



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Hansard Verbatim Report

No. 27 — May 3, 2023

Published under the
authority of
The Hon. Randy Weekes
Speaker



Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

Twenty-Ninth Legislature

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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Regina Pasqua

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Saskatoon Riversdale

Mr. Joe Hargrave
Prince Albert Carlton

Mr. Warren Kaeding
Melville-Saltcoats

Mr. Hugh Nerlien
Kelvington-Wadena

[The committee met at 15:29.]

The Chair: — Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to the Standing Committee on Human Services. My name is Terry Jenson and I am the committee Chair this afternoon.

Introducing the rest of the committee: Mr. Muhammad Fiaz, Mr. Marv Friesen, Mr. Joe Hargrave, Mr. Warren Kaeding, Mr. Hugh Nerlien, and substituting this afternoon for Ms. Meara Conway is Ms. Jennifer Bowes.

I would like to table the following document: HUS 22-29, Office of the Saskatchewan Information and Privacy Commissioner: Correspondence re: Bill 101, dated April 4th, 2023.

Today the committee will be considering the estimates for the Ministry of Advanced Education, followed by consideration of Bills 129 and 103. We will first consider votes 37 and 169, covering the estimates, supplementary estimates no. 2, and lending and investing activities estimates for the Ministry of Advanced Education.

[15:30]

**General Revenue Fund
Advanced Education
Vote 37**

Subvote (AE01)

The Chair: — We will now begin with consideration of vote 37, Advanced Education, central management and services, subvote (AE01).

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

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

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee. I am pleased to be here today to speak about the Ministry of Advanced Education's 2023-24 budget.

I am joined, to my right, by my deputy minister, Denise Macza, and my chief of staff, Michelle Lang who is sitting behind me. Also here from the ministry are David Boehm, assistant deputy minister; Mark Wyatt, assistant deputy minister; Corinne Barnett, executive director of corporate finance; Kirk Wosminity, executive director of student services and support services; Lindell Veitch, executive director of strategy, planning and sector engagement; Mike Pestill, executive director of sector management and relations; Jill Zimmer, executive director of international education and jurisdictional initiatives; and Cynthia Barbour, director of learning pathways.

Mr. Chair, the Ministry of Advanced Education is focused on supporting an accessible, responsive, sustainable, and accountable post-secondary sector. Our goal is to ensure that our

post-secondary institutions deliver the high-quality education that our students deserve. All partners, including government, play a role in supporting students and preparing them for rewarding careers right here in Saskatchewan.

We know that an educated, innovative workforce will help meet the needs of our residents and our economy, and it's essential to our province's future. Supporting our post-secondary students encourages growth that works for everyone. Ultimately it will help us achieve the goals in Saskatchewan's Growth Plan.

The Ministry of Advanced Education's '23-24 budget provides strong support for post-secondary students and institutions. We're investing \$764.8 million to strengthen post-secondary education, which is an increase of \$24.5 million or 3.3 per cent. This investment will expand training programs, fund priority infrastructure projects, and support students financially.

I want to emphasize that behind the many investments and initiatives in this ministry's budget, there is a clear purpose: keep our young people here at home; give them appealing opportunities to train, and then to work close to where they live; help them find and pursue their careers of choice right here in Saskatchewan.

We must pay particular attention to engaging and supporting Indigenous learners. At the same time, we also need to attract and retain bright, innovative newcomers to enrich our labour force and contribute to our economy. By doing all that, we will support a bright future for our province.

So first I'd like to talk about some key highlights in the budget. The ministry is playing a major role in supporting Saskatchewan's health human resource action plan. The plan includes four pillars: recruit, train, incentivize, and retain. And the Ministry of Advanced Education is focused on the training goals that are outlined in the plan.

This year's ministry's budget includes \$25.2 million in new funding to expand training programs for key health professionals. To help meet critical labour needs, approximately 550 seats will begin to be added this fall across 18 health training programs. This investment is over and above the 5.5 million commitment that we announced in January. It's already helping post-secondary institutions prepare for a significant expansion.

We are determined to give students more opportunities to prepare for and pursue rewarding careers in high-demand health sector occupations. In terms of numbers, the most significant seat increases are in training programs for primary care paramedics, pharmacy technicians, continuing care assistants, and licensed practical nurses. Among other priority occupations included in this expansion are mental health and addictions counsellors, clinical psychologists, and physical therapists.

The scale of this training expansion is significant and ambitious. Because it covers a wide range of health programs, it requires support from our universities and our technical schools and many of our regional colleges. And because Saskatchewan's health sector cannot work in isolation, the work also means collaboration with other provinces. Some of the new seats for Saskatchewan students will be in highly specialized programs in

Alberta and British Columbia, which are not offered here in Saskatchewan. These interprovincial agreement programs, IPAs, will help us meet the need for more specialized health professionals. They include programs for respiratory therapists, magnetic resonance imaging technologists, and occupational therapists.

I'm very pleased that seats will be reserved for Saskatchewan students in two new IPA programs starting this fall: speech-language pathology, offered through the University of Alberta; and environmental public health, offered through British Columbia Institute of Technology. Students do go out of province for this training, but all of the clinical placements for these programs will be completed here in Saskatchewan. This will help connect students to our labour market and support our efforts to convince graduates to make their permanent homes here in our province.

While negotiations with our partners in Alberta and British Columbia continue on these agreements, the Ministry of Advanced Education's budget includes up to \$5 million this year to reserve a total of 153 seats for Saskatchewan learners in 10 specialized health professions.

The '23-24 budget also includes \$10 million in operating and capital funding to continue the 150-seat expansion in nursing programs which was announced last year. This funding is over and above the health human resource training seat expansion investment. Nurses are the heart of our health system. This funding will support our nursing workforce by training more registered nurses, registered psychiatric nurses, and nurse practitioners.

An additional \$2.4 million will be used to support internationally educated health care providers to successfully transition to the Saskatchewan workforce. In particular, the funding will help cover costs associated with the delivery of Saskatchewan Polytechnic's bridging program for international students. Saskatchewan needs more internationally educated health care providers, whether already here or abroad, to help us meet residents' health care needs now and in the years to come. We encourage these international professionals to choose to live and work in this province.

Saskatchewan also needs physicians. Government has invested heavily in USask [University of Saskatchewan] College of Medicine to ensure the province has an accredited successful medical school. The College of Medicine will receive \$42.3 million from the ministry this year. This funding includes \$200,000 to begin planning for a potential physician assistants program. I will point out that this is Advanced Education's funding only. The Ministry of Health also provides significant funding to the college.

All of these investments are critical to meet our need for health professionals, ensure that our new health facilities will be appropriately staffed, and continue the post-pandemic recovery of our health system.

I want to recognize the vital role of our post-secondary education partners in addressing the health human resources needs of our province. Their commitment and level of engagement has been incredible. I sincerely thank all the institutions involved in

helping us expand training opportunities in health programs.

The Ministry of Advanced Education continues to work closely with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training on strategies to recruit, train, incentivize, and retain health care workers.

Mr. Chair, this year the budget recognizes another critical training need in our province — the rising demand for veterinary services. We are providing \$12.55 million to the Western College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan. Of that investment, \$539,000 will fund five new veterinary training seats at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine. Starting this fall there will be 25 seats available to Saskatchewan students at the college, which is up from 20 seats.

Saskatchewan Polytechnic will also receive \$340,000 in ongoing annual funding to support its two-year veterinary technologist program. The program is offered through distance delivery so it's more easily accessible to students in rural Saskatchewan. Veterinary services are in high demand here and across Canada. We continue to work with our partners in the agriculture sector to address this need with a particular focus on encouraging students to choose rural and large animal practice.

Those are some of the key areas of focus in this year's budget. Mr. Chair, I'll now move on to institutional funding details.

The '23-24 budget represents the third year of a four-year funding agreement between our government and post-secondary institutions. This agreement has provided funding predictability as requested and supported by our partner institutions.

A one-time \$60 million investment over the past two years has helped post-secondary institutions weather the challenges of the pandemic and to take concrete steps to improve their financial sustainability. Under the agreement, operating funding will remain stable over the next two years.

Institutions continue to focus on shared priorities which include generating new sources of revenue and investing in operational efficiencies that result in long-term savings; finding new, innovative ways to work with other post-secondary institutions; achieving post-secondary priorities that are set out in Saskatchewan's Growth Plan; and pandemic recovery and post-pandemic evolution of programs and operations.

Institutions have reported on results of the initiatives that are under way. Their reporting shows that our \$60 million investment has supported 134 unique initiatives to address the priority areas I've just mentioned. Post-secondary institutions are using the funding primarily for revenue-generating activities. Forty-four per cent of the projects are in this area. Projects include efforts to increase domestic and international enrolment, offering new programming like micro-credentialing, and investing in enhanced fundraising activities.

Of the remaining projects, 22 per cent focus on pandemic recovery, programming, and operational transitions; 15 per cent support expense reduction; 10 per cent support academic and administrative innovations; and 9 per cent promote collaboration among institutions. And I appreciate the willingness of all our partners to work together to ensure that we provide our students

with the best possible post-secondary education.

I would now like to provide some details on base funding for our post-secondary institutions. The budget includes \$697.4 million in operating grants for post-secondary institutions. We're providing \$431.8 million to the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina, and federated and affiliated colleges. 171.1 million will go to Saskatchewan Polytechnic, the Saskatchewan institute of technologies, and the Dumont Technical Institute.

35.6 million will be invested in our regional colleges. This is in addition to the 26.3 million they will receive this year from the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training. Included in funding for regional colleges is \$1.9 million to continue implementing a comprehensive higher education enterprise resource planning system. It will support current and future business requirements such as a student information system, and financial and human resource components to meet students' and institutional needs.

I will note that since 2007 our government has increased operating funding to our universities by 37 per cent. In relation to comparable universities, both Saskatchewan universities are in the top 50 per cent in terms of operating funding received from government, and that's according to Statistics Canada.

The roles played by our technical institutes and regional colleges in the post-secondary education sector is also vitally important and is reflected in their funding allocation for this year. Base operating grants for technical and Indigenous institutions and regional colleges remains stable this year. Additional funding of \$9.1 million will support expansion of health training programs at these institutions.

In the case of Saskatchewan Polytechnic, this funding also supports a continuation of the nursing seat expansion.

Mr. Chair, the budget also invests \$58.9 million in capital projects and preventative maintenance and renewal across the post-secondary sector. This is a 90 per cent increase in the ministry's capital budget. It reflects several priorities in addition to health training expansion: \$8.7 million for an electrical infrastructure upgrade project at the University of Saskatchewan; \$6 million for design and planning work for Saskatchewan Polytechnic's Saskatoon campus renewal project; \$4 million for renovations at the University of Saskatchewan's dental clinic; \$800,000 to expand Carlton Trail's technical learning and trades facility; and \$600,000 for a new shop at Northlands College to consolidate building operations and increase student learning space.

I'd like to specifically highlight the funding for Sask Polytechnic's Saskatoon campus renewal project. Saskatchewan Polytechnic currently delivers programming at 11 different buildings in six locations across Saskatoon. This project will consolidate most of these programs into one location which is yet to be finalized. This year's funding will advance planning and design work. The project has great potential to increase enrolment; reduce dependence on leased space; improve student access to services; and provide modern, flexible training spaces. It's a visionary and exciting project. We look forward to the completion of due diligence and to the submission of a proposal

for government approval.

Also on the capital front, Parkland College is receiving funding this year to reopen a provincial firefighting training program in Melville. I'm very pleased that starting in July, Saskatchewan residents will once again be able to train and become firefighters in their home province.

[15:45]

This is a collaborative effort and it also involves the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency and the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training.

The Ministry of Advanced Education is contributing \$210,000 in funding for fixed capital assets as part of the government's total investment of \$1.8 million.

The '23-24 budget provides strong financial support to our post-secondary students by investing \$46.6 million for student loans and scholarships. The budget will increase by 24 per cent over last year due to growing utilization of the Student Aid Fund and the Saskatchewan Advantage Scholarship.

Specifically \$34.5 million, a 28 per cent increase, will provide loans and grants to more than 20,000 students. And \$12.2 million, a 15 per cent increase, will fund a variety of scholarships. The additional funding will allow us to support over 20,000 students who are most in need. Additional support is available through an enhanced repayment assistance plan, loan forgiveness for nurses and veterinarians who practise in rural Saskatchewan. More students, Mr. Chair, will be eligible for the Saskatchewan Advantage Scholarship this year. An estimated 12,500 students will benefit. Eligible students can receive up to \$750 a year for up to four years.

And I'm proud to say that this year, we're also providing \$50,000 for new Indigenous language scholarships to the First Nations University of Canada. The scholarships will encourage and enable students and potential teachers to study Indigenous languages. Ultimately this will help revitalize, preserve, and protect Indigenous languages in Saskatchewan.

In addition 3.5 million will be provided for the Saskatchewan Innovation and Opportunity Scholarship, French language scholarships, the Queen Elizabeth II Scholarship, and the Scholarship of Honour. This range of financial aid options supports our students and helps build a diverse educated workforce for our strong and growing economy.

And I also want to note the government continues to offer the graduate retention program through the Ministry of Finance. The GRP [graduate retention program] is the only program of its kind in Canada. It provides up to \$20,000 in income tax credits over seven years to eligible post-secondary graduates who live and work in Saskatchewan after completing their education. The GRP is another way to significantly offset the costs of post-secondary education. To date, more than 81,000 graduates have claimed \$739 million in GRP benefits.

Overall in '23-24 our government will invest \$111.6 million in direct supports to students through tax credits, grants, and scholarships. Over 20,000 students will benefit from an

additional 95 million in financial aid this fiscal year. Saskatchewan student loans are interest free while students are enrolled. In '21-22 this represented \$4.4 million in benefits for students.

Our budget maintains an ongoing funding for a variety of key initiatives and strategies with respect to Indigenous supports. I'd like to mention an important area of focus which is Indigenous post-secondary education. The Ministry of Advanced Education funds numerous projects and initiatives that support Indigenous students' success.

In '23-24 the ministry is providing 19.3 million in funding for Indigenous post-secondary education. This includes funding to the First Nations University of Canada, the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, the Gabriel Dumont Institute, the Dumont Technical Institute, Northlands College, and Saskatchewan Polytechnic. Many of their programs support Indigenous students in post-secondary education and their entry into the labour market.

One example, Mr. Chair, is the Dene teacher education program in La Loche and the Clearwater River Dene Nation. Newly graduated DTEP [Dene teacher education program] teachers are able to instruct their students in the Dene language as part of the K to 12 [kindergarten to grade 12] curriculum. This in turn is expected to increase student participation and graduation rates at both the elementary and secondary levels in northern Saskatchewan. Mr. Chair, we're providing \$255,000 over four years to the First Nations University of Canada to deliver the DTEP program in the North.

Another initiative funded in our budget is the Mitacs program. This creates opportunities for students while helping to meet the needs of employers. The '23-24 budget includes \$1.15 million for Mitacs's research internships which gives students the opportunity to excel and become champions of innovation. Mitacs's funding also includes support for an Indigenous pathways initiative. It provides students with research and developmental skills they can apply through employment in Saskatchewan businesses.

The number of Indigenous students in post-secondary education and their success rates are increasing. So, Mr. Chair, we're on the right track. Over the past five years, Indigenous enrolment is up 35 per cent in diploma programs and 25 per cent in bachelor degree programs. And we know that since 2007 the number of Indigenous people with post-secondary credentials has doubled from 22,000 to more than 44,000. However we recognize there is much more work to do on addressing the educational attainment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and we'll continue to foster an inclusive post-secondary sector and seek new ways to increase the enrolment and educational attainment of Indigenous students.

Our government is pleased to partner with Heritage Canada to support French language education at three institutions in the province: La Cité, le Bac at the University of Regina, and Collège Mathieu in Gravelbourg. This is done through the Canada-Saskatchewan agreement on minority language education and the second official languages instruction. The '23-24 budget also includes \$7.9 million for French language programming, which is an increase of \$5 million, and it will be offset by revenue from

the federal government. In addition to regular annual funding, these institutions will receive complementary funding for project-based initiatives and infrastructure projects. Funding is also provided for student bursaries.

Saskatchewan's international engagement strategy is another key area of focus for the ministry that supports Saskatchewan's Growth Plan. We continue to advance our post-secondary international education strategy, which was launched in 2021. It provides a road map to enhance Saskatchewan's international profile, attract international students and researchers, and build capacity to support students once they arrive. This budget continues to support key initiatives within that strategy, the Saskatchewan agent training program, the student ambassador program, and the international practitioner program. The agent training and practitioner programs were the first of their kind in Canada, demonstrating Saskatchewan's leadership in this area.

In '23-24 our government will continue to support these programs and help us highlight Saskatchewan as a post-secondary destination of choice for international students. Our approach will increase our connections with higher education institutions around the world. It will help us develop high-quality research partnerships, which are key drivers in innovation and trade. Through this work, we're positioning Saskatchewan as a leader in food and energy security and biomedical science, and we are building Saskatchewan's further brand by attracting more students to learn, work, and live in this great province.

Mr. Chair, in closing I'd like to acknowledge and thank our partners across the post-secondary sector for their commitment to ensuring our students receive high-quality education. Our government is equally committed to ensuring that students have access to exceptional training programs and appealing employment opportunities right here at home once they graduate.

Our commitment is clear in our financial support for this sector. Saskatchewan has invested \$13.4 billion in post-secondary education and student support since 2007. We understand that post-secondary education is a key to a strong and growing economy. We will continue to focus on actions that meet the needs of students, build a stronger workforce, and help us reach our goal — growth that works for everyone.

So thank you for your time, Mr. Chair, and to the committee, and I look forward to answering any questions that the committee has.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. I'll open up the floor to questions. And I recognize Ms. Bowes.

Ms. Bowes: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Welcome to the minister and to his officials here this afternoon. I am going to at some point be turning over the floor to my colleague the opposition critic for Health to ask some detailed questions around the health profession training seats, but for now I'll start off with my questions until she arrives later on.

So to begin, Minister, starting off with the ministry's multi-year funding agreement with post-secondary institutions, which began in '21-22, and as you mentioned, is in year three of four. Beyond predictable funding — which certainly has been recognized, and by the opposition as well, as something that's desirable for the

sector — beyond predictable funding, what was the ministry's intention with this agreement?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I'll start and ask one of my officials to kind of add some commentary to this. But essentially the idea of the agreement was to provide stable and predictable funding to the sector. It provided, as I mentioned in my notes, \$60 million over the first two years to allow institutions to create some initiatives within the sector, which will give them further stability as we move forward.

So that was the primary reason for doing it. Certainly, as you mentioned, predictable and stable funding was important to the sector and it was enthusiastically supported by the sector. But giving them opportunities to create some opportunities within their institutions to ensure stable funding as they went forward. And certainly there's some challenges within the post-secondary sector in terms of funding, and so creating some opportunities within the sector to ensure its stable funding base for delivery of the programs that they have was the key to the program's intent at the beginning.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thanks. And that 60 million that you've referred to over the first two years, what sort of opportunities to create stability was the ministry looking to grant the institutions?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Are you asking for some of the things that the institutions did with the money?

Ms. Bowes: — I'm wondering if there was any specific direction from the ministry around how those dollars were used.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Post-secondary, especially the universities, are self-governing institutions. So we provide the funding to the institutions, and they make their decisions in the best interest of their students and their programming needs. So there was never any direct directives given to the universities with respect to how they can spend their money. Certainly the intent of the agreement was to make sure there was . . . created some opportunities for success in the future, but no direct conversations with the universities.

The only other thing, and I've mentioned this in the House on a number of occasions, but the agreement does provide for caps on tuition. That was something that was important to the government to make sure that students could continue to afford the education which they get from our institutions.

Ms. Bowes: — Yeah, thanks. Then I guess around those caps on tuition hikes, certainly I understand there are caps for domestic students, but you know, as we know there were no caps included for international students. And so how did the government, you know, hope to provide any sort of predictability for the many international students who come to our province to seek opportunities, to seek a high-quality education? Why was that exclusion included under the multi-year funding agreement?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I might just kind of make a comment with respect to the first question that you gave. Certainly when it came to the multi-year funding agreement, there's some general principles that were involved with respect to that agreement in terms of some conversations that were had around COVID recovery: revenue generation, sector collaboration, and some

strategic initiatives in the growth plan. Certainly no specific direction that was given to the institutions in any one of those areas, but that was kind of the general crux of the agreement.

In terms of international students, I think the thinking within the sector is that international students would be driven more by providing the programming rather than prospective tuition costs, so ensuring that we're making available to international students the kind of programming that they want.

I might also add that our international student tuition is among some of the lowest in the country when it comes to a comparative between post-secondary institutions. But certainly ensuring that we're providing the programming that international students are looking for was the priority for the institutions.

Ms. Bowes: — Well my understanding is that, you know, international students can pay up to three to four times the amount that domestic students can pay in our province. So when we're looking at that comparator, it's a major point of contention for international students we've seen. Especially at the U of R [University of Regina] campus, international students there have been raising awareness and lobbying and rallying around a freeze for international tuitions. And is that something that has been contemplated by your ministry, is a freeze to those fees?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well we don't direct the tuition rates or the tuition rates to any of our post-secondary institutions, save for the cap that's in the agreement. But I might again comment that we have some of the lowest international tuition rates in the country.

[16:00]

So that would be the answer to the question, I think.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So I mean, I know you've spoken about, you know, undertaking conversations around a new MOU [memorandum of understanding] once the current one has expired. And I understand that's not something that's currently contained in the MOU, but am I correct to understand then that you will not be, for instance, opening up that MOU to address any sort of tuition caps for international students in our province?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well I'm not going to comment on . . . We've just started this conversation around what this new funding agreement has looked like, so I'm not going to put any restrictions on any conversations that are going to happen between the government and our post-secondary sector. So I won't commit to it. But certainly all these things play into a conversation when we're looking at what a new funding agreement will look like.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thanks. And so then as well with the current MOU, there will be no consideration to opening that up to implement any sort of caps for international student tuition?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well we're not looking at the present time of opening up the agreement. We have a four-year agreement with the institutions. I have said on a number of occasions that we're interested in exploring what a new four-year funding agreement will look like. Those conversations are currently ongoing within the ministry, and there will be an engagement

with our sector partners starting relatively quickly. We thought it was important to start that conversation now as opposed to waiting until the fourth year of the agreement.

So I'm not going to predict, you know, what the nature of those conversations will be, how the agreement is going to unfold. But I can tell you that the institutions are very excited about sitting down and having a conversation with government about what the future looks like for post-secondary training.

As I've mentioned before, I mean this was a historic four-year funding agreement. The institutions were very excited about having predictability and stability in their funding to be able to make long-term decisions in terms of how they fund their programs, how they support their students. And so in my initial conversations with the leadership at post-secondary institutions, they are very excited about sitting down with the ministry and talking about how we move forward from here.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. I understand that as a part of that multi-year funding agreement, that all post-secondary institutions were required to sign a nondisclosure agreement in order to receive funding. Is this true? And if so, why was this a requirement?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Certainly the conversations that we're having with the post-secondary sector were pre-budget, and obviously in having conversations around what the budget might look like, those were very sensitive things. And so there was an agreement that none of that would be disclosed pre-budget when the agreement was first entered into. But the agreement is a public document, and certainly the fact that those negotiations were happening pre-budget necessitated the need for confidentiality.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Well I also understand that the president or CEO [chief executive officer] of each institution together with one negotiator signed those NDAs [nondisclosure agreement], and that those NDAs included a provision requiring that they neither discuss nor disclose the terms of the agreement with other individuals in the institutions, including their own boards.

I understand that only after agreement was reached with the institutions' senior executive and agreed to by treasury board and the Premier, only then was the agreement presented to the boards of the institutions. Would you say this an accurate depiction of events?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Certainly the conversations that happened were all, as I mentioned before, confidential because they were all pre-budget. Certainly there was no restrictions on having conversations with members of the board of directors or the board of governors, who ultimately are responsible for the ongoing operations of the institution and who approved the agreement.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, because it's my understanding that those agreements that were signed by the institutions were signed before there was any presentation to the boards of the institutions. Is that correct?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Yes, that's correct, but the ultimate agreement would have been taken to the board of governors, who ultimately had the responsibility for endorsing the terms of the

agreement. So reach an agreement in principle with those that are negotiating on behalf of the university, which is the administration and ultimately the board of governors, who have the ultimate authority with respect to approving any agreements that are entered into between the university and the government, or any other institution for that matter.

Ms. Bowes: — So when you say agreement in principle, were the agreements not already signed prior to presentation to the board?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — They may well have been signed, but certainly there's no authority to bind the university without approval of the board of governors.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Because according to information that I've been provided with, there were really no negotiations necessarily to speak of, and that the agreements were signed, you could suggest, under duress. The message being, you know, kind of take this or you're going to be facing big cuts. Can you speak to the accuracy of that?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I would state unequivocally that there was no pressure put on the institutions with respect to signing an agreement. The fact that they were provided with \$60 million in funding, I think, is a pretty significant example of the good faith in the government to make sure that these institutions are sustainable going forward.

But again, any agreement that gets signed by the administration, with respect to whether it's the government or any other one, requires the approval of the board of governors. And so I would say unequivocally, there was no undue influence placed on any member of the administration or the board of governors with respect to these agreements. All universities and the post-secondary sector were very excited about having the stability of a four-year funding agreement and were all enthusiastic supporters of it.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So you know, given what has been described and confirmed here in terms of the process to sign off on these agreements, does the minister believe that this undermines board autonomy?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Not at all. Boards of governors have the ultimate authority for endorsing or rejecting anything that the administration signs. And so the fact that the university negotiated an agreement with the government, it was up to the board of governors to either accept or reject that agreement. And as I said, they were enthusiastic supporters of the agreement when it was negotiated and was presented to the board of governors.

Ms. Bowes: — And is the minister willing to speak to, you know, the contents of those NDAs and the necessity of those NDAs?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well I think I've said that it was important to have confidentiality as we're leading through a budget deliberation. So it's important to maintain the confidentiality of the conversations, especially when it comes to the deliberations around budget. But again, this is a public document. You can read it. I'm sure you probably have. The government or the university has nothing to hide with respect to the negotiations or the

agreement itself.

Ms. Bowes: — Yes, I understand that the document is now public. Of course I've seen it. So you know, in terms of my questions, not sure I got an answer fully to that last one. Like, will you speak to the contents of those NDAs that were required to be signed by the institutions?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I mean I can't speak to the contents of the document. I don't have it in front of me. If you have a specific concern about an element in the agreement, if you have a copy of it, I'm certainly happy to answer that. But I don't have a copy of the agreement so I can't speak to the contents.

What I can say is that it's not uncommon to sign nondisclosure agreements in the context of negotiations, especially when it involves pre-budgetary discussions. And we often do that.

Ms. Bowes: — So then will you agree to provide a copy of that NDA to committee?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I'll have to take the question under advisement. I don't have a copy of it, and I'm not sure that one's available to the ministry. But we will give some consideration to answering the question in due course.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And when can I expect an answer on that front?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I'll have some conversations with my ministry officials immediately after this meeting.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So again with the multi-year funding agreement, when we take a closer look at the government's agreement with post-secondary institutions, we can see that in total the base funding for post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan is falling by 13.7 per cent over the agreement's four-year span. And so if you compare the tuition rate increases, it is almost a per-cent-for-per-cent substitution.

So the government funding reductions are being replaced with tuition hikes, which are being offloaded onto students and their families. And so as the minister, how are you able to defend this agreement as being acceptable, never mind historic as you have described it numerous times before?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I'll start by saying our tuition rates are generally in line with tuition rates across the country. If your question is the reduction in funding because of the \$60 million that happened in the first two years, as I mentioned, that \$60 million was provided so that the institutions could take some initiatives to ensure stable funding and stable operations over the next number of years.

So it was always understood that the \$60 million would be provided in the first year so as to allow the institutions to do things that were going to be providing further stability for its funding and the reduction to the base. So if you're saying that, well, funding's been reduced because the \$60 million or the \$30 million in the first two years isn't there, the fact of the matter is that the institutions were accepting the \$60 million so that they could provide some initiatives and do some things within their institution to make sure that there was stability going forward.

Ms. Bowes: — No, it's not in reference to the 60 million. It's in reference to funding levels prior to the multi-year funding agreement. And when taking into account inflation, which we've seen has been a major factor across the board here in Saskatchewan. And certainly post-secondary institutions have not been immune to those inflationary pressures, so that's where we are coming up with that 13.7 per cent reduction.

And I guess building on that, you know, that has been in part the basis for the opposition's call for your ministry to open up that multi-year funding agreement, which can be done under the terms of the agreement by mutual consent of the parties, in order to account for those inflationary pressures and to adjust those zero per cent increases that we see in the current year, year three, and also it will be occurring in year four of the agreement.

[16:15]

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well let me just say this. The fact that we are opening up or starting the conversations a year earlier, I think it's ... We certainly recognize that there has been some challenges at our post-secondary institutions, particularly around inflation. And that was one of the reasons that I wanted to begin the conversations early with respect to what a new funding agreement will look like.

I'm not going to make any commitments on when that agreement will be, what the terms of that agreement is going to be, how it's going to be moved forward. But certainly the government recognizes the fact that there have been some pressures on our institutions which need to be addressed. And that's one of the reasons why we're starting these conversations very early with respect to what a new agreement will look like.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, and I mean I think that's good that you have initiated those conversations. But what do conversations about an agreement which may be signed, you know, two years from now, have to do with the inflationary pressures that institutions are facing today with zero per cent increases?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well those are all part of the conversations, right. And then that's why we're starting them early. What the outcome of those conversations will be, in terms of what a new agreement looks, whether it's in two years, whether it's in one year, I'm not going to comment on that. But the fact of the matter is that the government has recognized the need for further conversations in this sector to make sure that we're providing the appropriate supports to our post-secondary institutions so that they can provide the support that they need to the students that they are responsible for.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So I mean, I'm taking it from your answers that you have no intention of opening up that agreement to address the zero per cent increases in the final two years of this present agreement.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well let me just say to that, we'll just say government has made no commitments in that regard. So all I'll say is the fact that we've started to initiate these conversations, I think, is indicative of the government's understanding of where we need to go in terms of funding post-secondary education.

Ms. Bowes: — And have the leaders from institutions been in

contact with you? Have they described to you the inflationary pressures that they are experiencing as a result of those zero per cent increases, which were negotiated prior to, you know, an inflationary crisis taking place?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well there's certainly ongoing conversations between ministry officials and leadership at our post-secondary institutions. I've had the opportunity to spend a great number of hours with the leadership at our three major institutions to talk about some of the challenges. And that was part of those conversations which really led to the discussion about, talking about what the future funding of post-secondary education looks like in the context of a funding agreement.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So you know, speaking of inflationary pressures and, you know, measures that have been taken through other ministries under your government, such as the Ministry of Education and K to 12, there were some dollars for inflationary pressures that were provided. And so I guess then, my question is why would the same measures not be taken through the Ministry of Advanced Education? If it's deemed to be appropriate for our K to 12 system, why not for our post-secondary system?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — As I mentioned in my last answer, I have spent many, many hours with the leaders of our three large institutions, none of whom have asked for interim funding.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So I note from the budget that there has been a substantial decrease in funding to universities as well as federated and affiliated colleges. And so I'd like to know how the minister justifies this reduction.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — There's a twenty-four-and-a-half-million-dollar increase in our budget from last year. And I think I went through my notes — I can go through them again — to talk about what . . . the commitments that the government has made to our post-secondary institutions, but there's a number of key supports that have been given to the institutions. So an additional \$24.5 million in funding will help our institutions deliver the programming which we expect them to deliver.

So perhaps you can give me a little bit of guidance in terms of your comments with respect to the budgetary reduction.

Ms. Bowes: — Yeah, so I mean . . .

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Because the government has given more money this year.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, so I mean, of course we all understand that there's different sort of buckets of spending. And yes, there have been, you know, some investments in terms of capital, student supports. But again, when we're talking about, you know, the operating grants, we're looking at . . . So if you see a zero per cent increase and, I mean, if you're taking inflation into account, that actually amounts to a cut. That's the reality of the situation.

And so I want to know, like, whether you acknowledge that that represents a cut to our universities and institutions, including federated and affiliated colleges, and how you justify the institutions effectively taking cuts as a result of the budget.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — To the member, I justify it by the fact that we've signed a four-year funding agreement with the institutions. The institutions knew what they were getting into when they signed it. We've had no complaints about the funding agreement. I could read into the record a number of quotes from leaders of our post-secondary institutions, both the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina, and Sask Polytechnic about this government's commitment to post-secondary education, none of whom have come to me and said they look for interim funding in this year's budget.

So I think I'll answer the question simply by saying, we've entered into a funding agreement, the details of which certainly are known, were known to the institutions when they signed it. I've already commented that we recognize that there's some challenges that have been faced by the institutions, and that's one of the reasons why we want to have a conversation about what a new funding agreement looks like and the elements of that funding agreement. And those conversations will be starting relatively quickly.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So you know, you indicated in your last response here that the institutions knew what they were getting into, but clearly they did not. At the start of that agreement when it was initially signed by the institutions, they did not know and none of us knew the extent of the inflationary pressures that would be faced across our province, including at the institutions. They're certainly not immune to those pressures.

And so, you know, to say that they knew what they were getting into, they willingly signed, no issues. I mean we saw, for instance, the president of the University of Regina Faculty Association come here to the legislature and say very clearly that . . . very clearly requesting a reconsideration of the terms of that MOU in terms of funding and saying, yes, there are pressures, and yes, there are issues that are extremely problematic, certainly for that institution but for all institutions. Big pressures.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well the president of the University of Regina has not come to me and asked me to reopen this agreement, and that's who I deal with. So he hasn't asked for any interim funding. But what I have said to him, and I've said this a number of times, including today, we're certainly willing to have a conversation with our post-secondary sectors to make sure that we're meeting their needs. And this will all be part of the conversations which my ministry staff will be having with the leadership of our institutions.

But no leader of any of the post-secondary institutions, whether it's the University of Saskatchewan, Regina, or Sask Polytechnic has come to me and asked for interim funding either before the budget or after the budget.

Ms. Bowes: — And so, Minister, what do you believe the financial implications will be for the universities as a result of this decrease in funding? What do you think will be the implications financially?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I mean I think you really have to talk to the institutions about that. You know, we've seen the budgets. We've seen the commentary that's been brought forward by the University of Regina. And I'll read this quote in. I mean the University of Regina has said that there'll be no academic

programs being eliminated due to budget pressures, so the impact on the students and their academic experience will be minimal while continuing to provide all the supports that they typically provide to students.

So I think really you're going to have to have that question to the leadership of the institutions. But again I'll repeat my answer. We've had no requests from leadership at any of our post-secondary institutions for increased funding outside the memorandum of understanding.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So yeah, certainly, you know, we will have those discussions with leadership from institutions. But I would assume that you as well, as the minister, would be assessing those financial implications in your role.

I'd like to know what advice does the minister have for our universities in terms of managing these funding reductions? What advice are you giving to them?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well I don't give them any advice. I don't give them any advice. The universities are self-governing institutions. They make their own decisions based on the funding that's provided by the government and their other sources of income. I mentioned in my opening comments that there are a number of initiatives that the universities are taking to increase the revenue generation at their institutions.

But those conversations are all conversations that . . . have with the universities. They will make their own decisions based on their budget, based on priorities, based on efficiencies that the leaderships of the institutions think are necessary to continue to provide the services to the students that they believe are important, not just to the university but to the province and to the growth of this province and our economy.

Ms. Bowes: — So I think we are already starting to see the financial implications. We're seeing it in terms of tuition hikes. We saw it just recently, 4 per cent, the maximum 4 per cent in tuition hikes at the U of S [University of Saskatchewan] followed by the maximum 4 per cent of tuition hikes at the U of R. So you know, again it's just pointing to the fact that this reduction in funding, this lack of funding is being borne by students and their families through ever more tuition hikes in our province.

And so I want to know, how do you feel that it's acceptable for university students and their families to be bearing the burden of your government's underfunding of our institutions?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I mentioned in my opening comments that in terms of university tuition, we're, as a percentage of the revenue of our institutions, pretty much about the middle of the pack. I do want to emphasize the fact that we do provide through our institutions a significant level of student support, whether that's through the graduate retention program, whether that's through student loans, student loan forgiveness, in a number of areas.

So I think it's fair to say that the government, through the Ministry of Advanced Education, is cognizant of some of the challenges which students encounter. That's why we have the programs that we do. That's why we've had significant increases to our student supports over the last number of years, including

some significant support and additions to our Student Aid Fund this last year.

So my suggestion to you is that you can't take one in isolation of the other. You have to look at the whole picture. And the student loan supports that we provide are significant for students to be able to achieve their potential through post-secondary education.

Ms. Bowes: — So, Minister, do you believe the universities will be able to sustain university operations without significant disruption to the quality of programs, education, and services that are provided to students?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I do. I have great confidence in the administration of the universities and their boards of governors to continue to provide the high quality of education that we need them to provide. As I've said before, we'll continue to work with our post-secondary sector to make sure that we're providing the proper level of support. And I think it's indicative of the government's level of support for post-secondary that we're starting to have conversations around what a new funding agreement will look like.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, so let's take an example here. Let's take a look at the University of Regina. We understand . . . I mean it's very clear that the U of R is particularly challenged at this time. In fact just this week I've been informed that the U of R has begun laying off non-academic staff with at least 17 out-of-scope layoffs and two in-scope layoffs that I'm aware of. There may be more. We're hearing of academic layoffs forthcoming also as well as significant vacancy management occurring across the institutions.

So will the minister speak to these specific pressures that the U of R is clearly facing and what he anticipates as a result of these pressures?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — This is a question properly put to the president of the university. In his press release this week — and I've read part of that release — he's not anticipating any academic programs will be eliminated due to budget cuts. So I fully expect the universities to be operating within the budgetary constraints and the operating grants that we give them. I fully expect them to find efficiencies in the delivery of their programming. But I also fully expect, and I have great confidence in the leadership at the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan, to ensure that they continue to provide the high-quality programming that we expect them to do.

[16:30]

But again, the question really needs to be put to the University of Regina. I think these are independent organizations. They will make the decisions that they need to make within the budgetary provisions, within the grant that we provide to the institutions to make sure that they continue to provide the high quality of education. Again I don't fault anyone for looking at efficiencies to try to determine whether they can be better and more efficient in the delivery of the programs that they're required to deliver.

But again, the university has said that there'll be no academic programs being eliminated, and they've gone on to say that they'll continue to provide strong student supports, such as

student wellness, counselling services, the Centre for Experiential and Service Learning, and investments into credit transfer programming. And I think we can all be thankful for the fact that they're going to continue to provide those services and the high quality of education that we expect them to deliver.

Ms. Bowes: — So in your view, are layoffs acceptable ways to achieve efficiencies at the institutions? And how will this not impact student education?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I leave these decisions to the universities. I don't make the decisions with respect to staffing. I don't make decisions with respect to programming. I don't make any of the decisions in respect of the operations of the institution. But I believe, and I have said before on many occasions, I have great confidence in the leadership of the University of Regina and our other post-secondary institutions to do what they need to do to make sure that they continue to provide the high-quality program that we expect from them.

The University of Regina decides that they need to do some things in order to create more efficiencies with respect to the delivery of the programming at the university. I fully expect them to do that. But I don't tell them to do that. These are all decisions that they make in the best interests of their institution.

The Chair: — Ms. Bowes.

Ms. Bowes: — Yes.

The Chair: — I'm just going to interject here as Chair. I provide plenty of leeway in questioning, but we're going round and round with the same questions. So I would ask you to move on to your next set, please.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So on that note, you know, just to your response there, certainly I understand that you don't make those decisions as minister. But I mean, I would hope that you understand that the level of funding provided by your government forces the hand of the institutions to be forced into making decisions like that.

So moving on to my next set of questions. Will the government be providing emergency funding to the U of R as has been called for by both the University of Regina Faculty Association and the opposition?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well as I've said before, the leadership of the University of Regina has not asked for any interim funding. We will be respectful of the memorandum of understanding as we expect all the institutions who are subject to that memorandum of understanding to be respectful of it.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And, Minister, what is your vision overall for the universities going forward?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well I'm not really sure how to answer that. I mean we expect our institutions to provide high-quality education. They are critical to the growth of this province. They are critical to the economy and the future of Saskatchewan. We want our students to study here. We want them to stay here. We want them to work and raise a family.

So my expectations of our post-secondary institutions is to continue to provide the same quality of service, of education, that they have provided in the past, a service and an education which I'm very, very proud of in terms of the leadership at the institutions and the quality of the education. They have an international reputation with respect to a lot of the programming that they deliver, and I fully expect that that will continue.

Ms. Bowes: — And so, you know, stemming from that, is it part of your government's long-term vision to amalgamate the University of Regina with the University of Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — No.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So if the answer is no, you know, if we're looking at . . .

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Let me just qualify that. I mean, there's certainly a lot of co-operation going on between our institutions, and that was one of the pillars in the memorandum of understanding. I have been very clear with the leadership of our institutions that we want more collaboration between our institutions with respect to the delivery of programming to ensure that we're as efficient as possible when it comes to delivery of that programming. But the unequivocal answer with respect to the merging of the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan is no.

The Chair: — Ms. Bowes, I'm just going to interject one more time. We're dealing with estimates, not future whatever you have in mind. So I'll just ask you to stick to the estimates as they are presented in the budget, and please proceed.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, so in terms of this budget and the implications that it has for the institutions, specific to U of R and to this year's budget, limited to that . . . You know, looking at the cuts that are coming down the line, you know, the institution has said that they are looking to achieve 5 per cent cuts across the board at that institution. So I'm predicting, you know, three or four more years of this kind of underfunding that we're seeing at the U of R, and I don't know that the institution will be able to continue on.

So you know, you'd said, again in terms of the funding levels and the impact that that has on this institution in particular, you had said that, you know, it's not your long-term vision to amalgamate. Is it the vision to amalgamate programs, say, between the U of R and the U of S?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — As I've mentioned before, I don't make programming decisions. Certainly in my time as the minister, I've encouraged more co-operation between our institutions to the extent that that ensures more efficient delivery of programs. I certainly leave this to the leadership at the institutions to discuss how best programs can be delivered.

If there are opportunities for University of Regina programs to be delivered in Saskatoon, which there are, we would encourage that if that is in the best interests of the institution and the students that they serve. University of Saskatchewan programs in Regina, and we encourage that because if that's in the best interests of the delivery of programming at our post-secondary institutions, I'd like to see that happen. I'd like to see more co-operation between

our technical institutes and our universities, and there's a lot of that. And if you go back to the health human resources action plan, that's a collaboration of all three institutions to make sure that we can provide the training and the support to support that plan.

So I'm very, very fortunate to have the leadership at the institutions that I do have. We're at a very, very good spot when it comes to that leadership, and I would continue to encourage them to work together to find the best ways to deliver programs, whether that's at the University of Regina, the University of Saskatchewan, or Sask Polytechnic, or any of the regional colleges.

Ms. Bowes: — So, Minister, in advance of this budget, both University of Saskatchewan students' association and University of Regina students' association had lobbied you directly as the minister for a number of things. One was the elimination of interest on Saskatchewan student loans as was done with federal student loans. And so I'd like to know why this measure was not undertaken in the budget.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — As you know, Saskatchewan student loans are interest free while students are in study and for six months following their graduation. We did not support that the federal government decided that they were going to remove interest from student loans. We did not follow suit. We provide a significant amount of financial support to students, whether that's through loan forgiveness, whether that's through a number of other programs. And so it was our view at the time, and continues to be, that we will not be removing the interest from student loans as the federal government did, and in line with a number of other provinces that have not done that.

Ms. Bowes: — So it would seem to me that this would be a very common-sense, practical cost-of-living measure that your government could be taking, you know, of which we saw very little in the budget overall. And so I'd like to know, did your ministry assess what the cost of implementing this recommendation would be?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well let me just say that we have a number of programs to assist with respect to the repayment of student loans. We have our repayment assistance plan which makes repayment more affordable for about 4,000 Saskatchewan students. We've increased the zero-payment threshold for single borrowers from 25 to \$40,000. And we've aligned repayment income thresholds for larger thresholds with the Canada student loan grant. So taking into account a number of things that we have done in terms of reducing monthly student loan payments from 20 per cent to 10 has been, I think, significant in allowing students to afford the repayment of their student loans.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Well obviously I find it quite unfortunate that, you know, this wouldn't be a measure that would be considered, because you know, not only are students being made to bear the burden of increased tuition hikes due to underfunding, but then they are also being made to bear the expense of increased interest on, you know, those hikes in tuition rates as well, which . . . So again, I mean, I'd like to know from your ministry. I would assume the numbers have been calculated as to what that cost would represent.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I don't have that number in front of me, but I could tell you that in terms of student loan repayment, we do have our graduate retention program. You've heard me speak about this. The number of people that have received that, over 81,000 students who get the tax credit every year. And so that tends to be, I think, a significant offset to any interest that they would be paying on student loans.

So that's the only program of its kind in the country. And for those that can't afford to repay their student loans, there are a number of loan forgiveness programs that the government has to assist those students.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So fair enough if you don't have that number in front of you. Will your ministry commit to getting us that number?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We'll endeavour to try to find that for you.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So I mean you're speaking, you know, and you've mentioned in your opening remarks and just now, the graduate retention program which, as you say, one of its kind. My understanding is that other jurisdictions, you know, used to have similar programs and that all other jurisdictions who had a similar program actually abandoned it because they found it was not effective. Is that your understanding?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I'm not familiar with any other provinces or jurisdictions that had a similar program.

Ms. Bowes: — And are your officials able to speak to that?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I can't speak to any other jurisdiction. I understand there are a couple of jurisdictions that had them that got rid of them. I don't know what the details of those programs are. But I am aware of the fact that in student surveys that have been done in Saskatchewan this is a very, very popular program for us to be able to provide to students so that they can have that tax deduction in the years following their graduation from university.

Ms. Bowes: — Yeah, well I'm sure it is popular, but popular does not equal effective. And as I understand it, we have some of the lowest rates of graduate retention across Canada. So you know, you spoke to the total number of dollars that have been invested in the graduate retention program over the seven years it's been in place. You spoke to the number of students who have accessed that program.

But in terms of measuring that program's effectiveness, I'd like to know if that work has been done by your ministry and specifically, you know, what are the . . . for instance, one-year retention rates on graduates in Saskatchewan.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I'm aware that in the graduate student surveys one of the reasons that a number of students stayed was the graduate retention program. I can't comment on the rate of retention. I would be surprised to hear that Saskatchewan had the lowest rate of student retention. I'm not sure where you got those numbers from.

[16:45]

But certainly one of the key factors in building our programs and funding post-secondary education is to ensure that students stay and work here in Saskatchewan, and the student retention, that student retention program is a key element of that.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, so is that something that your ministry tracks, retention rates for graduates?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I don't have any exact numbers. I can certainly give you some percentages with respect to certain programming, but I don't have an overall number of graduate . . . The grad survey is a voluntary survey, right, and so that's where we get a lot of our numbers. But I do have some graduation rates and some retention numbers from a number of our programs. Certainly nothing that comes close to the number of programs that are delivered by the university, but I can undertake to try to get you some numbers together. I'm happy to do that.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Yeah, I mean based on the information we were able to find through Stats Canada, outside the Maritimes, Saskatchewan has the lowest rates of graduate retention after both one year and after five years following graduation. So you know, in addition we've seen statistics again by Stats Canada saying that after five years of graduation, 53 per cent of international students in Saskatchewan leave the province.

So it would appear quite clearly to me that this program is not serving its intended purpose. And you know, while it may be a popular program, surely I, you know, we would assume, I'm sure taxpayers would assume that the government would be undertaking program evaluation to, you know, assess the efficacy of these programs that they are providing beyond just, you know, touting the numbers of people who have accessed it and how much has been paid out. So you know, has there been any assessment by your government of this program in terms of its efficacy?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Are you suggesting that we eliminate the program? Is it your suggestion that we eliminate the program? Because from our perspective and from the graduate surveys that we do, it's a very popular program ensuring that there's further retention of people who want to work and live in Saskatchewan.

I'm just looking at some numbers. For instance in our registered psychiatric nursing diploma program, 91 per cent grad retention rates; a number of these, pharmacy technicians, 90 per cent; 100 per cent for licensed practical nurses.

So I'm not sure that knowing what the foundation of the numbers from Statistics Canada are, I'm not sure I can really comment on that. I think we have a pretty good retention rate of graduates that come from the University of Saskatchewan and our post-secondary institutions, and I think the graduate retention program is a key factor in that.

Ms. Bowes: — So do you think the lowest graduate retention rates in Canada behind the Maritimes are pretty good?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I'm not acknowledging that that's in fact a fact.

Ms. Bowes: — Well are your officials able to confirm those numbers? I mean it's all available online by Stats Canada.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I kind of find this a little interesting. I mean in one respect you want us to add supports to the post-secondary institutions, and now you want us to remove one. I can tell you that with respect to international students, part of our international engagement strategy is not just to bring students here who want to stay and work in Saskatchewan, but educating students who are going to go back to their home countries to provide the good quality support that their people need in their countries.

And so to suggest that our graduate retention rate with respect to international students is low, there's an effect here. We want students to come and work and live in Saskatchewan and be trained here, but we're also not discouraging them from going back to the countries that they came from to provide the necessary supports to the people in their home countries. And so that's all part of our international engagement strategy.

Ms. Bowes: — So a few more questions. I mean I didn't receive a response of, you know, whether your officials are able to confirm those numbers, but I'm pretty confident in them myself, and maybe you can have a look at them as minister later on.

I'd like to know, you know, you listed a number of fields of study and good retention rates which is great to hear. So I guess then my question is, where are we losing grads? What programs, you know, of study, what fields of study are we most predominantly losing our graduates from?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — So I'm just looking at a graph of retention rates. So it looked from looking at the chart — and I can provide you with a copy of the chart that I just looked at — that our international and domestic retention rates were pretty significant. And they were at par with a number of Western provinces and certainly toward the higher end, so I'm not sure where you get your numbers from. But we'll certainly provide that graph to you showing that our retention rates are pretty good, not just with respect to domestic students, but international students as well.

Ms. Bowes: — Well I'll very much look forward to reviewing that, yes. As I mentioned, you know, we're getting our numbers from Stats Canada. So you know, again I don't think I received an answer in terms of whether your ministry has actually performed any form of evaluation of the efficacy of the graduate retention program beyond saying that, you know, you've assessed it through a survey as being a popular program. But I take it that the answer then is no.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — You shouldn't assume that. The fact is that once you look at this graph — and I'm sorry I don't have it in front of me — you'll see the retention rates are pretty significant especially with respect to the Western Canadian provinces. And so I think when you look at that . . . And our view is, my personal view is the graduate retention program is a key factor in ensuring that we retain students in this province once they graduate. So you shouldn't assume that “no” was an answer to that.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, well then I would ask for a direct answer. Has there been an evaluation through your ministry of the efficacy of the graduate retention program since its inception seven years ago?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I think I'm just going to repeat what I said

before. I think the efficacy of the program is demonstrated by the fact that there's been 81,000 students that have taken advantage of it, all of whom have to stay and work in Saskatchewan. So I think that that demonstrates the efficacy of the program.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, well I think we're probably not going to be able to get much further in this back-and-forth. But I would like to know just again related to the graduate retention program, you mentioned the total amount that's been paid out. You mentioned the total number of students who have accessed that program since its inception. And I'd like to know, in the last year how much was paid out in tax credits through the graduate retention program?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — In 2023 the estimate for the graduate retention program — and of course this is a program that's administered by the Minister of Finance — would be \$65 million. That was the revised number from 2022. \$65.8 million in '21, and in '20 it was \$66.6 million in tax credits.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So I guess, you know, my suggestion here, unsolicited, is that this government would be doing better to invest on the front end of investments for student supports versus the substantial amount of money that has been invested in this program for the last seven years, which according to, as I said, the numbers we've accessed through Stats Canada is showing that this program is actually not serving its intended purpose and, I would suggest, is the reason that other jurisdictions across Canada have done away with this sort of a program.

I want to, you know, come back a little bit to . . .

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well I just wanted just to answer that because it seems to me that if what you're advocating for is the elimination of a program which allows graduates to stay and work, and gives them a further incentive to stay and work in Saskatchewan, I'd suggest that that's not particularly supportive of the economy or the growth of this province.

Because from our perspective, anything that we can do as a government to encourage people to stay and work in Saskatchewan, to raise their families, those are good things for Saskatchewan. That's good for the economy and it's good for the future of this province. And to suggest that we get rid of a program that does that, I just don't think is very responsible. So I just wanted to say that on the record.

[17:00]

The fact of the matter is that we have funding agreements in place with our institutions. We will continue to have conversations with them about what that looks like. But to eliminate a program . . . And I don't know what the reasons were that other provinces eliminated them. I don't know what the benefit was that they had in terms of their retention or their tax credit. But to suggest that we get rid of a program that encourages people to stay and work in Saskatchewan, I don't think is particularly responsible.

Ms. Bowes: — Well I mean that's good to know. So just to be clear, what is being suggested is that there are more supports for students on the front end when they're looking to start off their education versus the back end where, you know, money is being

doled out but it's not proving to be effective in actually retaining graduates at any significant level.

So you know, that's what we are pushing more towards, especially when we've got, for undergraduate domestic student tuition rates, we've got the second-highest rates in the entire country. So you know, when you're talking about a program that will provide tax credits to students upon graduation, well I mean how many prospective students are not even able to access a post-secondary education in this province because of that lack of front-end investment by the government.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well I kind of reject that too. I mean the fact of the matter is there is \$112 million in student supports through loans, scholarships, bursaries, grants, and other supports. That's \$9 million more than last year. To suggest that we're being deficient with respect to front-end supports of students, I think is wrong.

So to provide supports to students on the front end and the back end is important. And I think that just to simply abandon supports at the back end, I mean we're not going to eliminate our student loan repayment programs. We're not going to eliminate a number of the programs that benefit students once they graduate. And so to suggest that everything should be on the front end and nothing on the back end, I don't think is particularly responsible either.

Ms. Bowes: — So I mean, here's a suggestion, something for consideration. Instead of the current program that's on offer, you spoke earlier about the government offering return-for-service agreements for nurses and for veterinarians in rural Saskatchewan. So I mean what about that as a much more effective measure to actually ensure that we are going to be retaining graduates, instead of a program that really has no sort of criteria that would require a grad to remain in province? I mean it's basically kind of . . . It seems to me that that would be a much more efficient way of (a) providing those upfront supports, and also (b) ensuring that we'll have graduates who will be remaining in the province with, you know, a tie to that support.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We do provide a return-of-service agreements in a number of areas. I think that in providing these kinds of . . . Going to the graduate retention program in particular, those tax savings are spent in Saskatchewan because those people are working in Saskatchewan and they're paying tax in Saskatchewan and they're raising their families. So that money that we invest in the graduate retention program through the tax credits is all being spent in Saskatchewan, it's all being recirculated through the economy.

But on your other point, we do have return-of-service agreements in a number of different areas, and that's something that we continually consider whether expanding those types of return-of-service agreements are important in any one particular area.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, so I'd like to come back to, you know, the earlier discussion about those lobby documents by USSU [University of Saskatchewan Students' Union] and URSU [University of Regina Students' Union]. And so of all the recommendations out of both of those documents, did your government make any commitments reflective of these recommendations in the most recent budget?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well when I meet with a students' union or when I meet with any organization where they have suggestions with respect to how we can better support students, how we can better support our institutions, all those suggestions get put together. They go to my ministry; my ministry officials assess those.

At the time that I had my conversations with the USSU, we were right in the middle of budget negotiations or budget consideration in terms of this year's budget. But all those discussions all form a package of information that I take to my ministry to give some consideration to as we're doing our budget deliberations.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, so that doesn't answer the question. Were any of those recommendations included in this year's budget?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well we increased the amount of money in our Student Aid Fund. That was one of the things they had talked about. We incorporated some changes with respect to loan forgiveness in a number of areas. So there was a number of things that the students had brought forward to me that we gave some consideration to, not all of which made it into the budget. A number of them do get consideration in terms of how we enhance our funding to the sector.

But I'm always willing to have conversations with students at all our post-secondary institutions to see what we can do better. And those are all conversations that I take forward with my ministry and have discussions about how they can be incorporated into the budget.

But I've given you a couple of examples. And the fact that we increased funding in our Student Aid Fund, the fact that we provide more student supports, I think is indicative of some of the comments that those students had made to me.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, well you know, so just to read into the record here some of the recommendations that student leaders from our universities have been asking this government for. You know, one was in terms of the relief of student debt, as I mentioned before; eliminating interest on student loans, which is a very simple and effective measure that this government could implement.

Another was replacing student loans with upfront, non-repayable grants for low-income students; increasing scholarships, grants, and bursaries specifically for Indigenous and international students; a number of measures around fairness for international students.

And you know, we talked earlier about the fundamental unfairness of the tuition rates that international students are subject to in our province, the fact that they're paying three to four times the rates of tuition that domestic students are and there's no caps on tuition; hikes in the memorandum of understanding undertaken by the government and the post-secondary institutions.

They're looking for, you know, increased funding support for graduate students, measures to address student mental health needs — that's one thing I hear consistently from student leaders at our institutions. They're looking for more assistance from the government around creation of sexual assault and violence

prevention policy, creation of trans rights legislation, and you know, in URSU's document, addressing issues with a performance-based funding model. Also from USSU they were calling for a one-year student loan repayment grace period.

Many of the recommendations between the two student organizations were very similar, but you know, from my understanding, there wasn't much consideration that was given at all to these recommendations in the budget, even though, you know, the students made every effort to meet with you as the minister prior to the budget.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well I mean we did do a couple of things. And I mentioned before there's a \$1.5 million increase in the student Advantage Scholarship. It's something that they talked about that was important. There's a lot of requests when I met with the students, and for them to expect that all of that would be incorporated into one year's budget, I think is a little unreasonable. But we do take those suggestions forward and give some consideration to them in the . . . you know, given the priorities of my ministry and given the priorities of government.

Ms. Bowes: — All right. Well you know, I hope that there will be follow-up from your ministry with those student leaders. They've put a lot of work into these lobby documents. It's my understanding that this is the first time that the student leadership at the two universities have brought forward a lobby document of this type, and I would hope that this government would take the concerns and the recommendations of our students, you know, our future leaders in this province, very seriously.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Students are a key stakeholder in this sector. That's why I meet with them. That's why I make every opportunity to have conversations with student leaders. Just yesterday the leadership from Sask Polytechnic was in the House, and I took the opportunity to spend almost an hour with them to talk about issues.

But as I said, they are a key stakeholder in the delivery of public education. It's why they have representation at the board of governors table. It's why they have representation when it comes to meeting the senior leadership at Sask Polytechnic. I know that a lot of this, a lot of what they've suggested have been directed through those institutions. A lot of the things that they asked for when they met with me are things that we would expect a university to take quite seriously and in fact have.

So we would continue to encourage them to have conversations with leadership at their institutions, which I've said before — independent institutions. And I'll continue to have conversations with student leaders and share those conversations, not just with my ministry officials but with leadership at the university as well.

Ms. Bowes: — Great. So speaking of Sask Poly, what would your description of the financial implications of this budget be for Sask Poly, specifically in terms of any tuition increases we might expect here, in addition to what we've already seen at the universities?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Just a follow-up on the last question. One of the other initiatives that we have started this year, we've created a student council where we will have formal conversations with leadership at the institutions. And not just

leadership at the institutions, but students generally who might not otherwise be represented by student unions. So we'll be having those conversations.

As far as Sask Poly is concerned, we haven't heard from them with respect to what their intentions are with respect to tuition rate increases.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, and what about at Saskatchewan's Indigenous institutions. Do you expect or are you aware of any tuition hikes expected at these institutions?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — First Nations University tuition levels will come from the University of Regina. We haven't heard from any of the other institutions. I think May is when their budgets are due, so we'll know more then.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And you know, in terms of these institutions being able to sustain operations without significant disruption to the quality of programs, education, and services provided to students, what do you have to say about that? Will these institutions be able to do so?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I fully expect that they will. We provided, as I have mentioned before, in terms of the funding for technical institutes, \$1.71 million support those technical schools and other institutions. And so I fully expect that they'll continue to be able to deliver the educational programming that they have as in the past.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And so specific to Sask Poly, we've been hearing concerns, you know, about long wait-lists for programs at this institution. And can you provide me with all of the waiting lists by program at Sask Poly? And I, you know, I understand. I don't need that here tonight, but if that could be provided in writing that would be appreciated.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We know that there are some waiting lists to get into programs. Certainly that's generated based on the strength of the economy and the number of people that we require. That's why we've been spending a significant amount of time working with our institutions to make sure that they are providing the level of education and the number.

Certainly there's some challenges when it comes to providing instructors for certain courses and I know that the Sask Poly and the other technical schools work as hard as they can to make sure that they have the proper training in place. But I think that's just simply an example of the strength of the economy and the number of people that want to work.

Graduation rates at Sask Poly are in the high 90's in terms of graduation rates, and in the high 90's for those that graduate that end up having a job, some of whom have a job before the first year of their program.

So we're very proud of the delivery of the programs that Sask Poly provides, but again these are all things that we work on with our institutions to make sure that they're providing the support to their students in order to get the people trained that we need to support the economy.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thanks. So I didn't get an answer to that.

Will you be willing to provide that?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I don't have that. We can certainly ask the institutions for . . . Sask Poly for whatever numbers that they have, but I don't have those numbers.

[17:15]

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, yeah. I understand you don't have them here today, but will you undertake to get those numbers and to get them to the opposition?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We will undertake to ask for them, yes.

Ms. Bowes: — You know, this is something that has been a question in, you know, the minds of some people that I've spoken with, that I've heard from. I wonder, want to know, you know, is it part of your government's long-term plan for Sask Poly to take over the regional colleges at a certain point in time?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — No. We have a brokerage program from Sask Poly where Sask Poly brokers those programs to the regional colleges, and that's been a relationship that's worked very, very well in terms of Sask Poly providing the programming support to our regional colleges. We have no intention of amalgamating any of our regional colleges into Sask Poly.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thanks. And you know, on the regional colleges, unlike most of the rest of the post-secondary system, the regional colleges have not seen significant changes to their legislation and regulations. And so I'd like to know why is this and what are your intentions here?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I've got no . . . I talk to leadership at our regional colleges on a regular basis. We've been to most every regional college to discuss issues of concern. Opening up the Act or having changes to the legislation or regulations isn't something that has been brought to my attention in any great degree, so I really have no immediate intention in opening up the Act. But certainly willing to consider any conversations or any suggestions that the regional colleges have with respect to amendments to the legislation, which we might want to think about.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And so you know, on the topic of that legislation, I note that there is a requirement in legislation for a review of regional colleges at least every five years, yet no review has occurred since the fall and winter of 2010 to '11. So you know, in that time two more reviews should have occurred since then. And I'd like to know, you know, why has the ministry not met their statutory requirements and when will another review take place?

The Chair: — Ms. Bowes, I'll just remind you that the minister may or may not answer this question because it is outside of estimates, and I would encourage you to stay on track please.

Ms. Bowes: — I'm happy to rephrase my question if you like.

The Chair: — I will defer to the minister to make a decision whether he decides to answer.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I'm going to have to answer either now or

tomorrow, so I'll answer it now. We are aware that there is a statutory requirement for the review, and I'll be having a conversation with my ministry officials about that. I can't tell you why. Certainly we're aware of our statutory obligation.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So I guess specific to this, you know, this year, this coming year, is that something, you know, now that you understand that that statutory requirement has not been met, is that something within this coming year that will be undertaken?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — It's certainly a conversation I'll have with my ministry officials and my colleagues in cabinet.

Ms. Bowes: — In terms of the regional colleges, I had a question about, you know, what is the role of the regional college board versus, you know, the role of yourself as the minister.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well we expect the regional college boards to, you know, provide oversight and direction to the CEO of the regional college, to look to her for guidance with respect to delivery of programs and needs in the region. We certainly work with the regional colleges on a regular basis with respect to ensuring that they're providing the training and the educational opportunities that people in that particular region need. And so that's the role. I mean there's certainly an oversight role by the ministry and the minister with respect to our regional colleges.

As I mentioned before, I spend a great deal of time talking to our regional colleges about what their needs are, what their requirements are, what the local training requirements might be, and then we work within the ministry to prioritize those among our regional colleges in terms of providing the appropriate support.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. I want to know too around the regional colleges, what role do the regional colleges play in terms of local labour market development and planning?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well they don't do a lot in terms of labour market development. I mean the businesses in the area will let the regional colleges know what their labour market needs are. I encourage them, and the ministry encourages the leadership at our regional colleges to be in pretty close contact with their local businesses, with the local economy to see what the needs are in any particular area and then work to provide the programming that's necessary to support the labour market needs in that particular area.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, yeah. That's good to know. I just . . . It's my understanding that this used to be something that was a regular occurrence, is that, you know, the colleges would consult with local businesses. And is that something that still happens in order to make that determination?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We encourage that, sure. We encourage that those conversations take place and regional colleges do that. Certainly if we become aware of a particular need in a particular area with a particular industry, we will provide information and support to our regional colleges in that regard. But certainly the interface between the regional college and their local economy is critical to ensuring that they meet the local labour market needs, and important that the ministry then provides support to the

regional colleges to meet those within the priorities set by the ministry.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. I had a few other questions before our opposition Health critic arrives. I think she'll be here fairly soon. You had mentioned earlier loan forgiveness, and I was wanting to ask who is currently eligible for loan forgiveness.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I'll have my deputy minister answer that question.

Ms. Macza: — Hi. Denise Macza, deputy minister of Advanced Education. In terms of loan forgiveness, nurses are offered 4,000 per year up to 20,000 in terms of loan forgiveness; nurse practitioners, the same values, 4,000 a year up to a \$20,000 cap; veterinarians and vet techs have similar loan forgiveness opportunities, 4,000 a year up to a \$20,000 cap. That is for Saskatchewan loan forgiveness.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, so just the nurses, nurse practitioners, vets, and vet techs then?

Ms. Macza: — Yeah.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, and so how do you assess which disciplines are eligible for loan forgiveness? What is that based on?

Ms. Macza: — The loan forgiveness decisions are part of normal budget deliberations and it's based on the needs of the economy and the needs to retain professions in the critical areas.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, and has there been any discussion, you know, for instance with this budget, in expanding loan forgiveness to any other professions or groups?

Ms. Macza: — Every year considerations like that go forward, but they are part of budget deliberations.

Ms. Bowes: — So are you saying then that with this budget there's going to be no expansion to other professions or groups beyond the ones you listed?

Ms. Macza: — Current budget, no other professions are provided loan forgiveness, just the one that I've outlined.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, so it's my understanding . . . I mean, we talk about a major, you know, there's all kinds of talk about labour shortages, about certainly many sectors that are having difficulty recruiting and retaining workers in our province. And so it would seem to me that, you know, this loan forgiveness program may be, you know, an expansion of this may be a key way to address some of those shortages. And so is that something that is, you know, up for further consideration by your ministry?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — These are all considerations that we have as we build our budget, and decisions are made based on priorities within the relative ministries and with priorities of the government. So we do have conversations with respect to how we can best support the economy. And as we go forward, I'm sure there will be more conversations about loan forgiveness in any one particular area. These ones certainly came to the top of the list when it came to priorities in terms of delivering services

to the people of Saskatchewan, but they don't foreclose any further conversations.

Ms. Bowes: — And are you aware if this is part of the, you know, health human resources plan by your government in terms of, you know, evaluating further expansion of loan forgiveness? Is that something under consideration through that avenue?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — There will always be conversations and consideration by the ministers of Health with respect to how to best support the delivery of health care in this province within the context of the health human resources action plan. So there is always those conversations as to how best we can deliver those services. And if this ends up being part of that in the future, then it's certainly something that would be considered.

Ms. Bowes: — I wanted to come back a little bit to, you know, discussion around international students. Correct me if I'm wrong, but my understanding from your previous comments was that, you know, the expectation is that institutions will look at sort of new, expanded opportunities for revenue generation. And is, you know, an increased recruitment of international students one of those measures that is being promoted as a revenue generator for institutions?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Yes.

Ms. Bowes: — And so you know, how are we going about recruiting international students? You know, we see news about certain missions to one country or another. What is the process for, you know, that type of recruitment?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well as I mentioned, we have an international engagement strategy which is kind of built around two pillars: global engagement, and capacity building and leadership. So one of the key factors is to ensure safety and security of post-secondary students, both domestic and internationally. But what we want to do is we want to encourage international students to come to Saskatchewan to train and hopefully stay in Saskatchewan to continue to support the economy.

But we work with agents to recruit international students in the Government of Saskatchewan and post-secondary institutions to attend a number of fairs, a number of in-person and a number of virtual sessions to showcase what we have to offer in Saskatchewan in terms of our post-secondary institutions and provide information to students that may want to travel and study here.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So do you have any specific things that you offer to encourage retention of international students as graduates? Again, mentioning that after five years of graduation, 53 per cent of international students in Saskatchewan leave the province.

[17:30]

Ms. Macza: — In terms of the initiatives we have under way to support our international students and make sure that they are receiving the education and the supports they need, we recently launched a new provincial international education strategy, as the minister mentioned, which aims to create equitable and

responsive, transparent and collaborative approach in terms of the recruitment of students in our province. There is a process across the post-secondary sector to allow the sector to share best practices and address any barriers for international students.

One of the key programs in our strategy is we have a Saskatchewan agent training program. This program is one of the first of its kind in Canada, and under this program we aim to ensure students receive high-quality service from the agents that they are engaging with. To do this, we provide them with consistent and appropriate Saskatchewan-based instruction and resources to meet the needs and to answer the questions of the students. Through this program, the agents improve their knowledge of the Canadian laws in immigration as well as benefits of studying and living and working in Saskatchewan. We've trained over 112 international recruitment agents with more to come in 2023. And this program is frequently cited by other jurisdictions as a leading practice for protecting the integrity of the international student program.

In addition to this agent training program, we have designated learning institutions in Saskatchewan which offer a variety of settlement and student supports to international students under this program in this framework, and it should also be noted that each province has their own designated framework. Saskatchewan's framework is premised on ensuring that students have what they need to get the best possible learning and experience in Saskatchewan.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thanks. And what has the spending been to date on the international engagement strategy?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — So the total budget for our international engagement strategy is \$880,000. I would point out that that is in addition to any funds that our institutions spend on international engagement and student recruitment, which is not insignificant either. So working together with our post-secondary institution partners to ensure the success of that strategy.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And so you had mentioned, Deputy Minister, the agent training program. And how much money has been spent on that program?

Ms. Macza: — The agent training year in the first year was \$70,000.

Ms. Bowes: — Seven?

Ms. Macza: — Seventy.

Ms. Bowes: — So my colleague has joined. Vicki Mowat, our official opposition critic for Health. And I'm going to turn it over to Vicki at this point to ask some questions around health profession training seats.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to the minister and officials as well. I was asking some of these questions with the Health minister, and he advised me that I was barking up the wrong tree. So I've got some . . .

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I'll probably say the same thing.

Ms. Mowat: — So I've got some questions here, folks, and yeah,

would appreciate some of your thoughts here.

As we look at the . . . I did listen to the opening remarks as well. As we look at the Saskatchewan health care training expansion, I know some of these details were released back in January in terms of the 18 different health organizations and 550 new training seats. But there is some additional detail that folks are seeking on this.

In particular, at the bottom of that release there's an indication that most of the new seats will be available in the fall of 2023. The remaining seats will be available as instructor, facility, equipment capacity is determined and as interprovincial agreements are finalized. So can you indicate which ones are the outliers or which ones we're still waiting on being finalized?

Hon. Mr. Wyatt: — I'll have Mark Wyatt answer the question for you, assistant deputy minister.

Mr. Wyatt: — So your question was how many of the seats we expect to have available as of the fall, and I'll answer that and also share how many we expect to have available by the end of the first post-secondary year. So of the roughly 550 seats across 18 programs, we expect that 401 seats will be available by the end of the '22-23 academic year. So that's roughly taking you through most of the seats.

Some of the exceptions that will be coming on board through the course of . . . The reason that they may not be available for the September fall semester is that the colleges and Sask Poly have different intake periods, so some of those new seats may come on board for a January start. The regional colleges also have different intake points throughout the year. So we do expect that as we have both the start of most of those seats coming on board in the fall, there will be some additional seats taking us up to 401, as I said, by the end of the '23-24 academic year.

The other reason that some of these seats won't be available in the fall semester is that they are being extended over, introduced over a period of years. And so, for example, the clinical psychology programs at the University of Regina, University of Saskatchewan, those are being introduced over a number of years, and it will be a gradual rollout over the course of, I think, in some cases five years.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. Are we able to go through occupation by occupation and get a sense of when these seats will be made available or what seats will be available starting in the fall? So if we can kind of just . . . I don't know if you have the chart in front of you. I can list them one by one if that's preferable.

Mr. Wyatt: — Sure. We do have that information available. Just give me one second to find the right table. So just moving through the number of seats that we expect to be available during the '23-24 academic year: of the continuing care assistant seats, we expect 181 seats will be available; the licensed practical nurse, Indigenous practical nurse programs, 60 seats to be available; medical lab assistant, 5 seats; mental health and addictions counsellor, 16 seats; pharmacy technician, 24 seats; physical therapy, 15 seats; and primary care paramedic, 100 seats.

There are two programs . . . With respect to the medical

laboratory technologist and medical radiology technologist, there is a planned expansion of 40 seats between those two programs. We will be bringing on 20 of those 40 seats in the fall. They will be introduced in Saskatoon. And the other 20 seats we are intending will follow in 2024.

As I mentioned, the clinical psychology programs at the University of Regina and University of Saskatchewan, they'll begin their expansions with six new seats and will grow to the full expansion of 15 additional seats with increases over multiple years.

The other area is with respect to the interprovincial agreements, the out-of-province seats that we announced at the time. And so we do intend to have 88 seats available. Well we haven't finalized all of those agreements. At this point our intention is that we will have approximately 88 seats available through those programs.

Ms. Mowat: — Can you clarify whether the number . . . So you're referring to the net change in seats.

Mr. Wyatt: — Correct.

Ms. Mowat: — So for example, like, the backgrounder I'm looking at from January 2023 says for CCAs [continuing care aide] the current seats is 613, and then the post-expansion seats is 794. So you had said 181 will be available. So that's the entirety of that?

Mr. Wyatt: — So yeah, just check these numbers. 613 is the pre-expansion number. We expect to get to 794 for an increase of 181, and we do expect that . . . Again CCA is one of those programs that are offered through the regional colleges. And so some of those intakes may not all be for September of 2023, but as those different intakes come into effect over the course of the academic year we do expect that the full 181 will be available.

Ms. Mowat: — By the end of '23-24 is what you had indicated, right?

Mr. Wyatt: — Correct.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. So I wonder if this can be reported more simply and in a way that sort of compares to the chart that we have in front of us. So out of the 794 post-expansion seats for CCAs, how many of those will be available by the end of '23-24? If we can look at each category under that lens it will prevent a lot of fervent math.

Mr. Wyatt: — I think we can probably work through that. Just the form that my information is, it presents the number of expanded seats in each area. And I also have the size of the increase, so we can probably identify where some of the exceptions are.

Ms. Mowat: — Perhaps if it's simpler we can just get that information tabled so that we can do a cross-comparator later. Or we can go through occupation by occupation. I'm pleased to do that as well.

Mr. Wyatt: — I can move through the areas if you'd like. I think I can reference the total number of seat expansions and the

number of seats that we expect will be available this year.

[17:45]

So continuing care assistant I think we covered. We expect 181 seat expansion. All 181 of those seats will be available in the '23-24 academic year. Licensed practical nurse and Indigenous practical nurses, the increase there is 60. It should be 100 per cent of those available. Medical lab assistant, the increase there is five, and we do expect all of those to be available. Mental health and addictions counsellor, just finding that one. The expansion there is 16 and again, it should be all 16 of those seats. Pharmacy technician, 24; once again all of those seats will be available. Physical therapist, 15 seats; all will be available. Primary care paramedic, 100 seats; all will be available during the '23-24 year. Medical lab technologist and medical radiology technologist, of the 20 seats in MLT [medical lab technologist] we expect 12 will be added, and of the 20 seats in MRT [medical radiology technologist] we expect eight will be added in the fall. So there is a shortfall there.

Clinical psychology, there's a total of 30 seats that are being added in clinical psychology, and six of those will be added this year as part of a multi-year rollout. With respect to interprovincial agreements, the diagnostic medical sonographer, we have 16 seats in total and eight of those will be added in '23-24. Electroneurophysiology, three seats are being added, and all three we expect to be available.

And I should just again mention, with respect to some of these interprovincial agreements, we're in the works of sort of signing those agreements with some of the provinces and institutions that we're working with. So these haven't been finalized.

And so just to give you a sense of what we are anticipating to come from those, the MRI, magnetic resonance imaging technologists, nine seats in total, five in '23-24. Occupational therapists, 10 seats in total, five in '23-24. Respiratory therapist, 10 seats in total; at this point we're looking at two being available in '23-24. Environmental public health inspector, we expect to have four seats will be available. And speech-language pathology, 35 seats is the total expansion target, and 15 would be available in '23-24.

I think that covers most all of them.

Ms. Mowat: — I think cardiovascular perfusionist.

Mr. Wyatt: — One of one.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you for going through that detail and saving everyone from me doing math on the spot.

I'm interested in the 150 nursing seats that were announced last year. How many of these additional seats have been created? Can you take me through what the previous number of seats looked like, what the current number of seats look like, as well as their regional distribution?

Mr. Wyatt: — So of those seats, all of them have been created. And the number of nursing seats was divided evenly between the USask program and the collaborative Sask Poly-University of Regina program. That number was 62. Yeah, so there were 62

RN [registered nurse] seats added in each of those programs. There were also five nurse practitioner seats added at each of the USask and the collaborative U of R and Poly program. And we also have Sask Polytech adding 16 RPN [registered psychiatric nurse] seats. So that should get you to the 150. And just to note that there was an additional eight RPN seats that were brokered by North West College in the fall of 2022.

Ms. Mowat: — And out of these seats that have been created, are all of these positions filled by students? Or what are the vacancy rates? Also I had asked about site specific, if you have that information.

Mr. Wyatt: — Sure. Of the 150 seats, all were filled with the exception of 12 that were offered but were not filled, and those were in the University of Saskatchewan post-degree Bachelor of Science program. We recognize that with the announcement of the new seats that there may be some challenges fully filling all of the seats, you know, across the board. We were pleased that, you know, most all of the seats were filled, but there were some in that post-degree program at the U of S that did not go filled in the first year they were offered.

Ms. Mowat: — Do you have a sense of why these seats weren't filled? And is there any indication that they will be filled for the upcoming class?

Mr. Wyatt: — Some of the reasons were, I mean one of the things that was noted is that in the first year of other program expansions there have been other situations where all of the seats were not filled in the first year, and just really an adjustment period. With that particular program, the U of S program, you're not drawing from the entire student population or high school student population. You are drawing from students who are already in their first year of an undergraduate health sciences program, targeted towards health science profession. So you are pulling from a limited pool of potential candidates.

And so really, you know, I think it was identified that a combination of just the timing and the ability to recruit into those seats to create the awareness and marketing, as well as just recognizing that there's a more limited population to that U of S program than the U of R or Sask Poly program where it's available to the sort of full range of high school graduates and other students who may be either transferring into a different program or studying or maybe haven't entered post-secondary at that point. You know, there is some limitations around who is accepted into that program.

And it's one thing we're addressing in all of these, with all of the seat expansions, is that we've been doing a lot of advertising and marketing about the new seats that we've been adding through this year, a lot of emphasis on social media to really try and create the awareness about the availability of the seats that we've been adding through this year.

Ms. Mowat: — Can you take us through the number of seats per training site? I know there was a large emphasis on sort of decentralizing some of the nursing training, so can you take us through that breakdown?

Mr. Wyatt: — So with respect to the 150 nursing seats, 62 of them that are being offered through the University of

Saskatchewan, RN seats, those will all be in Saskatoon. Of the U of R-Sask Polytech RN seats, 52 will be located in Regina and 10 in Saskatoon. The nurse practitioner program through the U of S, five will be offered online, and similarly, the U of R nurse practitioner, five will be offered online. And lastly the Sask Polytech RPN programs, those 16 seats will be offered in Saskatoon.

Ms. Mowat: — So I'm confused because I thought that there was an expansion of seats in places such as Lloydminster. I can't remember listing all of them, but you sort of only listed Saskatoon, Regina, and online. Prince Albert is not included in . . .

Mr. Wyatt: — So there are RN training programs offered in multiple different communities, and so we have seats delivered in Saskatoon, Lloydminster, Prince Albert, Yorkton, La Ronge, and Ile-a-la-Crosse. And those are through the U of S program, which has taken more of a regional approach. And the U of R-Sask Poly program is offered in Regina and Saskatoon. Those would be existing seats that are offered in those communities. The expansions that were part of the 150, those were based on the locations that I just provided.

Ms. Mowat: — And out of those existing seats that are distributed regionally, were there vacancies in those seats? Or were all of those seats filled?

Mr. Wyatt: — We know that there were some of the seats offered through the University of Saskatchewan outside of Saskatoon, in some of the training locations outside of Saskatoon, that weren't filled. We understand it was a small number relative to the overall program enrolment, but we don't have that number available right now.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. I hope, if it's feasible that that information can be provided to the committee at a later time. I'm being told I get one more question here due to time.

Like it's certainly encouraging to see robust seat expansion in health occupations. I think we can all agree that training is a key component of the health human resources. How are the number of seats that are required determined? You know, what sort of needs assessment takes place between yourselves, between the Ministry of Health, the relevant education institutions, to forecast into the future of what's going to be needed not only today but also in the years down the road.

Hon. Mr. Wyatt: — This is a kind of collaborative effort between our ministry and the two ministers of Health and their administrations to determine, kind of, where the greatest needs are, what the capacity of our institutions are. And so this is really kind of an ongoing discussion between the three ministries to determine where the greatest needs are. And again, capacity of institutions is important and . . . [inaudible] . . . do some work with regard to ensuring that the institutions have the capacity to provide it. But it's really a collaborative effort between all ministries in order to provide that.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. Having reached our agreed-upon time for consideration of these estimates, we will now adjourn from our consideration of the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Advanced

Education.

Minister Wyant, do you have any closing comments you'd like to make?

[18:00]

Hon. Mr. Wyatt: — To you, Mr. Chair, I want to thank you for your leadership today. I want to thank members of the committee for their attention. I want to thank all my officials for being here today to support me in this important work, my chief of staff who is here. I want to thank Ms. Mowat and Ms. Bowes for their respectful questions this evening, and to thank Hansard for their very good work as well. So thank you very much.

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

Ms. Bowes: — Yeah. Just briefly, thanks for the conversation, Minister. This is our first time together in committee, and it's been interesting. Thanks very much to your officials. Really appreciate all the time and hard work that goes into prepping for estimates every year. And I also want to say thanks to Hansard for your good work. And it's been a pleasure. Thanks.

The Chair: — Thank you, Ms. Bowes. This committee will now recess until 6:15 p.m.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

[18:15]

Bill No. 129 — *The Medical Profession Amendment Act, 2023*

Clause 1

The Chair: — Welcome back. We will now begin consideration of Bill No. 129, *The Medical Profession Amendment Act, 2023*, clause 1, short title. Minister Merriman is here with his officials. I would ask that the officials please state their names before speaking at the microphone. Minister, you can introduce your officials and make your opening remarks.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I don't have any opening remarks. I think we covered this off in the House. My officials can introduce themselves. I think we have a limited amount of time so I would turn the floor over to the committee.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. And we'll open the floor for questions. And I recognize Ms. Mowat.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to the minister and officials for being here tonight to answer some of these questions. We have chatted about this a little bit in the House already, but this bill seeks to create the role of physician assistant in the province, make sure that all of that works within the legal framework and the regulatory framework of the province, and the goal is to bring this profession in, in a structured way. I wonder if the minister can speak to why physician assistants were chosen as, you know, a necessary component of the health care team right now?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thanks for the question, Ms. Mowat.

This was actually brought to me by the dean of Medicine, Dr. Preston Smith. He mentioned that this was another tool that was out there in Canada, and other provinces were using it as far as a clinician and a forward-facing position that we didn't have in Saskatchewan.

He suggested that we have a look at this to see if it was something that could fit into our complement of great health care workers. And he committed that if we would look at it, that he would look into it from the College of Medicine as far as the regulation of it under the physicians. And we had some preliminary discussions, went through our process, and thought that this was something that was effective in other provinces. And we thought, as in the past with other professions that have been introduced and scopes that have been expanded over the last few years, we wanted to maximize . . . see what other provinces are doing, glean information from them, and see how we can take that and apply it to Saskatchewan.

So we're very excited about this. We've had some very positive feedback from the SMA [Saskatchewan Medical Association], mostly from physicians that have interacted with physician assistants and understand the value that they are within the system and how much they complement doctors in their role. So it's something that's very exciting to them. For physicians that have not worked with physician assistants, this is an opportunity for them to showcase their skills in assisting doctors and forward-facing to the patients. So it's a very good opportunity for us.

Ms. Mowat: — Can you speak to the scope of a physician assistant and how it might differ from other health care professionals within the complement right now?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Sure, maybe I can describe some of the duties that a physician assistant or PA will be required to do within their operating: conducting patient interviews and taking medical histories; physical exams; ordering and interpreting tests, which I think is very important; prescribing medications; formulating treatment plans as part of the primary health care team; providing patient counselling and preventative health care; assisting in surgery; and performing other tasks within the supervision of a physician's scope.

So again, under the direction and the supervision of a physician, they will be able to operate and deal with all of those preliminary analysis that a physician would normally do, because what we want is a physician to be operating, as all positions within our health care system, at the top end of their scope. This is something that will assist and elevate physicians to the top end of their scope, so they do not have to be bogged down with some other processes such as something that could be very simple as taking a patient history, ordering and interpreting tests. That's something that can be done by the physician assistant, so the physician can move on and do something that is at the top end of their scope.

Ms. Mowat: — In terms of that job description, how would that compare to the duties of a nurse practitioner or an RN? You know, where would the overlap be there?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — There would be a lot of overlap. The difference between — and I've been trying to explain this in the media — is a nurse practitioner can operate independently from

a physician, where a physician assistant has to have the supervision of a physician on the final call on what they are doing. Now that supervision can be virtual, can be in person, can be a video call. It could be just a verification simply of a physician just verifying what the physician assistant has done. But they're trained under two different models. One is obviously under a nursing model and the physician assistant is trained under a physician model and under that scope.

I can go through some of the nuances. There's many differences between the two positions. But I could also get a copy of this cleaned up and submitted to the committee as to the differences of the two positions, because there is some clarification that has to be done in the general public.

And we're working with the national association of physician assistants so they can do some public relations and explain this to people that . . . especially in the medical community that have not worked with a physician assistant before. So we're heavily relying on them. They're very supportive I believe.

Well last time I spoke to them, the gentleman that was in charge of the physician assistant association, or the national, was actually from Moose Jaw and couldn't find a job as a physician assistant and had to move to Winnipeg unfortunately, because there was no position here for them. So his response was if physician assistants are allowed in the province, that he would definitely be moving back to his home province to be able to practise.

Ms. Mowat: — In terms of the overlap that exists with nurse practitioners, I wonder if you can speak to the differences in training between NPs [nurse practitioner] and PAs [physician assistant] as well as what the base salary might look like.

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Okay. I can certainly go through the education. Okay. Just making sure I get the up-to-date. I'll start with the physician assistant and go through it. There's four bullets on each side here.

So again the physician assistant is educated in a medical model. They have a bachelor or master's degree in physician assistant studies. Regulation is dependent on jurisdiction. They practise in all areas of medicine through their scope of practice, although their scope of practice is based upon their scope of supervision.

A nurse practitioner would be educated in the nursing model and a medical model. They would have a bachelor's in nursing, followed by a master's in nursing degree for nurse practitioner studies. They're regulated under the health care professions by the College of Registered Nurses of Saskatchewan, independent practitioner with a scope of practice and practising in all areas of nursing.

As far as salary, I don't . . . Just give me a second on that. I'll just maybe cover just in the . . . We only have a limited amount of time here. I'll go through a couple of the dollar amounts. We have budgeted this year \$1.3 million for 12 positions. That is pro-rated because we knew we wouldn't get the physician assistants in immediately, so we have \$1.7 million annualized for those 12 positions.

We will have to sit down and negotiate what the exact salary is

because that hasn't been set yet. There's a few things that we have to go through with Labour Relations just to make sure that that is set. And a nurse practitioner, we're just checking on the salary, but it would be . . . I think it's negotiated in and around \$100,000, plus or minus a bit depending on their experience and where they are in their practice.

Ms. Mowat: — Do we know exactly which clinics these 12 PAs will be placed in yet? Or I think maybe communities were listed previously, but . . .

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yeah, we don't have the exact communities. We're going to sit down and see where we have gaps in service and see if we can fill in those gaps with these.

Now these aren't going to fill in all of the gaps but it is certainly going to help out. They're definitely . . . Again they're trained similar as an army medic, so they would be very good in triaging individuals in emergency room situations. That type of scenario would be one of the things that we would be looking at for these positions to be able to help out our system.

Ms. Mowat: — Okay. I was under the impression that they were going to go to primary care clinics. That's not the case?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — No, they would be going to some primary care clinics as well. Yeah.

Ms. Mowat: — Is there a breakdown of . . .

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — We haven't determined that yet. We've got to go through this process, but . . .

Sorry, I just got an update on the NPs' salary range, is in, again, from that 100 to 120.

Ms. Mowat: — So there isn't a breakdown of where they are going? How was the number 12 determined, or the dollar amount determined then?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think it was more on the budgetary dollar amount versus the actual positions, but we wanted to start this process off slow and grow it, versus . . . Again, we have a finite amount of dollars in Health and we had to allocate money to surgeries, to primary care physicians, nurses. And adding this complement in, obviously it's an additional cost. So we wanted to make sure that we had spread our health care dollars to all areas of health care and not just focus in on one area.

And we have some educating to do within our clinicians so they understand the role of this, so we want to start small. And it'll be something that we'll be looking at growing over the years to come.

[18:30]

Ms. Mowat: — Is the placement of these PAs, is it going to be . . . Like, do clinicians need to apply to be one of the recipients of a PA? Or what is that process going to look like?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I think we would work with clinicians for, especially the ones that have some experience in this, for them to be able to talk to their colleagues and see what the

opportunities. But again we also want to work with the primary care team to identify where there are gaps. It's not just if you apply and ask for a physician assistant, you're going to get one because we need to plug these individuals in to stabilize primary care as well as if they are in any of our larger tertiary centres, that they're integrated in there. Because any time you bring a new position into an organization, we have to educate, not just the individual and how the system works, but we have to educate the staff on what this role of this position is going to be and what they can and cannot do.

So there's going to be a little bit of a learning curve here. Again that's why we've brought in a small number just to slowly integrate this into the system versus overwhelm it. Because we are bringing in lots of nurses as well from Saskatchewan, from the Philippines, doctors, so we don't want to overwhelm the preceptor side of things as well.

Ms. Mowat: — Is there an idea that these individuals will be placed under salaried physicians or fee-for-service physicians?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Thank you. It's going to be a kind of to be determined. We're going to see exactly where this fits into the overall system and make sure that, again, we're integrating in a way that's going to work for everyone. So on the fee-for-service versus the salary, right now we only have one group that has fee-for-service which are physicians that I'm aware of. Just checking here.

So we wouldn't . . . We would have to weigh that out and we'll have to see what is in other provinces and again work with the national association to see what has worked best in other provinces. Yeah, it's more of a to be determined right now.

Ms. Mowat: — Recognizing that there's a lot of TBDs [to be determined], when do we anticipate having these folks in place on the ground?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — As soon as possible. We've got a few things to work out. We wanted to make sure that it's on its due process through the legislative process. And once that's done, there's lots of work happening behind the scenes with our human resource strategy as well as our recruitment agency to determine these.

Again we're continuing to work with the association throughout this process so they can inform us. But nothing has been finalized. As soon as we do finalize it, we will have the physician assistants on the ground, the positions bid out. But we want to do it in the proper process to make sure that it is done, that there aren't any hiccups or any labour issues.

Ms. Mowat: — I think one of the central questions that I've received or heard in response to this legislation is, where are these folks coming from and where are they being trained? You know, where do we identify a labour pool that we are going to be able to recruit from, given that we don't have that training capacity within our province?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yeah. The rough numbers is there's just over 900 of these across the country, physician assistant positions. The majority of them are in Ontario, some practising. There are two schools. I believe one in Manitoba and one in

eastern Canada. I'm not sure . . . Dalhousie is doing a new one. University of Manitoba and McMaster and a consortium of PA education at the University of Toronto.

But I think at some point in time, the dean of Medicine has indicated that they would look at potentially expanding their college to see if they could train physician assistants within Saskatchewan because ultimately, if we can train our own . . . But I don't want to pre-empt the process that he has to go through.

Right now we've got the regulations in place. Now we'll have the . . . Once this has passed, we'll have the legislation in place. And then if down the road we want to look at developing an in-house program within our province, I think the government would be open to that. Obviously there's financial implications on that. But if we can grow our own within the province, we'd certainly love to be able to do that.

Ms. Mowat: — Is there a sense that there's folks who have been trained as physician assistants that are not currently working? Or is the goal to approach these educational institutions to recruit those folks?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I would think we'd be looking at both of recruiting new physician assistants, but also experienced ones that are out there. We want to be able to put a competitive dollar out there so a physician assistant that is living in Manitoba or maybe in western Ontario would consider coming to Saskatchewan and moving their family here.

We've got a lot to offer in this province and that's why we want to make sure that our wages are competitive. And preliminary indication is our wages would be competitive with other provinces, if not a little bit better than other provinces. But again we want to walk before we run with this.

Ms. Mowat: — Is there any . . . On sort of the medium term, is there any look at sponsoring seats at those educational institutions like has been done in some of the other health occupations?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — I would say that we're looking into it, and we would be supportive of Advanced Education doing that. But we want to make sure that we're focused in on getting these physician assistants in. If there is an opportunity in another province that we could sponsor seats, I would certainly support the Minister of Advanced Education in pursuing that, but that would be more of a question for him versus myself. I don't want to spend his budgetary dollars.

Ms. Mowat: — I think we can all agree that it's good to alleviate some burdens on physicians, especially as we hear about, you know, some of the administrative burdens or what they're classifying as unpaid work under the fee-for-service model. I think the idea of that is really good.

How many additional patients would you expect a physician would be able to care for when they are working in a team environment with a physician assistant? Because I assume that the ultimate goal here is to improve efficiencies so that they can be responsible for more patients. You know, is there an expectation . . . Is there a number of folks that the ministry has

forecasted that will be able to receive care using these 12 individuals?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — Yeah. It would be tough to quantify it on efficiency. My focus would be on patient outcome versus the efficiency side of it. I think if we are seeing that patients are having a better experience in the primary care team with physician assistants complementing that, with physicians, RNs, nurse practitioners, dietitians, physiotherapists, as part of that team, I think the real test will be in the patient outcomes versus the volume of patients that they are seeing.

And I think we will see some pressures come off of the physicians that are utilizing physician assistants or have the ability to access physician assistants. I think they'll be able to see patients at a higher level and be able to maybe spend a very focused amount of time with that individual versus doing all the general questions which we've all been asked when we go in and see a doctor, those questions where the physician assistant could certainly take that stress off of a physician, and they can operate.

So I think we'll see it in the patient outcome and the patient experience. I don't want to put a number on it because it's going to also depend on the complexity of each case that's coming in. But I think you'll see a pressure relief from the physicians that they are not spending time doing things that they could have somebody else doing and they're operating at the top of their scope.

Ms. Mowat: — Thank you. I have no further questions, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: — Thank you, Ms. Mowat. Are there any more questions or comments from any of the other committee members? Seeing none, we will proceed to vote on the clauses. Clause 1, short title, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried.

[Clause 1 agreed to.]

[Clauses 2 to 19 inclusive agreed to.]

The Chair: — His Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, enacts as follows: *The Medical Profession Amendment Act, 2023*.

I would ask a member to move that we report Bill No. 129, *The Medical Profession Amendment Act, 2023* without amendment. Mr. Nerlien moves. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Minister, do you have any closing comments you'd like to make?

Hon. Mr. Merriman: — No, Mr. Chair. Just thank you to the committee, thanks to Ms. Mowat, and thank you to my officials for being here tonight to support this great opportunity we have.

The Chair: — And, Ms. Mowat, do you have any comments

you'd like to make?

Ms. Mowat: — Yeah, just thanks for respectful dialogue and for everyone who's been here tonight.

The Chair: — Thank you, Ms. Mowat. This committee will now recess until 7 p.m. Thank you.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

Bill No. 103 — *The Accessible Saskatchewan Act*

Clause 1-1

The Chair: — Welcome back, everyone. We will now begin consideration of Bill No. 103, *The Accessible Saskatchewan Act*, clause 1-1, short title. Minister Makowsky is here with his officials. I would ask that officials please state their names before speaking into the microphone the first time. Minister, please introduce your officials and make any opening remarks that you have.

[19:00]

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Okay, thank you very much, Mr. Chair and committee members. As you mentioned, I'm here to present Bill 103, *The Accessible Saskatchewan Act*. With me are Kimberly Kratzig, deputy minister; assistant deputy ministers Louise Michaud and Joel Kilbride. Executive directors Daryl Stubel, Stefanie Wihlidal, and Sterling Snider are here to answer questions.

So just a few brief opening remarks if I could. Persons with disabilities represent nearly a quarter of our province's population. This figure is expected to grow as our population ages. In the 2019 Throne Speech we made a commitment to engage with Saskatchewan residents to develop accessibility legislation. To ensure persons with disabilities can participate and contribute to our communities, we know it's important to develop legislation that makes Saskatchewan a more accessible and inclusive province.

Following public engagement, we took an important step forward in working toward a more inclusive and accessible province by introducing *The Accessible Saskatchewan Act*. The purpose of this legislation is to aid in the identification, prevention, and removal of accessibility barriers for persons with disabilities.

The disability community is diverse and we recognize that people experience barriers differently. We've included a broad definition of disability in the Act to acknowledge this diversity and to promote the inclusion of all persons with a disability.

In developing this legislation, we've considered the different types of barriers experienced by persons with disabilities such as physical barriers, communication barriers, attitudinal barriers, just to name a few. To address these barriers, this legislation allows the government to develop standards in the areas of the built environment, information and communications, employment, transportation, service animals, procurement, service delivery, and any future areas that are needed.

The Act also establishes the accessibility advisory committee,

which will provide advice to the development of standards in each of these areas. It's important that people with lived experience are involved in the development of accessibility standards. That's why at least half of this committee will be persons with disabilities or from organizations representing persons with disabilities. We will develop an application process to ensure the committee is representative of the population of Saskatchewan and reflects this diversity.

Under this legislation the government and designated public sector bodies will be required to develop accessibility plans within one and two years, respectively, of the Act coming into force. These plans will identify the actions that will be taken to remove and prevent barriers that individuals who are in or interact with these organizations face.

Continuing with the spirit of "nothing about us without us," the Government of Saskatchewan is committed to ongoing engagement with persons with disabilities when developing accessibility standards and plans. Proposed standards will be made publicly available for at least 60 days, ensuring everyone has the opportunity to comment and provide feedback.

As the minister, and ministers in the future, it will be their responsibility to raise awareness of how barriers impact the ability of persons with disabilities to fully participate in their communities.

To support this work, the Saskatchewan accessibility office will be established. The office will be responsible for leading regulation development, increasing public awareness about accessibility, and providing education and support to organizations to help them comply with the Act. An annual report will be released each year which will outline progress made in implementing the legislation. The report will be publicly available to promote accountability and transparency in this important work.

The needs of individuals in society evolve and change over time. To respond to these changing needs, the Act will be reviewed seven years after coming into force and every 10 years thereafter. This timeline ensures there is adequate time between reviews to implement recommendations and assess their impacts.

I'd like to highlight one part of the Act that has already been well received. Through the Act we recognize sign languages as the primary languages of communication for persons who are deaf in Saskatchewan. Members of the Deaf community told us the inclusion of this clause is significant for them, and I look forward to seeing many more positive impacts the implementation of this Act has for residents across the province.

So that concludes my remarks, Mr. Chair. We'd be happy to answer any questions from the committee.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. At this time I will open the floor to questions, and I recognize Ms. Conway.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And I want to thank the minister for his opening remarks, and then I think I'm going to just dive right into it, Minister. My first question is, I heard positive feedback about the definition of "disability" within the Act, and I know that was one of the concerns raised by folks

involved in consultations leading up to this Act. What percentage of people in Saskatchewan . . . When you developed this bill, how many people are you kind of operating on the assumption live with the kind of disability that would be covered under this Act in Saskatchewan today?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So as I said in my opening comments, roughly 25 per cent of the population would fall under the definition. My understanding of that, that definition comes from Stats Canada.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry, Minister, I missed that in your opening comments. Thank you for that clarification.

Can you talk about the application of the bill? I think one of the concerns that I've heard from folks is that the bill seems to mainly apply to public bodies rather than private bodies. Can you speak to that under the Act?

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. Louise Michaud. So the application of the bill . . . So one of the things that we did here during consultation was that people asked that government be leaders in implementing this bill. So the way that it is laid out, after the first year government will be required to have its accessibility plan ready and available. And then two years after the bill comes into force then it would be public bodies.

Now when you talk about application of the bill, as standards are developed, there will be sort of decisions made to whom they apply at that time. Certain standards would apply just by their very nature to different people, different classes of people, as they say. So for example, you might have any access standards that relate to service animals. Those would apply universally. But then you might have, depending on the standard being developed, you know, it may be that government would apply it to itself first to sort of show leadership and to develop and then . . . So those decisions would be made during regulation development.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Ms. Michaud. Just in terms of, for example, the accessibility plans . . . Like I'm looking at the Act here and it contemplates the Government of Saskatchewan, yet to be named public sector bodies, and then any other prescribed person.

I understand and wholly support this idea of government being leaders, but I don't see anything under the Act that contemplates the application to the private sector going forward. Can you point me to anything within the Act that points to that being part of this accessibility plan contemplated under the Act?

Ms. Michaud: — Okay, yeah. As you noted, it says "any other prescribed person." And that's where, you know, going forward, decisions may be made to have, you know, the requirement for plans could be made to apply to different classes within the private sector. So that's something that would be made going forward.

Ms. Conway: — So that's something that would appear in, for example, regulation?

Ms. Michaud: — Yes.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. Are there currently plans in the works to

go there in a . . . Is there a timeline or plans to go there in the next, you know, 5 to 10 years?

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. No decisions have been made at this point. What we will be doing, we'll be focusing on taking the steps needed to implement the legislation. And so our first sort of areas of focus will be on developing the general regulations, the prescribing of public bodies, etc., and taking the steps to establish the public advisory committee. And then sort of as we work on regulations with the advisory committee, then we'd be making those decisions going forward.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Of course there was quite a bit of delay in and expectation, I think, around this bill. And you know, when we're contemplating the full participation of folks with disability in their communities, it has to involve the private sector. You know, people's experiences don't just involve the government or public bodies. And I would note that the most effective way to do that and ensure compliance is through legislation.

And there have been some really imaginative things done in other jurisdictions, kind of economic incentives to the private sector. Because of course, you know, what I heard in my consultations is the private sector actually has a lot to gain by being much more accessible in terms of the economic benefits that they would enjoy as a result of opening up their places of business or whatever it is, their organizations to, you know, as you noted, potentially 25 per cent of the population.

So as disability critic I was disappointed to see that this hasn't yet been contemplated. And it was a major source of feedback to me in preparing for committee, folks hoping to kind of bring that message that that is very much something I think people would like to see. And there's all kinds of really promising ways to do that that wouldn't just, you know, overburden the private sector if that's the concern. So you know, wanting to just kind of put that on the record here tonight that I'm really hoping that that's something that becomes a priority going forward.

But in terms of the Act as it exists, Ms. Michaud made reference to certain standards that are applied universally. Could you just maybe explain to me what you mean by that? You referenced the service dog example.

[19:15]

Like are you saying that some of those standards, you know, that all sectors will be subject to some of those universal standards? I just didn't quite understand, Ms. Michaud, what you meant by that.

Ms. Michaud: — My example was, my service animal example was really related to, for example if you're talking about access rights then that would, just by its very nature, apply to the private sector. So you know, I think you referenced accessibility plans, and that is the sort of first year, second year with government and then public sector bodies. But it's just depending on the standards that are being developed, and by their nature, then decisions will be made on to whom they apply.

So just to explain a little bit, you know, if you have sort of access and training standards for service animals, then those would, just

by their very nature, need to apply to the private sector to ensure that people who use service animals would have access rights.

Ms. Conway: — So does something like that exist currently? Like, is there anything under this Act that say, you speak about these access rights; if there was, say, a private sector entity that wasn't honouring that standard, is there anything that could sort of address that under the Act as it exists today?

Ms. Michaud: — So the way that the Act is designed, it's mainly enabling government to make regulations. So there are some key areas: service animals, the built environment, information communications, transportation. And the reason, the way that the Act is organized right now is that it enables making those standards, and then once the decisions are made and the standards are in regulations, then the Act would apply.

The other important thing to note about this Act is that it is intended to work in tandem with existing legislation. So it's not intended to duplicate legislation such as the human rights code. Potentially we could be looking at employment standards legislation, etc. So it may be the standards would be, you know, clarifying or filling in gaps from those pieces of legislation to ensure that barriers are removed, but it wouldn't be sort of creating a new, you know, a duplicating standard.

So for example, for service animals there are already access rights, and then standards might be developed to sort of clarify and make some definitions there. The things that the Act requires right away without regulations are the making of the accessibility plans.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Ms. Michaud. So I guess is it fair to say that the focus, the immediate focus is for government to develop these accessibility plans? I think the Government of Saskatchewan has a year subsequent, public bodies have three years, and then the regulation will kind of flesh out the standards for kind of the rest of folks in due time. Is that kind of the idea?

Ms. Michaud: — So thank you. So yes, you're correct. Government will have one year subsequent to coming into force to develop its accessibility plan. For public sector bodies it will be two years. And then regulations will be made, you know, in consultation with the community, so with the advisory committee and hearing from the disability community. And regulations there will be made and requirements sort of in a number of areas.

Ms. Conway: — The accessibility advisory committee . . . See, it would be really interesting to hear that the advisory committee, one of their main purposes is to develop the actual regulations. Is that the plan? Like I note here that that committee will be formed according to the regulations. So to me when I read the Act, I thought the regulations would kind of already be in place. I love this idea that the advisory committee will be actively involved in creating those regulations around accessibility standards. Is that what's being contemplated, Minister?

Ms. Michaud: — So yeah, there are a number of steps that are planned around developing the policies and processes for establishing the advisory committee, receiving applications, etc. And then they will be involved, you know, in the regulation-making process. They'll be involved in the design and then providing recommendations to government for the regulations.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. You mentioned the human rights code. And I guess, again one of the consistent areas of feedback I got around the Act was, you know, in a perfect world — well in the current world — public bodies should be providing barrier-free services, particularly government, and that the human rights code and the Charter already requires that of government and of public bodies. So the concern is, you know, what work is the accessibility Act doing? How would you respond to that, Minister?

Ms. Wihlidal: — Hi. Stefanie Wihlidal. Thanks for the question. Yes, so the human rights code contains prohibitions based on discrimination. Of course disability is one of them. And so what our legislation is going to do is have specific requirements in each of those seven key areas. So if it's the accessible employment standards, we'll have specific accessibility requirements throughout the hiring cycle.

Ms. Conway: — So a little more meat on the bone?

Ms. Wihlidal: — Yes.

Ms. Conway: — Yeah. And that's really good to hear. I just, I think that is . . . You know, some of the disappointment around the sector is just, you know, arguably a public sector body should be doing that work. You know, although the Charter and human rights code doesn't provide that sort of detailed breakdown of how government as an employer, for example, needs to create that workplace, these are arguably things that should be happening or should have been happening.

I guess one of the questions I had is, to what extent did a dialogue with the Human Rights Commission inform at all the Act? I know — I don't know specifically — I know that a number of the complaints they get are around, you know, barriers in workplaces and other places. Did you have any kind of dialogue with the Human Rights Commission around the kinds of complaints they were seeing, the number of complaints they were seeing? And is anything in this Act, or the contemplated regulations, kind of directly responsive to some of the issues that maybe we're seeing come up again and again?

Ms. Wihlidal: — Thanks for the question. Yes, so we did meet with the Human Rights Commission prior to our public engagement just to make sure we were on the right track, and then they did participate in a number of our engagement opportunities — the virtual discussion forums and submitting survey responses. And they gave us information about what the common complaints they receive regarding disability are and that helped to inform the seven key areas that we're going to develop those specific requirements in.

[19:30]

Ms. Conway: — Thank you for that. Can you speak a bit more about those areas that they were kind of specifically seeing concerns around?

Ms. Wihlidal: — Thank you. Yes, so when we met with them we certainly considered all the complaints information that they shared with us, which was really great. And we looked across to the other provinces too that have accessibility legislation to see what are those barriers that persons with disabilities are currently

experiencing. And so that really informed those seven key areas, and those were also based on the public engagement feedback as well.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, is it possible at all to provide a little more detail about the nature of the complaints you are hearing about? Without obviously, you know, saying anything that would tend to reveal the identity of anyone. Obviously that would be private. But surely there were some themes and some categories. Can you speak to that?

Ms. Michaud: — So thank you. Basically, as mentioned, the themes of the complaints that we've been receiving did have a great deal to do with informing the seven key areas that we've identified for regulation and standard development.

So for example, you know, the built environment, we would be looking at potentially where people might not be able to access a physical space even if a building meets building code requirements. But there might be, you know, very simple things like parking spaces, you know, accessible parking spaces that are either not properly designed or don't exist, or you know, outside walkways that are not covered under existing building codes but still caused people to have, you know, barriers accessing a physical space. So that's one of the areas that the Human Rights Commission did identify.

Information and communications. Again, you know, that has been things like the ability to acquire information either from a public body or a business in a manner that people can access. So that might be things like either a plain language or, you know, the ability to have interpretation in a manner that . . . like in access to sign language interpreters. So those are some of the areas.

Of course access to employment. And so that would be potentially ensuring that people have equal access to an accessible interview guide or, you know, that interviews are done in a manner that people can fully participate.

Certainly, you know, transportation. This may be, for example, where there's been situations where either, you know, ride-share or cab companies would not have wheelchair accessible transportation available or might refuse to take a service animal. Service animals themselves certainly, you know, access to public spaces, being denied access.

And then finally, you know, looking at opportunities for, you know, people wanting opportunities to participate in sort of public life. So that's why we've included procurement as, you know, something that has to consider accessibility standards, you know, in its design.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. And I'm glad to hear the focus will not just be on citizens who use government services, but folks who work within these public bodies. I did hear a fair amount of concern around, you know, accessible workplaces and opportunities. I guess I want to . . . Just before I move off the topic of the sort of limited application, if I can call it that, I think some of the nature of the feedback I got was that there's a concern that the Act has some good definitions as I said, has some aspirational elements, but there's a lot of language around encouraging compliance.

I mean how do I put this? A lot of language around monitoring, reviewing, encouraging compliance with accessibility standards. Not a lot of language around enforcement, requirements. So I think there's a concern or a fair amount of anxiety on the part of folks that were looking to this legislation that it lacks teeth, I guess is where I'm going with that.

And I'll just give you an example. You know if I look at subsection 2-2(6) and (7). So for example, this is under "Accessibility plans." These are these accessibility plans we were discussing.

And just for all the folks tuning in at home, the legislation kind of contemplates two separate things: the requirement of accessibility plans for government for yet-to-be-prescribed public sector bodies and for yet-to-be-prescribed persons on the one hand; and then it also contemplates the application of accessibility standards.

Now under the "Accessibility plans" portion of the Act, you know, and this is top of page 5:

(6) The Government of Saskatchewan and any public sector body must establish processes for . . . [reviewing] comments from the public with respect to their accessibility plans.

So there we see an example of that really strong word, the word "must." And then in the next provision, we see:

(7) If the Director becomes aware of a deficiency with respect to an accessibility plan of a public sector body to which this section applies, the Director may:

(a) provide that public sector body with notice of the deficiency, and

(b) in the notice mentioned . . . direct that the deficiency be remedied within a specified period.

And there's a few examples like that throughout the Act, which were a significant red flag for me and for many of the other folks I consulted with. Where people expected to see, really, like a signal that, you know, these standards will be taken really seriously, that there's going to be implementation, that there's going to be consequences if they're not implemented. Because we know, you know, this is really the best way to make change is to require these things, not to give people the option, not to give the minister discretion, but to require these things, and if people don't comply, to have a consequence. And I see that throughout the Act.

And so I understand where that anxiety on the part of folks are coming from. You know, the Act as it exists, it contemplates these application plans and accessibility standards, and there's a lot of encouragement language. But again the focus is on encouraging folks to come up with a plan, not necessarily defining the application of the plan, and certainly not implementing the plan at risk of consequences.

So, Minister, could you speak to those concerns? Because I understand why people have them, and I have them myself just reviewing the Act in terms of a lot of the language that was chosen. That language has a lot of power when we look at

legislation, the difference between “may” and “must.” So can you speak to that?

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. Yeah, so the way that the bill is designed and sort of the intent behind it is first to work with, you know, to work with obligated individuals and persons to make sure that we help them to identify barriers to accessibility and educate on how to remove them.

[19:45]

And then in the example you cited, where the director sort of “may” make an order to correct a deficiency in a plan. And the reason that that was done was because, you know, rather than have a director respond to all, you know, obligate the director to respond to all plan deficiencies with a formal order, this gives the flexibility for the director to be able to provide a response. So often it may be just sort of informing that there’s a deficiency and a formal order may not be necessary.

Now there are built into the legislation, where sort of compliance continues to not happen, there will be opportunities for administrative penalties to be applied and there’s also the ability to have a fine of up to \$250,000. So you know, the idea is that the bill sort of starts with trying to educate people; to have them learn sort of what the barriers that are in place are, here’s how to remove them; if there are deficiencies, how to correct them. But the bill does have the opportunity for sort of non-compliance to be enforced.

Ms. Conway: — The accessibility plans, there are no requirements for self-reporting with respect to the progress of the plan. I noted that every three years they’re supposed to be reviewed, but I was concerned to see that there’s no requirement of self-reporting throughout the process. And I guess together with the lack of sort of concrete guidance for these plans, which is in contrast to the delineation of some of the barriers in subsection 5-1, that concerned me. Can you speak to that, Minister?

I also don’t note a link in the legislation between these accessibility plans and accessibility standards, and under the accessibility standards section, it applies to prescribed persons only, not government or public sector bodies. Can you speak to that aspect of the Act as well?

Ms. Wihlidal: — Thank you. Yes, so for the accessibility plans, that requirement, any obligated organization that’s required to do a plan, they have to consult with persons with disabilities to understand what the current barriers are in interacting with that organization, because that’s really important information. So what are those barriers?

And then based on that information, the organization will identify the actions they’re going to take to address those. And so the other thing is that they’ll be considering certain principles of inclusion, adaptability, diversity, collaboration, self-determination, and universal design. And another thing about the plans is that, so for the government and public sector bodies, they must establish a process for receiving comments from the public with respect to their plans. So that’s another requirement related to that.

Ms. Conway: — So, Minister, my question was around the lack of requirement for self-reporting for the accessibility plans, and the lack of link between the accessibility standards and the accessibility plans. I’m sure the hope in developing these accessibility standards is that they’ll have broad application to many different contexts, so why not specifically provide for that link in the legislation? Can you speak to that?

Ms. Michaud: — Okay, so thank you. For reporting, one of the ways that government would be reporting, for example on its accessibility plan, would be through the annual report that it’s required to table and report progress on implementing the legislation.

As far as the link between the plans themselves and the standards, so the reason that that’s not sort of specifically identified is that any organization may be developing or removing barriers where either only one standard applies, or maybe multiple standards apply. But it’s unlikely that any one plan would be touching on all of the standards. One of the other things to note is that, you know, that the needs of persons with disabilities, that the nature of barriers, etc., will change. And that’s why we linked it to the principles, the overall principles.

And then the standards themselves, you know, once they apply, they don’t need . . . like, that goes without saying. It’s like any other piece of legislation, that the plans that are developed would have to be consistent with the requirements of those standards.

Ms. Conway: — So all the bodies and the Government of Saskatchewan and any future prescribed persons will have to do, once they’re kind of tagged to do an accessibility plan, they’ll have to submit an annual report. Sorry. I missed that.

Ms. Michaud: — No, government has to submit an annual report. But no, there’s not a specific, you know, annual report for reporting plans. One of the things is that as plans are reviewed, that would have to be done, you know, this has to be a mechanism for receiving comments from the community. And then people would then be sort of, you know, aware of and providing information on progress to the plan.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. Another concern I had was, and question I had was around the . . . So that accessibility plan section 2-2, the Government of Saskatchewan, public sector bodies, any other prescribed persons are the three entities contemplated under that section.

But then subsection (7) only contemplates public sector bodies. It says, “If the Director becomes aware of a deficiency with respect to an accessibility plan of a public sector body to which this section applies, the Director may,” and we’ve gone over that provision. Why not prescribed persons and Government of Saskatchewan? Why are they left out of that? It seems like a bit of a gaping hole.

[20:00]

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. So the Act does require that, you know, does apply that the director may make, you know, may make orders for correcting deficiencies in a public sector plan, so it does apply to public sector bodies. The other bodies as prescribed, that’s not contemplated currently but is a decision

that could be made later.

And then the other piece, the reason you asked about government's plan, is that the way that the government's plan is anticipated to be made, it'll be, you know, made in collaboration across ministries, and that will already include, you know, the director as a direct educator and contributor to the making of that plan.

Ms. Conway: — Does that mean that the threat of an administrative penalty, though, doesn't apply to the other entities contemplated under this section? That's my concern is the lack of teeth, that it only applies to public sector bodies not the Government of Saskatchewan and not any future prescribed persons.

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. So the administrative penalties do not . . . like, they're not limited to the plan. Each set of standards, regulations will identify to whom they apply and what the requirements are, and you know, sort of what the potential administrative penalties would be there.

Ms. Conway: — You're talking, Ms. Michaud, about part 7, part 7 of the Act, like the "Offences, Administrative Penalties and Appeals" under part 7?

Ms. Michaud: — Just one moment.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Just, we want to clarify what . . . You asked if it was referring to part 7, in reference to Ms. Michaud's answer.

Ms. Conway: — So it seems that there's, like in terms of compliance, there's part 7, "Offences, Administrative Penalties and Appeals," which appear to apply to persons. So section 7-1(1) there, it says "No person shall," and it goes through a list including "contravene any provision of this Act . . ." And that's where the potential to fine an entity \$250,000 is — up to — which Ms. Michaud had referenced earlier.

I guess I'm a little unclear about how that part 7 or the offences and administrative penalty portion of the Act relate to this deficiency . . . this administrative penalty mentioned under the accessibility plans and sign language portion of the Act. So that's part 2. I'm having trouble squaring those because . . .

So section 2-2(7) and (8) contemplate "If the public sector body fails to remedy the deficiency . . . the Director may impose an administrative penalty pursuant to section 7-3." I see. Sorry, I think I'm maybe working it out in my own mind. Can you give me one moment just to read this? Yeah, thanks.

So if you could just maybe . . . It appears that part 7, it's contemplated that that will be like the administrative penalty enforcement system for future prescribed persons. So this 2-2(7) and (8) clarifies that that administrative penalty regime also applies to public sector bodies. Am I summarizing that correctly? Sorry, it's hard to do this also just verbally without pointing to the Act.

Maybe if I could also clarify my question. So a breach of the Act or regulation can result in an inspection/order and administrative penalty contemplated under part 6, in particular 6-9. And then

there's this separate regime for failing to address a deficiency under 2-2(8) and 7-3 but no power to require compliance with respect to any deficiency as far as I can tell. Just can you speak to those two compliance pieces and administrative penalty pieces? I'm just a little . . . Maybe I'm just confused and I need to be straightened out.

Ms. Wihlidal: — Thank you. Yes, I'll try to provide a bit of clarity if I can. So maybe I'll just go to high level. The purpose of those plans is for the organization to identify those barriers, that person's experience when they interact with that organization.

So 2-2(7) is . . . So those public sector bodies in government have to publicly post their plan. And so if the director's made aware of a deficiency in the plan, that's really a poor plan, a plan that you can tell didn't put a lot of work into, not a lot of reflection on what are those existing barriers and what actions are they going to take to address those, to remove those. Then the director can give a notice and if the person does not comply with that . . . So the notice will say, your plan is deficit in this way and you must fix it by this time. And if that organization is not compliant, then it can move to an administrative penalty.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. And then with respect to the regime under 6-9 and 6-11, that's more the seeking a compliance order through the Court of King's Bench. Can you speak to how that would work?

Ms. Wihlidal: — So I wonder if it might be helpful to just talk about some of the compliance measures and enforcement tools. And I can see how it's a bit confusing because they're in different places and it's not a natural order of progression.

[20:15]

So in terms of the compliance measures, the first step is really to do broad education with the public and obligated organizations — there's a new law, there's new requirements and what those are. And we want to do a lot of education just so that everybody has an accessibility lens so when they're building something, developing a program, they're thinking about the needs of persons with disabilities from the beginning. Because that's how those barriers are created. People just aren't thinking about what the needs are for someone who uses a mobility aid, has a hearing impairment.

And so the other thing the Saskatchewan accessibility office will do is receive and monitor complaints about non-compliance. And the purpose of that will be to track trends. So if there's a certain organization or a sector that people are reporting that there's a lot of specific accessibility barriers, then . . . [inaudible] . . . targeted education to that group.

And so in terms of enforcement tools, we have some of those in the Act. And the purpose of those is to compel those organizations that are not compliant — even after we've done a lot of education with them — and so we can do inspections to ensure an organization is following the law, and the inspector can provide an order that requires them to fix that contravention.

So once we have standards, and there's a requirement to do a certain thing, and we receive a complaint, then we can verify —

because there's often two sides — so the inspector can verify objectively what is going on. And then they can issue an order saying, you must fix this; there is a requirement; you're not following it; you need to follow it.

And then if they still don't, after that it can be escalated to administrative penalties for non-compliance and the director can issue those, and that can be a monetary fine. And then after that, we can apply to the court for a compliance order.

And the last stage is then when we would apply to the Court of Queen's Bench for an offence to be . . . for prosecution to be looked into and potentially a fine imposed by the court.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, that's more clear, thank you. Can apply to the Court of Queen's Bench for compliance with the administrative penalty or compliance with the Act? Or both? Or either?

Ms. Michaud: — We'd be applying to the court for an order enforcing the order of the director. So the idea would be that it would give the director's order the same force as an order made by the courts.

Ms. Conway: — The administrative penalties section, they're contemplated for ". . . prescribed contraventions of this Act or the regulations." Do you have some notion of where those administrative penalties are going to be applied?

Ms. Michaud: — So those decisions will be made as regulation development proceeds.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Yeah, and I think I was a bit confused. I think though there's also like a little bit of lack of clarity around the administrative penalty, a little bit of uncertainty, at least as it appears in the Act. But hopefully that will be more fleshed out in regulation. The plan is to address the administrative penalty in regulation, Minister?

Ms. Michaud: — Yes. So the regulations will identify sort of the offences and the levels of administrative penalties and the situations.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, thank you. What does the advisory committee do besides help establish these accessibility standards? And just for those tuning in at home, the Act indicates that the advisory committee will:

- (a) . . . advise the minister, on the request of the minister, with respect to any matter related to the administration of this Act and the regulations; and
- (b) to perform any other prescribed functions.

So the reason I asked that question, very broad, wondering what you're contemplating at this point in time beyond be involved in establishing those accessibility standards.

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. So the advisory committee certainly will play a key role in advising on developing the accessibility standards regulations. They will also play a role in facilitating engagement with the community. They will also be advising and establishing specific standards development

committees, subcommittees. And also they'll be advising the minister on how to promote accessibility and removal of barriers.

Ms. Conway: — How is the minister going to select individuals for that committee?

Ms. Michaud: — So thank you. This is actually one of the key pieces of the legislation and really, you know, reflects government's commitment to the "nothing about us without us." The advisory committee again is going to be made up of a minimum of 50 per cent persons with disabilities or organizations that support persons with disabilities. And it's going to again play a key role in advising, you know, on development of the regulations. The specific processes for appointing the committee members have not yet been developed. However it will be a public application process and appointment by the minister.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry, I missed that last part. A public . . .

Ms. Michaud: — Application process.

Ms. Conway: — And sorry, I missed the last thing you said after that.

Ms. Michaud: — And then appointment by the minister.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, thank you. By far the . . . I mean it's clear from the Act that this advisory committee is going to be very significant. And by far, individual after individual, organization after organization that I spoke to, almost without exception — I'm going to say actually without exception — there was a concern not only on the part of individuals living with disabilities, but also this was articulated to me by representatives of organizations, including able-bodied folks that worked for the sector, over that word "or," that darn word "or" in there:

[Fifty per cent] . . . of the members of the committee are to be:

- (a) persons with disabilities; or
- (b) persons employed by or associated with organizations that support persons with disabilities.

Respectfully, Minister, it is not good enough to have 50 per cent of the committee as able-bodied folks, potentially, that work in the sector. That is completely at odds with, you know, the principle that you stated in your opening remarks: nothing with us without us, nothing for us without us. Folks are really concerned about that word "or." They don't think it should be there. They think that people living with disability are more than capable of putting forward their perspectives and their concerns on that committee.

Minister, would you consider removing that word so that this committee can be at least a majority of individuals living with disabilities? We see that self-advocates are certainly more than capable of bringing their perspectives to the table. There's no reason you can't include other people on the committee from the sector, but I think it's really important that this committee require at least 50 per cent of folks to be living with disability. And I don't think it's good enough to include simply individuals that work in the sector.

Ms. Michaud: — Okay. So thank you. So I guess one of the important things is to talk about the fact that this requires at least 50 per cent. So that's the minimum number that needs to be on the advisory committee so it's possible that there could be more.

And one of the . . . You know, the main reason for including organizations that work with people with disabilities is that, you know, an individual is able to provide their perspective. But we feel that it's also important to hear sort of the perspective of different communities of people with disabilities and, by including the organizations in that number, that we're able to then hear, you know, from organizations that represent large numbers of people with disabilities and who work directly with more than . . . And that way we get more than one person's lived experience. We actually have the benefit of, you know, having the experience of many people who work.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, it's definitely a good idea to have representation from the sector on this committee, but folks in the disability community deserve a legislated assurance that they will make up the majority of this committee. There's nothing to stop you, Minister, from appointing additional folks from the sector to, you know, fill gaps that you feel aren't represented by the individuals selected for the committee.

[20:30]

I think this is really important, again, that I think it's a question of respect to have that legislated assurance, not have to rely on the goodwill of the minister to exercise good judgment and maybe get the right folks. There should be an assurance in place under this legislation that the majority of folks informing these standards are folks with lived experience.

You know, that was the whole idea behind the wheelchair challenge yesterday. You know, like you just don't know until you've experienced it yourself. And that's not to say . . . I mean, there are all kinds of different disabilities, and you know, a person with one disability doesn't speak for others. But I think folks deserve this legislated assurance.

And I just want to read to you just a couple of sentences from letters I received about section 4-2(3), which is the provision that we're discussing: "This does not give people with disabilities a voice. Nothing without us." Moving to a different letter: "This is absolutely unacceptable." And this is from an individual that works in the sector, an able-bodied person who works in the sector.

Sorry, I had a third quote in front of me and now it's . . . I'll come back to this, Minister. I had a third but I think you get the idea. I see you nodding and I hope that's something that you'll consider, and again not just in terms of making an appointment on the committee, but really putting in place an assurance by way of legislation that not just yourself but future ministers in this area will be required to have an advisory board that is made up of at least a majority of folks with lived experience.

And again it was by far one of the loudest concerns I heard. It was everyone I spoke to and it was right off the bat, this concern with the committee. And I think it makes sense given the role that is contemplated for the committee under this Act.

How much has the ministry allocated in terms of dollars for overseeing the Act? I believe you gave me a number for just this year at one point. I'm just wondering what the plan is in terms of the cost for administering the Act going forward.

I also had a question about this creation of the Saskatchewan accessibility office, the structure there. Would that be within the existing office of disability issues? Will that be separate? Can you speak to the structure there?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So the expenditure for '23-24 is budgeted at 441,000. And I'll ask Ms. Michaud to talk about the structure.

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you, Minister. So the Saskatchewan accessibility office will be located within the Ministry of Social Services' disability programs division in order to focus, in order to draw from the expertise of working with the community and the sector, as the office of disability issues is also located within that division. The main differences between the two is that the Saskatchewan accessibility office will be focused specifically on implementing this legislation.

It'll be focused on regulation development and implementation of this legislation, whereas the office of disability issues has a different mandate around advising government on, you know, policy matters and the issues relating to service for people with disabilities in many areas, including outside of this legislation, and also in helping liaise with the community. The two offices certainly will work closely and in collaboration.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry if I missed this. The staff complement for the new office? And I guess, will those be new positions? Will they be moving over from the office of disability issues? Can you speak to that?

Ms. Michaud: — The Saskatchewan accessibility office has three new positions.

Ms. Conway: — And is that the total number of positions at that office?

Ms. Michaud: — At this time.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, thank you. I found the letter I wanted to refer to earlier. I am going to read the portion into the record because it actually makes an additional, I think, important point:

My primary concern with this legislation is that it does not place enough priority on lived experience from people who have disabilities on the advisory board. [I think they mean advisory committee.] Often people who have disabilities like me can't work for non-profits that aim to serve disabled folks, because the majority of NPOs in Saskatchewan do not have health plans that would even cover my medication as a disabled person.

Interesting point in terms of the barriers to being employed by some of those organizations.

The timelines contemplated in the Act, Minister, can you talk about why you arrived where you did in terms of the one, two years, the review every seven years?

And then can you speak to the reason for the delay? I think I was asked to, you know, specifically touch on that today. I think it was many, many years ago that the recommendation for this kind of legislation was made, and we certainly are an outlier as a jurisdiction. Can you just speak to why this was so long coming?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So in terms of the delay that you had talked about and mentioned, this government announced in the Speech from the Throne in 2019 we wanted to engage on this accessibility legislation. So this is enabling legislation. This is new legislation which in itself takes quite a bit of time, and the engagement and the consultation that we committed to do and we did — or not we did, the ministry did, I'm sorry — engaged roughly 1,300 people. And so that does take time. Writing the legislation and taking feedback from those extensive consultations just simply does take time.

My understanding also, the pandemic played a role in delays and timelines as well. And so . . . But in terms of the 7 and 10-year check-ins or what was contemplated to review some of the parts of the Act, I would ask Louise to go over that.

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you, Minister. So yes, the initial review period for the legislation is that there's a legislated review after seven years and then every 10 years after that. And the reason that this does appear to be long . . . However there are a number of things that matter when we do these reviews. One being certainly the ability to engage while doing the reviews.

In addition we'd be looking at, you know, making sure that between sort of the review itself, the engagement, any potential amendments, that there's enough time to, you know, to implement those amendments and then to evaluate the outcomes of that implementation before, you know, to give those implementations time to take effect and evaluate the outcomes before we start on the next review.

You had also asked about the time frame around the one and the two years for government and public bodies, respectively, to develop their accessibility plans. And again, one of the key components of developing these plans will be the requirement to engage, you know, to consult the public and to consult the community. So we wanted to ensure that there's enough time for people to, you know, understand what the plan looks like, to develop the plan, and then to be able to engage with affected individuals.

The other thing is that we've learned, you know, that these are workable time frames from the experiences of other jurisdictions that have already implemented accessibility legislation. And they had some advice as well around sort of what timeline reviews might be and making sure that there is enough time to understand the impact of implementation of the bill itself, and then also any potential amendments that are made after a review before, you know, starting to review it again.

[20:45]

Ms. Conway: — Minister, it was referred to in the 2019 Throne Speech, but I believe the 2015 disability strategy identified the need for this legislation, so that's going back, you know, about eight years now. We were both copied on a letter from the executive director of a disability organization, and it reads, "We

believe the review of the Act initially in seven years and then every 10 years afterwards is too long to establish concrete and effective change."

Folks are chomping at the bit, you know, to see these changes happen. Seven and ten years does seem long. Can you speak directly to those folks that have specifically raised this issue in terms of the delay?

Ms. Michaud: — So I can speak to the, again, the seven years for the initial review and then review every 10 years. And again the rationale for making that decision was around ensuring that, you know, although a review happens is that, you know, then if amendments are made that there's sufficient time for those amendments to be implemented and then for those amendments to have or, you know, not have the impact that they're intended to have in the community.

So that there's actually time, sufficient time to measure the effect of any, of initial implementation and then potentially after a review, any amendments that might be made before reviewing again.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Ms. Michaud. And I hear the concerns around, you know, learning from other jurisdictions. I guess my concern is, you know, when you look at some place like Ontario — yeah, they had some pretty ambitious timelines, but they also had some pretty ambitious requirements that aren't necessarily reflected in this Act.

Like, you know, they had a set of rules that entities had to meet within two years and then within five years, etc., etc. They had sort of prescribed requirements around implementing, for example, 10-year compliance plans with punishments laid out in great detail. I guess one of my concerns is there's less of that here. There's less kind of meat on the bone.

What I'm hearing is that a lot of that is maybe going to be contemplated under regulation. But hopefully, you know, the minister will continue to monitor the Act if not going so far as to do a formal review going forward.

I have one other, kind of, area of questions and then I think I just have some like final questions that won't take me very long.

But can you speak, Minister, to the service and procurement accessibility standards that you think will come out of this Act for health care, education, for housing? I don't think we see any of those standards stipulated under the Act. Are those going to be in regulation? Are those going to be more contemplated under the accessibility standards? Can you speak to that? I think folks are really eager to hear a bit more on this topic.

Ms. Michaud: — Okay, thank you. So again, this legislation being designed to complement existing legislation, we looked at, you know, as a result of receiving the feedback in the public . . . in the engagement, we looked at education and health care. And what we determined was that the things that would be typically addressed under accessibility to these services would likely be more appropriately contemplated or dealt with in standards, for example, around the built environments.

So if it's, you know, physical access to health care spaces that

isn't covered under the building code, then the built environment standards would be the place to do that. Service delivery standards, information and communication standards would also address, you know, many of the other issues that would arise in education or health care.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, how does it currently work? Like for example, when we're contemplating a new build, are these standards that exist in terms — and this just is a product of my ignorance — are these standards that exist within SaskBuilds? Or do specific ministries have accessibility standards? How does it currently work, and how does this legislation stand to kind of transform or change the status quo?

Ms. Michaud: — So if I understand your question, currently there are accessibility requirements for example in *The Construction Codes Act*. And the way that those would . . . What this legislation is designed to do — you know, again, the human rights code, etc. — is to fill gaps in existing legislation that where, you know, existing barriers to accessibility are not removed by that legislation.

So I'll use, for example, building codes. And there are standards in building codes around things like ramp heights, doorway sizes. But there are, you know, there are things missing from those that create barriers. So for example, you know, things like colouring for people with sensory impairments or neurological differences.

You would be looking potentially, with the built environment, at things like pathways in parks. Those are not covered under any legislation — you know, sort of the width or accessibility or tactile information for pathways in parks — and so the idea being that standards around the built environment would be able to address some of those gaps.

An example for information and communication standards or service delivery standards might be about, rather than when somebody approaches a counter, rather than trying to catch the eye, is to actually speak to an individual. Or, you know, having people trained to identify if somebody's sort of not able to hear them. Then, you know, how do they serve people with disabilities or different ways of communication?

Ms. Conway: — Yeah. It strikes me that compliance with building codes, we know that that isn't resulting in sufficient accessibility I think for folks across the board. So I guess my first question, I guess SaskBuilds would be a Government of Saskatchewan . . . contemplated under Government of Saskatchewan under the Act, not a public body?

Ms. Michaud: — Yes.

Ms. Conway: — So would SaskBuilds come up with an accessibility plan just for its own workplace, or would SaskBuilds be coming up with creating policies through the lens of this Act? Or will that be up to the other sort of areas to come up with their own standards when contemplating, for example, new initiatives and new builds and new programs, like be it information and communication software for example? Can you just maybe take me through how that's going to look?

Ms. Michaud: — It's actually a little bit of both. So what we would be looking at is, you know, we're working out sort of the

particulars now, the details of developing government's accessibility plan and how that's going to come together. But you know, as you talk about sort of how government policies, etc., would be developed is as standards themselves are developed and put into regulations. Then any ministry that's doing their work where those standards apply would be doing that. So if, you know, if we're looking at a standard for example for websites, then any website work done in government, if we do standards relating to information and communication, then any work done like that would have to be done in compliance with those standards.

[21:00]

Ms. Conway: — Minister, when do you hope the Act will come into force? And when do you hope these accessibility standards will be in place?

Ms. Michaud: — So before the work that needs to happen in order for the Act to come into force is, we have some general regulations that have to be developed — including the prescribing of the public bodies to whom, you know, that the Act applies to. We also need to do the work around developing the processes for applications and establishing the advisory committee. So you know, that will determine the timelines for the Act coming into force.

When the Act is in force, one of the other . . . the key pieces, one of the key pieces of work with the advisory committee will be working on developing the standards. And you know, our learnings from other jurisdictions is that they typically take a phased approach to standards development. So in consultation, we will be looking at taking a phased approach once the Act is in force to developing standards under the key areas.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, why not bring some of the provisions into force so that the Government of Saskatchewan can get working on those accessibility plans, for example? And I guess as a follow-up, surely you have some target in terms of how long this will take to get this legislation live. I think folks are very eager to know when that might happen.

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. So yeah, our target is actually to have things ready for winter '23-24, so this coming winter. And the reason that we want to implement the Act sort of at one go is to make sure that we don't have sort of unintended consequences where we start implementing some pieces of the Act, starts the clock on other pieces of the Act. So that's why we do have, you know, intention to keep moving on this and to have it ready by winter.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Do you think that those regulations that will come, like the first set of regulations will involve at least a start in terms of a list of public bodies and prescribed persons?

Ms. Michaud: — So the general regulations will prescribe the public bodies that will be required to have their accessibility plans ready within two years of the Act coming into force.

Ms. Conway: — Perfect, but no plans for the any otherwise prescribed persons at this point?

Ms. Michaud: — Typically those would be found in specific

standards.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. Will municipalities be included in public bodies?

Ms. Michaud: — That's going to be fleshed out in the regulations.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. I did do some consultations at that level, and what I heard was that cities need to do more to ensure physical mobility barriers are removed from civic life. And particularly from councillors I heard that funding streams for new-built environment standards should be established by the province because of course this stuff ain't cheap. And then I heard also that often larger Saskatchewan cities have the resources, sometimes, required to develop finances and deploy accessibility initiatives, but a lot of smaller communities really struggle with the capacity to do that.

So I guess what I'm wondering is whether, in terms of public bodies like municipalities or future prescribed persons, whether there will be any delineated funding streams available to entities contemplated under the Act in meeting these standards.

Ms. Michaud: — So that's not contemplated under this legislation, so that's decisions to be made later.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, thank you. I also heard at the city level that provincial standards around procurement policies would provide much-needed direction. Do you think that this legislation will provide for those kinds of standards for municipalities?

Ms. Michaud: — Possibly, as procurement is one of the areas contemplated that's identified for regulation development, but you know, details of that would be again developed in regulation making.

Ms. Conway: — Was there any thought given to making an office of disability much like the other independent offices of the Legislative Assembly? This is certainly a concept that I support. Minister, have you given any thought to that? I believe there's some precedent for that elsewhere.

Ms. Michaud: — So thank you. So the decision was made to locate it in the Ministry of Social Services office, disability programs division. And then that decision was made in order to take advantage of existing expertise around serving people with disabilities, and also because having it within executive government makes it easier as sort of a government-led implementation Act for cross-ministry collaboration. So those were the reasons chosen to locate it within the ministry.

[21:15]

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Ms. Michaud. And one of the topics that came up quite a bit around the accessibility Act during my consultations were questions around housing, Saskatchewan Housing Corporation, and the lack of housing stock that really meets the needs of folks with barriers. Minister, can you speak a bit to how you think this Act is going to improve that within the Sask Housing Corporation, what the plans are around accessibility housing, and assurances that, you know, this issue of a lack of accessibility housing stock might somehow be

addressed in some way under this Act?

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. So the main purpose of this Act is actually to identify and remove accessibility barriers to existing services. And as standards are developed, Saskatchewan Housing Corporation will be an active . . . It sort of will be a participator and collaborator in how standards are developed and will certainly comply with accessibility standards.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, do you think that this Act will lead to Saskatchewan Housing Corporation renovating, upgrading, and/or building accessible accommodation in Saskatchewan?

Ms. Michaud: — This Act wouldn't prescribe, you know, numbers or changes. But some of the standards that have yet to be developed, you know, may have impacts on or may have sort of changes, result in changes to services of the Sask Housing Corporation. But those are not known yet.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. The advisory committee, the Act contemplates that the standards will be available for general public input, but there's no obligation on the part of the minister to publish the outcome of such consultations. Will the Minister commit to making those consultations public and making the outcome of the advisory committee's consultation and advice public?

I guess my concern here is that, you know, as it is, the legislation contemplates the minister being able to request advice from the committee, but there's no requirement that the public be aware of the contents of that advice in any way, shape, or form. And so there's obviously the risk that the minister could — and this isn't personal, Minister Makowsky — but yourself or any future minister could simply hide behind the committee and say, you know, we did consultation and this is where we ended, without really showing their homework in any kind of way or putting on the public record what the results of the committee's work was.

Ms. Michaud: — So we do contemplate a lot of opportunity, you know, for engagement. The advisory committee when developing the standards will be engaging with the public. The draft standards themselves would be, you know, also put out for public engagement, and then we would be looking at potentially, like, what we heard, reports, etc.

Ms. Conway: — So it sounds like there's a fair bit of transparency kind of built into the process.

Ms. Michaud: — Yes.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. What I hear consistently is, given the interaction with folks with disability who have, you know, frequent interactions with health care, education, housing concerns — as we all do — but I think there's a lot of concern over the lack of service and procurement accessibility standards in those three main areas. Is there anything more, Minister, you can say tonight in terms of putting some meat on the bone around those standards? Or is it a wait and see?

Ms. Michaud: — Thank you. So you know, we don't want to presuppose what will be in the regulations. That would be developed, again, informed by the voices of the advisory committee and individuals and in consultation with the public.

So, committed to that “nothing about us without us,” we would defer those answers till the regulations.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Minister, in my disability portfolio the three issues that come up the most often in my office are the inadequacy of the SAID [Saskatchewan assured income for disability] rates; the crisis within the CBO [community-based organization] sector — a recruitment and retention, wage benefit crisis; and the cancellation of the STC [Saskatchewan Transportation Company] and the impact that had in particular on the disability community, particularly in rural settings.

[21:30]

I know one of the letters that I read from today was from an individual who had to move into the city after the cancellation of the STC because he could no longer go back and forth for the care that he needed. Do you think there’s anything under this Act that will change or improve those three issues: publicly available transportation across the province, accessible transportation, because we know how that ended with the Rider Express, for example; a crisis within the CBO sector; and the inadequacy of SAID rates. Can you speak to that?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So in terms of the question, what I would say again, and it’s been explained a few times by officials, but this legislation is about removing barriers, existing barriers; accessibility of existing services, not about service levels; and who’s eligible and adequacy of rates, etc. So again, focusing on removing of existing barriers.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. I would suggest that for sure the lack of accessible transportation is a huge barrier for folks.

But with that all being said, I know it’s been a long day and a long night for everyone, and I have no further questions. So thank you.

The Chair: — Thank you, Ms. Conway. Are there any more questions or comments from any committee members? Not seeing any, we will proceed to vote on the clauses. Clause 1-1, short title, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried.

[Clause 1-1 agreed to.]

[Clauses 1-2 to 9-1 inclusive agreed to.]

The Chair: — His Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, enacts as follows:
The Accessible Saskatchewan Act.

I would ask a member to move that we report Bill No. 103, *The Accessible Saskatchewan Act* without amendment. Mr. Friesen moves. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. Minister Makowsky, do you have any

closing comments you’d like to make?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Thank you very much for the questions and officials for being here and all the hard work the officials have done to get us to this point in this Act. And more work coming, but we have a start here. So thanks to the committee again.

The Chair: — Terrific. Thank you, Minister. And, Ms. Conway, do you have any closing comments you’d like to make?

Ms. Conway: — I do. Thank you, Chair. I just wanted to summarize a little bit of I think hopefully what I tried to bring to this committee. It was the result of significant consultation. I do, you know, think it’s a positive step forward to have the accessibility Act.

My questions hopefully reflected some of my concerns though around the lack of detail around the scope and application of the Act, standards, clear requirements around timelines and implementation, the lack of application potentially to the private sector, noting of course that that should be a phased-in approach and that the government has a role to play in making the case for greater accessibility, perhaps even financial grants to ease the burden of that.

But what I heard tonight is that a lot of these details will be fleshed out in regulations, so I’ll be waiting, you know, to have a look at that, of which the advisory committee will have an important role. So I’m hoping to see that that advisory committee is a robust process, a transparent process and, as I raised earlier tonight, is a process of which the majority of the voices on that committee represent the voices of folks with lived experience.

So with that, I would like to thank the officials for being here tonight, thank the minister, thank the members of the committee, the staff, Hansard, everyone. I know it was a long night, so thank you so much.

The Chair: — Thank you, Ms. Conway. And on behalf of the committee, I’d like to also thank Hansard, legislative services, as well as building security for ensuring that everything in this facility runs smoothly and into the evening.

So that concludes our business for today. I would ask a member to move a motion of adjournment. Mr. Hargrave has moved. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. This committee stands adjourned until Tuesday, May 9th, 2023 at 3:30 p.m.

[The committee adjourned at 21:40.]