direction to be able to recruit, to build an agency that was a very specific . . . tasked in recruiting in a very competitive market. And we felt that that would operate best outside the Saskatchewan Health Authority so they could focus on internal human resources as they have done with our human resource strategy.

Ms. Mowat: — Was it at the request of the SHA?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sorry, you're asking me if the SHA had asked for this?

Ms. Mowat: — Yes.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — It was part of our overall health human resource strategy was to create this agency.

Ms. Mowat: — I understand that. I'm asking where the . . . what the genesis was for the idea. Where did this recommendation come from?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well I would have to say that the recommendation came from the general public asking us to recruit more doctors and more physicians and more specialized people. We've seen . . . which has been brought up on this floor, this Assembly, of specific specialists that we need in our province. So the genesis of it was to recruit people specifically into our province, targeted teams to be able to go out and recruit this.

This is a specialized group within the government and within the Ministry of Health to be able to go out and recruit individuals, and we wanted a very focused team on this. It was successful before, and I firmly believe it will be successful again. This is something that was asked for by the people of Saskatchewan is to recruit more physicians and more specialized care teams into our province, and that's what this agency will do.

Ms. Mowat: — Who is providing guidance on which positions need to be filled? You had indicated that the ministry would provide that direction. I'm trying to get a sense of what the processes are going to look like here. So we've asked a number of times in the past about what type of labour market analysis exists in terms of being able to forecast down the road on what the needs are going to be in health care, not only today but in the future. Is this agency going to be doing any of that work? Or where does that work fall?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well I think it would fall from not just the SHA, and it's not the ministry deciding what positions are out there, but these are coming from our health care teams which we,

again we need them to be proactive in recruiting people before they either retire or before they go on to a different opportunity.

This is, again this is exactly what people of Saskatchewan have been asking for us to do, was to create a very skilled team that would go out and recruit. And they've had some successes already, even without . . . The ministry has been working this and helping out with this, but this is driven from the Saskatchewan Health Authority, specialists in the province, the Saskatchewan Medical Association, our affiliates that say, we need these positions; can you go out and recruit for them?

It's a very important process to be able to have a team that would be specifically dedicated to this, not worrying about the internal human resources of managing 40,000-plus individuals. They can focus on the external and go . . . just do recruitment. Saskdocs was very successful at this. I don't see any reason why they wouldn't be successful in this as well.

Ms. Mowat: — In terms of getting that information from the teams and through the SHA and sort of being funnelled through the ministry, is there a completed needs assessment of what we need going forward for the health workforce? Is there a compiled document labour force survey? I know we've seen, used to see these types of needs assessments come through the ministry in Economy previously. Is something like that happening? Like, we have such a large workforce in health care that needs to be managed, and I'm trying to get a sense of what planning is taking place so that we're not being reactive in our recruiting, retention, and training, but proactive.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well I think you just identified exactly what this agency's going to do. That's exactly what they're going to do is work with the Health Authority and look at what it is that we are going to be needing right now, what we're going to be needing in the next two to three years, and next 10 years out.

[21:15]

We need to again have a highly effective team. This has been successful in the past when it was outside the Saskatchewan Health Authority, or the regional health authorities at that time, to recruit for everybody. And now that we have one health authority, we need that same focus. And again I'm not hearing any of the concerns that you have heard about, that this agency wouldn't be effective.

Ms. Mowat: — I certainly didn't say that in any way. I'm just asking questions about processes and the rationale for moving it into a different space within the structure, Minister.

So I'm getting a bit of contradictory information here. I was taking notes as you were speaking, and you had initially indicated that the ministry would be providing guidance on which positions need to be filled, but now I understand . . . I hear you saying that this agency is going to be providing that needs assessment.

So I understand the mandate of the organization to be going out and doing the recruiting and getting those much-needed health care workers. Who is deciding what we need, moving forward? Who is doing the forecasting, which is incredibly important especially when we talk about training? Because we know that this is, you know, the creation of seats, you know, sending folks

to training like this. These are great solutions but they're years down the road in terms of getting those folks, so we need to be forecasting years down the road as well.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I guess the answer to the question would be all of the above. We get input from the SHA. The ministry also has direct contracts and pays out directly to physicians and to teams. We have our affiliates. We also have independent, privately run doctors that are also looking at retiring.

We get all of this information, and that information will be fed into this agency and then ask them to be able to go out and try to recruit these individuals. We get it from lots of areas — I wouldn't say any one specific area — obviously the Saskatchewan Health Authority being the largest of those employers. But we would balance it out with what the needs are across the province, because we have many conduits and it's not just the SHA that employs every health care worker in the province.

Ms. Mowat: — In terms of recruiting, I want to talk a little bit about Indigenous recruitment and retention.

In the volume 2 Provincial Auditor's report that looked specifically at the health human resources plan, one of the recommendations that was made was that the ministry establish an Indigenous recruitment and retention plan, which certainly makes sense when you consider the amount of, you know, untapped labour that exists within the province and folks that would be very well served by being employed for the ministry, would help to tackle issues with systemic racism, would help to have a representative workforce.

What work is being done on this front, Minister?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you. Touch on a couple of things here right within our HHR plan, and I'll identify one of our goals: in '22-23, the SHA will work with partners to develop First Nation and Métis recruitment and retention strategy. A First Nation and Métis recruitment strategy has been drafted. In the past weeks, it's been shared with the executive sponsor for input, as well being shared with traditional knowledge keepers advisory council.

Next step include . . . with the executive leadership team and other stakeholders for input, are being finalized. The pillars and actions identified in this strategy align with the draft SHA health human resources 2022-2026 operational plan.

Also on our training seats, on March 23rd, SaskBuilds was given the approval to order equipment and commence minor renovations to facilitate a temporary 18-seat expansion between the MLT [medical laboratory technologist], which had 10, the MRT [medical radiation technologist], 8, programs starting in Saskatoon. This interim measure ensures expansion of the two programs while public and private options are further explored by SaskBuilds. Site tours, analysis, and . . . [inaudible] . . . assessments will be conducted in the coming weeks.

Further to that, Advanced Education and ICT [Immigration and Career Training] are expanding health care training seats in Saskatchewan Indigenous institutions. SIIT [Saskatchewan

Indian Institute of Technologies] has expanded the health care aide program in Prince Albert, with an additional 20 seats to be added for the winter semester, which is March of this year, and will have one part-time increase of Indigenous practical nursing seat. Dumont Technical Institute will have an additional CCA seat and one seat expansion for practical nursing.

This on top of our partnership, which is very unique, with Ahtahkakoop First Nation. We're just not partnering on employment, but we're also partnering on economic development with Ahtahkakoop First Nation with our urgent care centre in Saskatoon.

So to your question, yes, we are very much engaged with our Indigenous potential employees and also at a higher level in the building of facilities.

Ms. Mowat: — So you had mentioned that the plan is right now with the executive sponsor for input. Can you indicate what that means, who that is?

Mr. Will: — So the SHA sees it as a really important strategy to increase the diversity of our workforce. And our teams are currently working on an Indigenous employment strategy and working together, as we do that, through our First Nation and Métis health portfolio to engage Indigenous communities across the province to hear, you know, their ideas and opportunities.

So as was mentioned, currently it's in a draft stage, so it's just about to come forward to our executive team for consideration and support. But certainly good work that's happening and lots of engagement that's happening.

Ms. Mowat: — When can we expect to see this plan released? I think the Provincial Auditor indicated that it was expected to be completed by March 2023. We are freshly in April. When will folks be able to take a look at this?

Mr. Will: — Yeah, so as I mentioned, it's currently in a draft state. So until it's come to our executive team and we've had a chance to review it, I'd be reluctant to, like, give a definitive timeline. But I would say for sure, you know, our intention would be to see that finalized and approved in the next two to three months.

Ms. Mowat: — And so for clarification, when the minister said executive sponsor, he meant the executive team at the SHA is who it's in front of right now?

Mr. Will: — Yeah, we have sponsors from, you know, both our human resources department as well as our First Nation and Métis health portfolio. So that's internal to the SHA, correct.

Ms. Mowat: — So that's like the folks that are spearheading the project?

Mr. Will: — Yeah, that's right.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. Sounds good. I was just trying to get a sense of what the language was here. How successful . . .

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yeah, if I could just . . .

Ms. Mowat: — Oh, sorry.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yeah, I just wanted to add in that, you know, this is an important process. We don't want to rush it. We want to do it right. But I also want to give credit to a couple of our board members who just recently joined us, former Chief Reg Bellerose and Gillis Lavalley, who have been instrumental in helping us not just at a board level but also on a community level, to be able to work with our Indigenous partners and how we can engage them on multiple levels — on the employment level, on the economic level, as partnership levels.

We've been getting great advice from these two gentlemen who have a very deep knowledge of the . . . Well now I think I'm getting too much information. They have a very deep knowledge of what is going to work within the Indigenous community and what we need to be able to do to engage them at a better . . . So I just want to be able to thank those two individuals that have been able to help Andrew and personally advise me on lots of situations, not just with our Indigenous community but just in general.

Ms. Mowat: — What are the current goals within the SHA for a representative or diversified workforce? And where are you at with meeting those goals?

Mr. Will: — So I can certainly share from some of the planning that we're doing that one of the priorities within that strategy that we just mentioned would be finding an appropriate way to get a good understanding of what our current representation within our workforce would be. And so that is part of what's being contemplated in the plan. You know, ultimately I would describe our goal as to see that our workforce is representative and consistent with the populations that we're serving.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. So at present, if I understand what you're saying correctly, there hasn't been a self-identification survey, or there isn't an understanding of who your employment-equity-seeking groups are within the SHA?

Mr. Will: — Yeah, I would say that, you know, the previous process was inconsistent across former health regions. So part of our work is to determine a process to standardize that, and certainly that as we look at identifying the cultural representation within our organization, that we do that in a culturally appropriate way. And that is certainly part of the consultation that we're doing with elders and communities throughout the province.

[21:30]

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. I understand that there used to be some work under what was called the representative workforce strategy, I believe, within each region. Can you speak to if there's been any attempt at re-engaging, re-introducing something of this sort? And engaging, you know, all of the relevant players who could be making a difference on this file.

Mr. Will: — So as I mentioned, there certainly, you know, was variation across the former regions in their approach. And you know, our teams will be gathering best practices from the former regions and building that into our plan. But you know, until the plan is finalized, it would be hard to comment on that. But I

would say in anything that we do as the Saskatchewan Health Authority, what we really want to do is take those best practices and put them in place in a standardized provincial way. And you know, this strategy would allow us to do that.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay, thank you. So there are current recruiting initiatives under way, Mr. Minister. They've been referred to a number of times in terms of international recruiting efforts. So some of this work is happening despite the fact that it's not being funnelled through the appropriate agency yet because it's still in the works. Is there work happening, at this point in time, to engage with recruiting on reserves and recruiting urban Indigenous populations within the province?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sorry, just a point of clarification. Are you talking with, like tribal councils or are you talking like . . . The question was very broad. I'm just looking for maybe a more narrow scope on this. Are we engaging with our Indigenous partners on recruitment? Absolutely. And like I said, that starts from the board level of the Saskatchewan Health Authority and getting guidance from, not just the individuals that are on the board, but the tribal councils, chiefs that we speak to, the engagement of Riel Bellegarde at SIIT. I'm not sure what you're looking for specifically. Maybe if I could get clarification.

Ms. Mowat: — I'm wondering if there have been efforts to recruit on-reserve in Saskatchewan in a similar way that you would do in taking a recruiting mission to another location outside of the province.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I would say we're recruiting actively within Saskatchewan. That's why we're working with SIIT, our partners, our tribal councils to be able to engage our Indigenous . . . not just that, but also the Métis Nation. I'm not sure specifically, are you asking, are we going from reserve to reserve on a recruitment? I'm not sure what you're asking.

Ms. Mowat: — Just has any activity like that taken place?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think this is exactly what . . . I think this addressed your question. Are we engaging on multiple levels with our Indigenous partner? The answer is yes. We've had some very preliminary discussions with SIIT about not just training, but employment in after that training and how we can look at what are emerging areas in the health care that we can recruit Indigenous individuals, and looking at all positions within our health authority, either on the clinical side or on the administrative side. Whatever we can engage our Indigenous community with, we will work with them to try to come to them.

And I think you've . . . This new agency, this is exactly one of the things that they'll be doing. Not just recruiting around the world, but they'll also be looking at what we can do to build capacity within Saskatchewan at our post-secondary education institutions, from the U of S [University of Saskatchewan], U of R [University of Regina], Sask Poly, SAIT [Southern Alberta Institute of Technology]. Wherever we can engage individuals from Saskatchewan, we will be doing that so we can recruit them to stay in Saskatchewan and assist in our resources challenges that we have within our health care system currently.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. I'll look forward to seeing the plan and to get more detail on how this will be operationalized.

There's been recent media stories around approximately 300 international medical graduates that are currently living in the province of Saskatchewan looking for employment here and feeling like they are up against a wall in terms of not being able to access residency seats. What work is the ministry doing to ensure that folks like this — who are engaged, have training, and eager to get into the health workforce that we know so desperately needs people — what work is the ministry doing to ensure that folks in this situation are being assisted with finding paths?

Mr. Turner: — Good evening. I'm James Turner, executive director of Medical Services branch. So we've had some progress on this actually quite recently. There's been some media attention around the matching to residency seats. So in the first match of the round across Canada, we've actually matched 36 IMGs [international medical graduate] into residency seats here in Saskatchewan. So we've actually done quite well in that first match.

We typically do quite well relative to other provinces with IMGs matching into residency, so there's been some progress there. But we also have a SIPPA program which actually helps IMGs actually get assessed to actually practise family medicine in Saskatchewan as well. So that's a bit of a different stream, but both of those things are doing quite well for us with respect to IMGs in Saskatchewan.

And there's been some media attention recently with the College of Medicine as well around other supports that they're looking at to work with those IMGs to help find different pathways for that.

Ms. Mowat: — What type of work are they . . . What type of stream would that look like?

Mr. Turner: — Sorry. So there is an IMG support program through the College of Medicine, funded to actually help create connections with IMGs to . . . Maybe they need currency of practice. There's some ways that they can help support those IMGs that are here already, connect to actually get into a program and potentially get a residency seat or into a SIPPA stream.

Ms. Mowat: — I hear you saying that things have been going well this year. We have also heard from folks that are disheartened with the process. Has there been any changes to the process this year?

[21:45]

Mr. Turner: — Yeah, just a few things. So relative to other jurisdictions, we actually have a fairly good ratio of undergrad seats to residency seats. So we have 120 undergrad seats and 128 post-grad seats, so that's something that's kind of important as we're looking at how IMGs match into that, post-grad residency seats. So we have quite a good ratio there and there's more availability there. But also we are constantly working with the College of Medicine and also the regulators to look at ways to improve some of the pathways there for IMGs into practice.

Ms. Mowat: — So for a Canadian resident, a Saskatchewan resident that takes medical training in another country and returns to Saskatchewan, I understand that there is a limited window of time for them to complete their residency and therefore be able

to practise.

What paths are being set up to ensure that folks who fall into this situation, you know, however rare this might be . . . Although, you know, media reports were saying around 300 people. I think we can all appreciate that having an additional 300 docs in this province would be incredibly helpful. So what paths are being created to create these opportunities?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Just a couple of things. One is, Health doesn't set the criteria for this, for people coming back. This is done by the College of Medicine. Obviously we do work with them. And I just wanted to clarify we have 100 undergrad and 120 residency seats, so there are instantly 20 residency seats that are open every year for anybody that is coming back from other jurisdictions.

Now this is a very competitive process for . . . As the U of S medicine is a highly sought-after school to go to, this is a very competitive process. Now understanding that there are some challenges from some individuals that you've identified and we've seen in the media, in speaking with the dean, there is a process that they look at to make sure that there is some connection to Saskatchewan.

But they look at all Canadian citizens first, and they don't decipher whether it's a person from Saskatchewan or a person from Ontario. They can't discriminate beyond that. They have to look at Canadian residency. If they set up a boundary and said, we're only going to take Saskatchewan, that could be an issue that another jurisdiction might challenge.

In saying this, the 300 that you've identified that are out there, we need to make sure that we're maintaining a very high standard. Some of these international-educated or medical grads or international-educated health care workers might not be meeting the Canadian standard. And we need to make sure that the Canadian standard is upheld, because we have very high standards as community members and we want to make sure that that is not watered down just to bring in more health care workers. We want to make sure that those standards . . . and they meet the standards set out by the College of Medicine.

Ms. Mowat: — I think we can agree on that. In terms of the notion that, you know, some dedicated seats would be challenged, isn't Alberta doing exactly that and prioritizing some Alberta residents for some of their seats?

Mr. Turner: — Yeah, so we have looked at Alberta and we're actually doing better, relatively speaking, than Alberta, in terms of matching IMGs into our programs. So like in any given year, 25 to 30 per cent of our residency seats are filled by IMGs. And in Alberta, between its two universities, that's only 21 per cent. So we're actually doing quite well.

What we have been doing has been working. So even in this last match, 15 seats were designated for IMGs, and we actually matched 36. So even with designating them, we're still competitively getting IMGs matching into way more seats than we have designated for them.

Ms. Mowat: — Have there been any conversations with the college as well about increasing the number of residency seats,

even for a short term, in the attempt to deal with the need for more physicians, especially family doctors?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yeah, we've just bumped it up this year by eight seats.

Ms. Mowat: — I understand that four of them are family and four of them are specialists. But I understand as well that that was a carry-over from a previous commitment. I wonder if there's been any conversation about, you know, a new lens on what is happening given our current situation that, you know, we may not have been aware of the spot we would be in when this commitment was made. Because I think this is year two funding, so this would have been contemplated quite a while ago.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well I think in the larger, we're always having discussions with Advanced Education and with the College of Medicine to see where we can make improvements and investments. The investments of eight more seats this year. If we're looking at more next year, that would be part of the budgetary process. Right now we've increased it by eight.

Again trying to also bring in international-educated health care workers from various disciplines in. We have our SIPPA program. We have a wide variety of conduits into this province for not just doctors but all health care workers.

But again we have made some very large increases in this. We do have a very good ratio as compared to other provinces. And even if we had a hundred undergrads, not all of them are going to stay in Saskatchewan. They are going to look at specializing in areas that we might not be able to offer in Saskatchewan.

So there are a lot out there, and opportunities out there. This is a highly competitive position to be in to get to these 128 seats. We want to make sure that we're getting the best possible candidates, but we also want to make sure that we're getting the best possible candidates that have every option to stay and practise in this province.

Ms. Mowat: — I do want to talk a little bit about the training-seat expansion that was announced in the budget for — well I think announced slightly before the budget as well — for 550 new training seats in 18 high-demand health occupations.

I have the chart from January 2023 in front of me that provides some detail on the number of current seats and the post-expansion seats within the 18 health occupations. I understand that some of these seats are being allotted within post-secondary institutions within the province. Some of them are being allotted in, you know, Alberta and British Columbia, especially where we don't have those training programs within our province.

There is identified on this chart . . . There's a statement that most of the new seats will be available in fall 2023. The remaining seats will be available as instructor, facility, and equipment capacity is determined and as interprovincial agreements are finalized. Which of the seats are not yet finalized? Which of the seats are not going to be available from this chart in the fall of 2023?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think that would be a question better posed to the Minister of Advanced Education, as we are

supportive of these seats, but these are being managed through his specific budget on the 550. But the opportunity to be able to thank that minister for announcing this earlier in the school year and earlier in the calendar year, so we could get the opportunity to get those seats filled. But this is something that comes out of the advanced education budget, not ours.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. Forgive me for asking about it here, but it is also part of the health human resources action plan, so the silos become confusing when you have co-announcements taking place.

One of the other announcements that was made this year was around the nursing seats, so the continuation of the 150 nursing seats that were announced last year. How many of these seats that were announced last year have now been created within nursing?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yeah, and thanks for the question. Again this is under the . . . And I know it's challenging to keep all of these areas in their own ministry. But that is actually something that comes out of the Minister of Advanced Education's budget again. Health is a beneficiary of it, but it doesn't come out of a line item within our budget.

Ms. Mowat: — Perhaps you can answer how many of these seats were filled this year. So how successful was this as a recruiting initiative to bring more nurses into the education system?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sorry. Again I don't know that, but I can tell you that we did hire over 100 nurses that came out of the grad, on the back end of the program, that we did hire 100, just over. I think it was 102 the last I heard in December. And we're looking at hiring another cohort.

Minister Hindley and myself just went and toured through a job fair at Sask Polytechnic to be able to express our thanks to them and to Dr. Larry Rosia for the recruits. I believe that he said — and I stand corrected on this — I think he said it was above 95 per cent placement of the nursing program in Saskatchewan in employment.

[22:00]

So we're receiving them more on the tail end of their training versus the beginning. That's in Advanced Education's, and I'm not trying to shuffle it off. It's just it's in their budget, and I don't have the numbers of their uptake or I would provide it to the committee. But maybe one of your colleagues could ask Minister Wyant that.

Ms. Mowat: — We will certainly follow up on some of those details. The 102 folks that you have mentioned hiring in December, how would that be reflected in a retention number in terms of . . . You know, we always want to make sure that the students we're training are the ones that end up being employed by us as well. What does that look like in terms of how many grads we had versus how many we have offered employment to?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Well again I wouldn't know how many grads were out there. We make sure that we're active in pursuing all employment opportunities. And sorry, I just have a corrected number. I said 102. It's actually 114 that we've hired as of . . . And we're still hiring. I get an update every couple of days on

that.

I don't know how many were in the class in the total cohort. The Minister of Advanced Education would be better to answer that. But we're very happy that we were able to hire 114. That's a significant number for our province and for our overall health care system to strengthen the people that have been out there working in all the facilities. A hundred at a time is very significant. That on top of what we're doing in our other areas of our human resource plan is starting to make a difference, a significant difference in our health care facilities.

Ms. Mowat: — Is 114 . . . Are you talking specifically about nurses here? Are we talking about LPNs or RNs, psych nurses?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I believe the majority of them are RNs. I'm not sure of any psychiatric nurses, but just let me check.

They're all RNs — 114 of them. And we also have, I've just been informed, a conditional 81 offers for the next cohort coming out. So we're getting close to the 200 since December that we will have hired, if all of these offers go through, and we've had very good success on this.

Ms. Mowat: — When is the next cohort? Are you referring to folks that will be graduating . . .

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — April.

Ms. Mowat: — In April. Okay. Would these folks have been eligible to receive — I don't remember what it's called anymore — the recruiting incentive for rural Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yeah, absolutely. I just met with a group of nurses up at Eastview and talked to them specifically about this, that they would be eligible. I believe there was eight or nine of them in the room that were ready for employment as of April. We said that that 30 to \$50,000, and again those are specific positions in the province. Some of them, I think there was two or three that were actually going to rural, which was great. Some of them wanted to be in the emergency room and work in that area in the cities. But they would be eligible depending on what positions that they applied for because it's not for all positions across the province.

The Chair: — That will conclude our business for today. We're going to adjourn consideration of the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Health. At this point I would like to recognize Minister Merriman for any closing comments.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Everybody's tired. Thank you very much to my officials, the committee, Ms. Mowat, Mr. Love that asked some questions before, and of course Minister Hindley, and Tracey and her team, and Andrew and his team, and the committee members. Appreciate your time and we'll be back here tomorrow night.

The Chair: — Ms. Mowat, do you have any closing comments that you'd like to offer?

Ms. Mowat: — Yes, thank you, Mr. Chair, and to the ministers and all of the officials and committee members for putting in

another late evening. And yes, we will see you again tomorrow.
Thank you.

The Chair: — Thank you, Ms. Mowat. I'd also like to thank the ministers as well as all the officials for their attendance tonight. Also like to express my appreciation to the Clerks, also to Hansard and broadcast services as well.

So at this time I'd like to find a member to move a motion of adjournment. That would be Mr. Nerlien has moved. All agreed? Carried. This committee stands adjourned until Wednesday, April 5th at 3:30 p.m.

[The committee adjourned at 22:06.]