



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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[The committee met at 15:30.]

The Chair: — Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the Standing Committee on Human Services.

My name is Alana Ross, and I am your Chair this evening. Committee members are Ms. Jennifer Bowes sitting in for Mr. Jared Clarke; Mr. Terry Dennis sitting in for Mr. Muhammad Fiaz; Mr. Warren Kaeding; Mr. Travis Keisig sitting in for Mr. Hugh Nerlien; and Mr. Marv Friesen.

Today the committee will be considering the estimates for the Ministry of Advanced Education and the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Social Services. Advanced Education has two votes, vote 37, budgetary appropriation, and vote 169, lending and investing activities.

**General Revenue Fund
Advanced Education
Vote 37**

Subvote (AE01)

The Chair: — We will begin our consideration with vote 37, Advanced Education, central management and services, subvote (AE01). Mr. Wyant is here with his officials, and I would ask that officials please state their names before speaking, and please don't touch the microphones. The Hansard operator will turn your microphone on when you are speaking to committee.

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

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Thank you very much, Madam Chair. And thanks to the committee, to Ms. Bowes for being here today. I'm pleased to be here to speak about the Ministry of Advanced Education's '24-25 budget.

I'm joined by my deputy minister, to my left, Rebecca Carter; my chief of staff, Jill Stroeder; David Boehm, assistant deputy minister; Mark Wyatt to my right, assistant deputy minister; Jon Altwasser, executive director of corporate finance; Kirk Wosminity, executive director of student and support services. Lindell Veitch is with us, executive director of strategy, planning and sector engagement; Mike Pestill, executive director of sector management and relations; Shirley Zhou, director, international education and jurisdictional initiatives; and Duane Rieger, executive director of business systems and information management.

Madam Chair, our government is focused on ensuring that sustainable funding, programs, and opportunities are in place for Saskatchewan's post-secondary students. The Ministry of Advanced Education is committed to supporting an accessible, responsive, and accountable post-secondary sector.

I'm very proud of how our government works collaboratively with the sector to achieve a common goal: to provide students with world-class post-secondary education, one that will enable them to have rewarding careers and productive lives right here in Saskatchewan. Students are the future of our province, and we are committed to supporting them from their first year of studies

to entering the workforce after graduating.

This year we're investing \$793 million in post-secondary education which is an increase of \$28.2 million, or 3.7 per cent, over last year. This will support students and institutions through increased operating funding, new and expanded health care training programs, priority infrastructure projects, and financial support for students. The investments and initiatives in the Ministry of Advanced Education's budget support our overarching goal to empower students to pursue their dreams and learn close to home so that they can find meaningful employment and build their careers and lives right here in this great province.

So I'll now provide some key budget highlights. The '24-25 budget represents the fourth and final year of the highly successful multi-year funding agreement between our government and Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions. The agreement has meant funding predictability for institutions. They continue to express how much they appreciate the government's approach.

As you know, the first two years of the agreement we provided \$60 million in additional funding. That funding helped our institutions manage through the pandemic and supported projects focused on revenue generation, expense reduction, and academic and administrative innovation.

For the final year of the agreement we're providing a one-time top-up of \$12 million in operating funding, a 2.2 per cent increase over last year. This is in direct response to the needs of our institutions. They communicated to us their challenges with inflationary pressures, and this increase will help them to remain responsive to the needs of students, communities, and the labour market. The ministry is already working with institutions on the next multi-year funding agreement, which is expected to be submitted to the '25-26 budget development process.

Health-related training programs continue to be a key focus for the government. The Ministry of Advanced Education plays a significant role in supporting Saskatchewan's health human resources action plan. Advanced Education is focused on the training pillar of that plan, and this year's budget marks the next phase of an ambitious training expansion that builds on our work from last year.

In '24-25 we're focused on training in areas that continue to have labour supply pressures. An investment of \$3.5 million will support 66 new training seats distributed across six training programs. This will include 48 locally delivered seats for registered nursing and registered psychiatric nursing and 18 seats in the high-demand interprovincial training programs that aren't offered in Saskatchewan. The '24-25 budget provides 1.4 million for these additional nursing seats.

Twenty-four new registered nursing seats will be offered in Regina and Saskatoon through the collaborative Bachelor of Science in Nursing program, which is jointly delivered by the University of Regina and Saskatchewan Polytechnic. Another 24 new registered psychiatric nursing seats will be offered by Saskatchewan Polytechnic — 16 seats in Saskatoon and 8 in North Battleford through North West College. This continues our government's commitment announced last year to initiate a

health training expansion of 550 seats.

We're providing \$19 million in operating funding this year to continue implementation. This represents \$3.1 million or a 19 per cent increase over last year. As of January '24, 80 per cent of the 550 seats were made available to learners with more becoming available this year. It's a great result in light of the significant planning, preparation, funding, and human resources that are required. Our universities, our technical schools, and our regional colleges continue to work very hard in operationalizing the very ambitious initiative.

I'm very proud that our new budget provides an initial investment of \$11.4 million to support four new health training programs in Saskatchewan. This is a notable development for students and post-secondary sector. It will be a pivotal and positive change for our health force and the people that it serves.

\$10.8 million investment will enable the University of Saskatchewan's College of Medicine to begin preparing three new programs: occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, and physician assistants. The fourth is the new respiratory therapy program at Saskatchewan Polytechnic. Funding of \$600,000 will support program development this year.

There's a high demand for these professionals both here and across the country. There are significant positive initiatives that will help meet high demand for specialized professional health services in the future. The new programs will give more Saskatchewan students the opportunity to train closer to home rather than out of province, and it will make it easier to retain our graduates here in Saskatchewan.

We're extremely grateful to all our post-secondary institutions for supporting these important health training expansions so that our residents' health care needs are well served into the future. Through this work our province will train more valued health professionals.

Sharing post-secondary training capacity across provincial borders is a common occurrence. We're fortunate to partner with institutions in Alberta and British Columbia to help meet our health system's needs. Interprovincial agreements, or IPAs, help meet the needs for specialized health professionals. We're already reserving seats for a variety of health care occupations, including respiratory therapists, magnetic resonance imaging technologists, cardiovascular perfusionists, and more.

This year's budget invests \$754,000 for 18 new seats in three of the high-demand IPA training programs: diagnostic cardiac sonography, cardiology technology, and environmental public health. We will also expand seats in an existing IPA program, nuclear medicine technology.

And while students may need to study outside of the province, their clinical placements can be completed here in Saskatchewan. This helps connect students with the provincial labour market and local communities and cities, and encourage graduates to make their permanent homes right here at home.

We also connect directly with students enrolled to ensure they are aware of the specific benefits of coming back to the province

such as financial supports, job opportunities, and incentives and tax credits upon graduation.

In total the Ministry of Advanced Education has budgeted approximately \$6.7 million this year to reserve up to 216 seats for Saskatchewan learners in 12 specialized health programs.

I'd now like to focus on further budget details specific to nurse training. This year \$11.5 million, which is a \$3.34 million increase, will support ongoing implementation of the 150-seat increase in nurse training seats which was announced in 2022. This expansion includes 124 registered nurses, 10 nurse practitioners, and 16 registered psychiatric nurse seats. Training is available at the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina, and Saskatchewan Polytechnic. Our investment in nurse training recognizes the critical role they play in our health care workforce.

We're also focused on the province's need for more doctors. This year the Ministry of Advanced Education is investing \$55.3 million specifically for physician training at the University of Saskatchewan's College of Medicine. \$47.2 million in operating funding will support 108 undergraduate medical seats, 140 postgraduate resident seats, and the creation of three new training programs mentioned previously.

For capital funding, \$8.1 million will be provided to develop the new programs and expand the physical therapy program. This is in addition to funding of approximately \$132 million provided to the college by the Ministry of Health. Enhancements and expansions to health care training programs will help provide necessary professionals for the new health facilities that the province is building.

I want to recognize and thank our post-secondary institutions for their exceptional efforts to support our health human resources action plan. They have been terrific partners.

Collaboration will continue between the ministries of Advanced Education, Health, and Immigration and Career Training on strategies to recruit, train, incentivize, and retain health care providers for Saskatchewan.

Madam Chair, we continue to see a rise in demand for veterinary services in Saskatchewan, and we're responding with support for the Western College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan. The budget provides \$13.2 million in funding to the college, which is a \$637,000 increase over last year. It will support the continued implementation of five new seats for Saskatchewan students at the college which was announced last year, and there are now 25 seats available annually for Saskatchewan students which is up from 20.

We continue to work across government and with partners in the agricultural sector to encourage students to choose rural and large animal practices. One key continuing initiative in this area is our loan forgiveness program for veterinarians and veterinary technologists working in designated rural and remote communities. It forgives up to \$20,000 in eligible Saskatchewan student loans. We also are exploring options for expanding the college beyond its current capacity of 88 seats.

And there are some of the priority investments in Advanced

Education's budget, Madam Chair.

So I'll now touch on institutional funding details. Through the '24-25 budget, our universities, technical schools, Indigenous institutions, and regional colleges will receive more than \$724.4 million in operating and capital funding: 478.6 million is for the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina, and federated and affiliate colleges; 194.5 million will go to Saskatchewan Polytechnic, the Saskatchewan Indian Institute for Technologies, and the Gabriel Dumont Institute; and 37.2 million will be provided to Saskatchewan's regional colleges. It's worth noting, Madam Chair, that since 2007 our government has increased operating funding to our universities by 42 per cent.

Stats Canada data shows that in relation to comparable universities, both Saskatchewan universities are in the top 50 per cent in terms of operating funding received from government.

Also of note, in addition to Advanced Education, the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training contributes a total of 44.3 million to post-secondary institutions. Regional colleges receive an additional 26.3 million in programming funding from ICT [Immigration and Career Training] and technical institutes will receive approximately \$18 million.

In terms of capital funding, Advanced Education will invest \$58.9 million in key infrastructure projects across the post-secondary sector in '24-25. Highlights include 8.7 million for electrical and mechanical upgrades at the University of Saskatchewan, 6.3 million for the cooling tower replacement at the University of Regina, 6 million to continue planning for Saskatchewan Polytechnic campus renewal project in Saskatoon, and \$610,000 for the student wellness centre at the University of Regina. The capital budget provides \$7.8 million to implement the three new health training programs I mentioned earlier — physician assistants, occupational therapy, and speech-language pathology.

We'll also provide \$2.62 million in capital funding for continued implementation of other health training program expansions, both equipment purchases and renovations. An additional 855,000 will be provided to capital expenses specifically related to the nurse program expansions.

The budget provides \$500,000 in capital funding for planning a retrofit and expansion of the Western College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan to help address the need for more veterinary services in the province. And North West College in North Battleford will also receive \$250,000 to begin planning their new campus. Our institutions play key roles in helping address labour market needs and achieving our growth plan goals. And we're proud to partner with them, as I've mentioned.

[15:45]

Students, Madam Chair, are at the centre of everything that we're working to accomplish in the post-secondary sector. Our students will be the foundation of the diverse and educated workforce that is essential for Saskatchewan's rapidly growing economy. In '24-25 budget, it invests \$46.6 million in direct financial aid for post-secondary students. Of this investment, 34.3 million will

provide loans and grants to more than 22,000 students.

Another 12.1 million will fund scholarships such as the Saskatchewan Advantage Scholarship, which allows eligible students to receive up to \$750 a year for up to four years. We are providing \$3 million for the Saskatchewan Innovation and Opportunity Scholarship and an additional \$500,000 for various other scholarships.

We also continue to support Indigenous language scholarships through First Nations University of Canada. Annual funding of \$50,000 helps support the revitalization, preservation, and protection of Indigenous languages.

I'm very pleased that this year we're providing 4.2 million to introduce a new grant for students in need. Those who have dependents under 12, or dependents over 12 with a permanent disability, will be eligible for the Saskatchewan student grant for students with dependents. Eligible students can receive up to \$950 in additional funding per dependent per year.

Supports are also available when students complete their programs. For example, the repayment assistance plan has been enhanced to support more students in repaying their loans. Loan forgiveness is available for nurses and veterinarians who practise in rural Saskatchewan. And return-in-service payments are being introduced by the Ministry of Health for students in reserved seats in specialized health programs outside of the province.

I also want to mention the government continues to offer the graduate retention program through the Ministry of Finance. GRP [graduate retention program] is unique 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. To date, more than 81,600 graduates have claimed the GRP benefits.

This range of financial aid options supports thousands of Saskatchewan students in furtherance of their education. Overall in '24-25 our government will provide more than \$100 million in financial assistance to more than 20,000 students.

Indigenous post-secondary education is an important area of focus for Advanced Education. In '24-25 we will provide 19.7 million to support Indigenous student success through funding to First Nations University of Canada, the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, the Gabriel Dumont Institute, the Dumont Technical Institute, Northlands College, and Saskatchewan Polytechnic. Programs in these institutions support Indigenous student education and their successful transition into the labour market.

Madam Chair, we recognize that serving Indigenous students requires focused attention on those in northern Saskatchewan. In '24-25 our government is providing approximately ten and a half million dollars for post-secondary education and training programs and support for learners in the North.

I want to specifically mention our Indigenous teacher education programs, which have expanded across the province and are certainly making a difference in revitalizing Indigenous languages. This year we're providing \$208,000 for the Dene and Cree teacher education programs in La Loche, Waterhen First

Nation, and Hatchet Lake First Nation. The Gabriel Dumont Institute will also receive 3.7 million for its Saskatchewan urban native teacher education program, or SUNTEP, which is again another successful program.

Madam Chair, we're also committed to increasing post-secondary learning and training opportunities for Indigenous strategies. One way we are doing this is through the Mitacs program. This year the budget provides 1.15 million for Mitacs, including a specific Indigenous pathways initiative. Mitacs programs enable students to develop research skills and put them into practice by learning on the job, helping meet the needs of Saskatchewan businesses.

More Indigenous students are entering post-secondary education and more are completing their programs. So since 2007 the number of Indigenous people with post-secondary credentials has almost doubled from 22,000 to well over 42,000. And I'm encouraged by the collaboration and co-operation occurring across the province in the area of Indigenous education.

In the area of French language education our government is pleased to work with Canadian Heritage through the Canada-Saskatchewan agreement on minority language education and second official language instruction. Negotiations for a new agreement between Saskatchewan and the federal government are ongoing. This agreement supports French language education at La Cité and Le Bac and at the University of Regina and at Collège Mathieu. Historically, through the agreement, these institutions have received complementary funding for project-based initiative infrastructure projects and student bursaries, in addition to their annual funding.

With respect to international education, international education continues to be a priority for the ministry, particularly in light of the federal cap on student permits which was announced in January. We are currently working with our institutions to issue 15,000 provincial attestation letters to international students in 2024. Saskatchewan's international education strategy has positioned us well to manage the federal changes. The strategy supports the Saskatchewan growth plan goals by building our international profile and reputation and helping us attract and support students and researchers.

Our budget continues to fund key initiatives in the strategy including the Saskatchewan agent training program and the international practitioner program, which were the first of their kind in Canada. Initiatives like these have made Saskatchewan a leader — a province that follows best practices, ethical approaches in attracting international students and international researchers. We'll continue to support our institutions' efforts to make Saskatchewan a destination of choice for international post-secondary education.

Madam Chair, in conclusion, I want to again acknowledge and thank all of our partners across the post-secondary sector. We appreciate their commitment to providing students with high-quality education, and we're certainly very privileged to have the leadership that we have at those institutions. All of us want students to be well prepared for rewarding employment opportunities right here at home after graduation.

Our government has been committed to supporting post-

secondary education since we were first elected. In total, we've invested \$14.4 billion in this sector and in student supports since 2007. And we'll continue to remain committed to investing in students' education, supporting the financial sustainability of our institutions, and ensuring that we continue to have a post-secondary sector that remains responsive to the provincial workforce and its priorities.

Madam Chair, it's been my privilege to serve as the Minister of Advanced Education. And with the assistance of my ministry officials, we're now pleased to answer any questions that committee members may have.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. I will now open the floor for questions. I recognize Ms. Bowes.

Ms. Bowes: — Thank you, Ms. Chair, and welcome to the minister and his officials. Thanks for your opening remarks, Minister. I've got a lot of questions tonight so I'm going to move right into it.

Starting off, Minister, as you have mentioned in your opening remarks, your business plan and budget provide for a 2.2 per cent one-time funding increase to post-secondary institutions in response to concerns raised about increasing operational costs. What specific concerns are you responding to here, and what have the institutions been telling you about the need for additional funding?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well I'll begin by saying, as you know, four years ago we entered into a four-year funding agreement with our institutions, which called for \$60 million funding in the first two years with returning to base funding in the second two years.

Since I became the minister of Education, we've certainly been in contact with and in many, many conversations with leadership at our institutions about some of the stress that they have been incurring lately, specifically around inflation. I think that when the four-year funding agreement was negotiated by my predecessor, the Minister of Social Services, I'm not sure that anybody really quite anticipated what the level of inflation would be over those years. And that's impacted the institutions in a number of different ways. And so in my conversations with our sector partners, that was really identified as one of the key factors that we needed to be thinking about in terms of moving forward.

So as we started having those conversations, notwithstanding that the funding in the fourth year of this agreement was to be flat, we recognized as a government the need to provide some further support to our institutions. And so that's really where that conversation started with the institutions and then resulted in that 2.2 per cent increase.

Ms. Bowes: — Thank you. And in your view, how can 2.2 per cent possibly be sufficient to meet the pressures being faced by our post-secondary institutions given sky-high inflationary costs — which in lots of cases are not letting up — and, as you say, the key role of the post-secondary sector in supporting the economy?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well let me say this. I mean I think it's fair to say, and I believe this, that the government recognizes the value proposition that post-secondary plays in advancing the

province and advancing the economy and supporting the goals in the growth plan.

The institutions fully expected, as we were going through these conversations, that there was going to be no increase in the funding this year. I think that you'll see from some of the comments that are made by the institutions that they are quite pleased with the 2.2 per cent increase given the fact that they weren't expecting any increase in this year. And so 2.2 per cent was a number that we had worked on in terms of where we thought would adequately support the institutions as we move into the development of a new four-year funding agreement.

As we move into that conversation, certainly the effects of inflation and other factors that are driving costs at our post-secondary sector will be taken into account as we move forward. I know that when the \$60 million were provided, as I mentioned in my opening comments, the universities and our post-secondary sector generally took some significant steps in terms of reducing the costs in terms of working on what their budget projections would be, looking at revenue generation opportunities.

And so there was a number of things and the list is actually quite extensive. I think I read them into the record last year in terms of some of the things that our institutions had done to adjust to the four-year funding agreement. But certainly I think it's fair to say that the institutions were quite pleased to see the 2.2 per cent increase.

We'll continue to have this dialogue with the institutions around a number of things. We'll look to see what was good in that four-year funding agreement, where some of the challenges might be in that four-year funding agreement and address those as we go forward with our institutions.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And will this 2.2 per cent increase be built into the baseline for the next multi-year funding agreement?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — This is one-time funding. In the fourth year of the agreement we amended the agreement that we signed with our institutions to provide that additional amount. Certainly as we go forward in the conversations with our post-secondary sectors, we recognize that there is a need to further support our institutions. And so while it's not built into the base, neither was the \$60 million which was provided in the first two years built into the base either.

And so as we amend the agreement, this will certainly be part of the ongoing conversations. I know that in conversations with the leadership at all three of our major institutions, this is a key point that they want to talk about in terms of level of provincial support, ongoing provincial operating support. So while it's not in the base, it's certainly going to have some significant impact on the conversations that we're going to have, and we recognize the need for that ongoing support.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thank you. Last year in estimates you indicated negotiations had already begun on the next multi-year funding agreement. I know in your opening remarks you said that submissions would be scheduled for the next budget year. Are you still . . . I'm assuming then you're still currently in negotiations?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — There's certainly . . . Perhaps I'll ask Deputy Minister Wyatt to make a couple of comments on this. But we've been in conversations with our institutions about what a new four-year funding agreement might look like, certainly more informal conversations at the beginning of my term as the Minister of Advanced Education. There is a process which has been set out by the Ministry of Advanced Education in terms of how these conversations will proceed, but certainly the expectation that we will have a new four-year funding agreement in place before the next budget year. But perhaps I'll just ask Deputy Minister Wyatt to make a couple of comments. If you wouldn't mind, Mark?

Mr. Wyatt: — Mark Wyatt, assistant deputy minister. In terms of the process that we're moving through with the institutions, we have conducted an initial round of consultations, discussions with them in 2023. Part of that was the process that the minister was describing of understanding what some of their pressures and challenges are. And so I would say, you know, probably the main outcome arising from those discussions on the funding side of an agreement came through, sort of moved through the budget process and the approval for the 2.2 per cent increase in the budget.

We also had discussions that touched on other elements, non-financial elements of the funding agreement, accountability provisions as part of that agreement as well. Those discussions we are returning to and will be moving into another stage of discussions, consultations with the post-secondary institutions over the next few months. And I guess we would anticipate that if there is, you know, if there is a funding element to a future agreement, that it would be part of the next round of budget for the '25-26 year and ongoing, depending on the length of that agreement.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So formal negotiations have not begun.

[16:00]

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well conversations have begun with respect to . . . Ultimately what will end up happening is there will be proposals that will be put by both parties, and we'll come to the terms of an agreement. So formal negotiations have not, but certainly the conversations leading up to what that will . . . have.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thank you. Minister, what are your intentions as you undertake the negotiation process as minister this time around for the multi-year funding agreement?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — My intentions? Well I think I made some comments earlier about the government recognizing the value proposition of post-secondary education and the importance of post-secondary education in achieving our growth plan goals and further strengthening the economy. So I'm certainly very optimistic about . . . And I think the 2.2 per cent increase was a pretty good indication by the government that we recognize the needs of our post-secondary education sector.

So my intention is to continue to ensure that these conversations continue and end up with a successful negotiation, recognizing the fact and I mentioned this earlier, that there are some good elements of the existing agreement and certainly some things that need to be looked at from both sides. And so we expect, given

the collaboration and the good faith that's been exhibited to date by our post-secondary sectors and certainly the very hard work of ministry officials — and I thank them for that — we'll come to a successful conclusion.

But certainly enhancing the support for our post-secondary sector is important. And I think this budget recognizes not just the 2 per cent, but the increased investments that we've made in health in our health human resources action plan, the number of programs that we're building. The number of capital investments that we're making I think continues to recognize the need of this sector to our goals as a government and the need for the economy.

Ms. Bowes: — And will you be requiring institutions to sign a nondisclosure agreement as part of the agreement, as your predecessor did last time around?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — The answer to that is yes. We typically provide budget information to our institutions in advance of the budget, in terms of preparing. So they will be required to sign a nondisclosure agreement.

Ms. Bowes: — So my understanding is that this has not been standard practice historically. And so why do you feel this is necessary? And what is your rationale?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well we've never had a four-year funding agreement before. And so moving forward and developing a four-year funding agreement anticipating the needs of our institutions, providing advance certain financial information of the government requires confidentiality, and it's not uncommon in those kinds of situations. But in terms of Advanced Education, we've never done this before. This is the second time that we'll be negotiating a four-year funding agreement. And to the extent that confidential information will be disclosed to our institutions, we'll expect that to remain confidential. And we guarantee that through the execution of a nondisclosure agreement.

Ms. Bowes: — So does the minister not have faith in board confidentiality?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well we absolutely do have faith in board confidentiality and the conversations that we're having, but we think it's good practice. And I've been a practising lawyer for many, many years. So it's always good practice to ensure that you have these arrangements in writing, and the institutions have never had any difficulty signing them. When we do pre-budget consultations, when we do pre-budget conversations with our institutions, we always ensure that there's a confidentiality agreement signed. And as I say, the institutions have never had any difficulty with it and I think it's good practice.

Ms. Bowes: — And in your view, what impact do you think that this insistence on nondisclosure agreements has on transparency to the public and accountability for public dollars?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well the transparency of the spending of public dollars is all in the budget. I think when you're disclosing confidential information in advance of that information becoming public, I think it's good practice to have nondisclosure agreements. So I don't think it impacts at all the issues of transparency and accountability when it comes to government.

All these numbers, once the agreement is signed and is included in a budget, are all public, is all public. And so to the extent that conversations need to be had prior to those documents becoming public, I think it's, as I said, I think it's reasonable that nondisclosure agreements are prepared.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And stemming from that and I guess based on what had taken place last time in negotiations, will you be providing institutions with sufficient time to consult with their boards before presidents and CEOs [chief executive officer] sign?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We always of course want boards to have the full information before things are done. And certainly in this particular instance there will be adequate time for boards to give consideration to any agreement that's put in front of them. We know that the timing with respect to the preparation and the presentation of the first agreement might not have been as timely as this one will be. But certainly leading up to these negotiations and the conversations and the development of the agreement, there will be adequate time for boards to give full consideration.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Thank you. Moving on a bit here. According to Statistics Canada, Saskatchewan undergraduate students are burdened with the second-highest tuition rates in the country, around 33 per cent higher than the national average. Does this not act as a deterrent to our children remaining in Saskatchewan and obtaining their education here? And in fact, is it not a deterrent to them getting an education, period?

Mr. Boehm: — David Boehm, assistant deputy minister. So certainly if you do just a direct comparison with other institutions, of course it depends on which group of institutions that comparison is done against. And you know, we can quibble, I suppose, about the StatsCan methodology. But when we look at other information that StatsCan collects, specifically related to the share of revenue or income that comes to our institutions from government versus tuition, we compare very favourably with other institutions in other provinces when it comes to that ratio between government funding and tuition funding.

Ms. Bowes: — So over the term of the Scott Moe government, tuition rates have increased by 27 per cent according to Statistics Canada. Is this not increasing the significant affordability issues facing Saskatchewan households? And why would you believe such high increases to be an appropriate result of government policy?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well let me just respond to it this way. During the term when the New Democrats were in power, tuition rates in this province increased 300 per cent. So if you want a comparison, you can have that. That said, the government's providing over \$112 million in direct supports to students through tax credits, grants, and scholarships. And I would argue that that number, in terms of government support — and not just government support, but you'd have to look at the scholarships and supports that are provided directly by the institutions — is one of the highest per capita students in the country.

And so when you look at tuition rates, I think you also have to look at the amount of direct supports to students through a number of things that the province provides as well as what the institutions provide through their supports. So we're very, very

proud of the supports that we provide to the students, not just through grants and scholarships and tax credits, but through other supports that we provide.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thank you. And I mean, you know, we're talking about budget estimates this year, not decades-old NDP [New Democratic Party] government.

So are these increases in your view not limiting access to a post-secondary education only to children born into higher income families?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — No, I don't think so. I mean, as I mentioned, we provide significant amount of support for students through grants and scholarships. I can go through an extensive list of the supports that this government provides to students to help them get their education.

We recognize the importance of post-secondary education to our economy. It only makes sense that the government continues to provide the kinds of supports that we need to support the students so that we can have those students graduate and join the workforce. So certainly while we provide those supports, that's the incentive I think and the support that we give to people that can't otherwise afford an education or provide the support to pay for the tuition that comes from our post-secondary institutions.

Ms. Bowes: — What is the trend with respect to tuition fee increases for the universities and Sask Polytechnic in the future? And how much do you expect tuition fees to increase in '24-25?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — As you know, tuition rates were capped through our four-year funding agreement. It was one of the key features of that four-year funding agreement. And I've made it fairly clear to our institutions that as we move forward that will continue to be a key feature of the agreement. In terms of caps on tuitions, I'm not in a position now to negotiate in terms of what those numbers will be, but that will be a significant topic of conversation with our institutions as we proceed with the negotiations.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, and thanks for that. I mean, specifically in respect to your expectations with respect to tuition fees with the next multi-year funding agreement, you indicated that it will be a key feature. Do you foresee those caps changing in any way? Not only in the numbers currently, but also in the application to international students.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well as I say, I'm not really in a position to be able to talk about what those numbers will be, except to say that it was a key feature for the government in terms of the last four-year funding agreement. It will continue to be a key feature in terms of the next agreement. So as I said, I can't really talk about it in terms of what those numbers are going to look like. That will be a topic of conversation between the institutions and other elements of the contract.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And I suppose not talking about specific numbers but back to the second part of the question about international students and whether there will be any caps on international student tuition fees in the next multi-year funding agreement.

I know that certainly I've heard a lot of concern from international students across the province about not being included in that MOU [memorandum of understanding] in terms of caps on tuition fees. And I know you as well, I'm sure, have heard from international students. And will that be different in the next multi-year funding agreement?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well as you know, there's no cap on tuition rate increases for international students. I understand we have the second-lowest tuition rates for international students in the country. Again this is a conversation that we will have, but it certainly wasn't the position of the government to cap tuition rates for international students.

If I was in a position to be able to dictate what the terms of that agreement were, I would venture to say that there will be no change in that policy in terms of capping international tuition rates, having said again that we have the second-lowest international tuition rates in the country currently. But again this is a conversation which will happen between the ministry and the institutions.

Ms. Bowes: — Minister, last year in estimates, moving on again here, I had asked about the statutory requirement for a review of regional colleges. At that time a review had not taken place since 2010 and '11, despite the fact that by law two further reviews should have been completed by then.

Does the minister have an update on this? And has a review been undertaken since last year's estimates?

[16:15]

Mr. Wyatt: — Mark Wyatt. We're continuing to look at the, you know, the opportunities to complete a future regional college review. Over the last year we've been watching the results coming from the merger between two colleges to form the Suncrest regional college. That's something that we want to continue to understand the potential, you know, the potential results, benefits, any shortcomings from that process.

There's also work happening right now in the regional college sector around moving to a new information management system for those colleges, so that's something where there's been a lot of energy and collaboration taking place along with the ministry. So the regional college review is something that we're continuing to monitor on an ongoing basis, and continuing to look at the, you know, the potential opportunities for initiating a future review.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. My understanding is that this is not discretionary; this is a requirement under the Act. And so why has the minister still not met the requirements of the Act?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — One of the things that we've been having a number of conversations about is with respect to the legislation that governs Sask Polytechnic, and there is no requirement in that legislation for a review. But the way that the system works is it's highly integrated between the regional colleges, and as you know, the regional colleges broker all their courses, or generally most of their courses, from Sask Polytechnic. So to review the regional colleges in isolation of reviewing the Sask Polytechnic Act wouldn't make a whole bunch of sense given the integration.

So it would be our intention to talk about a review of the Sask Poly Act, and I've had some conversations with the Chair of the board in terms of a number of things that they'd like to see. But it wouldn't make any sense to review *The Regional Colleges Act* without also looking at the Sask Polytechnic Act at the same time, given the integration of how we deliver training through our technical colleges, well through Sask Polytechnic. So that would be a conversation that we need to have as a ministry in terms of how we're going to proceed to move forward with a review of all the legislation at one time.

Ms. Bowes: — Well my suggestion, unsolicited there, would be that you should be making amendments to the Act if you intend to continue treating this as a discretionary measure.

So is it my understanding then that there is no date even set for a further review to take place?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — There is no date set for a review. As Deputy Minister Wyatt had said, there's a number of things happening within the regional college sector, particularly a review of the amalgamation between Cumberland and Parkland College, which will be a key part of any recommendations that come in terms of changing the legislation. And so, there's been no date set, but it's certainly an ongoing conversation that I need to continue to have with my ministry officials and my colleagues.

Ms. Bowes: — Moving on to the annual report. The annual report indicates that between 2015-16 and 2019-20 operating expenditures exceeded revenues in Saskatchewan's post-secondary sector. In 2020-21 an increase in operating revenues and a decrease in expenditures saw revenues exceed expenditures for the first time in six years. Then in 2021-22 both revenues and expenditures significantly increased by 11 per cent and 14 per cent respectively and now stand at about the same level overall. Do you have the data for 2022-23 yet?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — This information has just come to the ministry and it's currently being reviewed. Ultimately of course it will become public, but it's just in the ministry now.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So at this point you would not have an explanation for the change and the implications of the change?

Mr. Boehm: — So I think what you're seeing in terms of the changes in the data, particularly on the expense side, is what I would describe as the normal ups and downs within the sector.

As you can appreciate, each institution will plan out its program delivery approach for the year, but whether they can attract and fill all of the sections of all of the courses and classes that they have on offer of course depends on the availability of students and the students' willingness to sign up. And so, you know, in some situations, you know, they may plan to offer a class, they may budget to offer a class, but then are ultimately not able to fill it. Or other parties may emerge and, you know, they may have to shift their program around.

And so I think what you're seeing is the typical fluctuations that each of the institutions would face on an annual basis.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Again from your annual report, between 2014-2015 and 2021-2022, government funding decreased as a

percentage of total operating revenue by 3.6 per cent. Given the importance of post-secondary education to the economy, how do you defend this decrease?

Mr. Boehm: — So we talked a little bit about the expense side and now shifting to the revenue discussion and of course we've spent some time talking about the existing multi-year funding agreement. And so I think what you're seeing in terms of the adjustment in the revenue amounts over time is the impact of the current multi-year funding agreement where, in the first two years, we had the injection of funds to help deal with the pandemic and a number of the changes that the minister mentioned. And over time, and particularly the last two years of the agreement, of course those funds came out and the revenue correspondingly would have declined.

Ms. Bowes: — So you feel that that full 3.6 per cent is accounted for by the difference in funding over the years?

Mr. Boehm: — There are also a number of other factors that will come to play. Again, number of programs offered, number of enrolments in the institutions, their efforts with respect to the recruitment of international students, and then international student revenue as well. But the majority of that shift would have been driven by the multi-year funding agreement.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thank you. Your annual report also shows that over the past five years the most significant shifts within the broader government and non-government revenue categories have seen a slight decrease in provincial government funding as a percentage of total operating revenue, a 1 per cent decrease, and an increase in revenue from tuition and fees — that's from 28 per cent of total operating revenue to 32.2 per cent. How do you justify decreasing funding for your sector and the consequent increases in tuition fees?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — So I think it's basically the same answer the assistant deputy minister had just given. Remember that government doesn't raise tuition rates. The institutions do that, and institutions are independent of government. And we don't tell them how to run their organizations, save for the fact that in our four-year funding agreement we've capped tuition rate increases. But I think the answer that the assistant deputy minister had given before answers the question.

Ms. Bowes: — Yes. Yes, I realize that the ministry does not set tuition rates. However there is a proportional shift as funding has gone down, tuition has raised, so I don't know how you would account for that. Is there something that you would point to?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — There's been increased enrolments of domestic and international students, which obviously gives rise to an increase in revenue for the institutions. So that's a significant part of it. As soon as you have more students, you have more revenue.

Ms. Bowes: — Between 2010 and 2020 Saskatchewan saw its proportion of funding in post-secondary education from the provincial government decline from 54 to 50 per cent. Would you agree that the increase in tuition fees we've seen . . .

The Chair: — Ms. Bowes, we are here tonight to be examining the estimates for 2024-2025. Could you please relate your

questions to the estimates?

Ms. Bowes: — Yes. Thank you, Ms. Chair. This is in relation to the budget, the question I was about to get to. Would you agree that the increase in tuition fees we have seen is largely a result of the government failing to adequately fund the post-secondary sector in Saskatchewan, which would include the current budget and funding allocations?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — No.

Ms. Bowes: — The four-year agreement that the government instituted for the post-secondary sector has provided a zero per cent increase in funding for the first three years, and then finally this year you did increase the base funding by, as you mentioned, 2.2 per cent. The base funding for post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan is falling by 13.7 per cent over four years, and if you compare the tuition rate increases it is almost a per cent for per cent substitution.

[16:30]

The government funding reductions are simply being replaced with increases in the tuition being paid by students and their families. Is this the policy that the government is going to pursue long term?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — This government continues to support the post-secondary sector. We're very proud of that. As I mentioned before, there was \$60 million which was provided in the first two years of the agreement with funding being flat in the last two years. So I think the fact that the government has recognized the need for further investment in the post-secondary sector was recognized in this budget.

We continue to put great faith in our post-secondary institutions to provide the students that we need to support our economy as we go forward, so I would respectfully disagree with you that reduced funding for the post-secondary sector is being offset by tuition rates.

We know that there's increased costs at our institutions and we also recognize the independence of our institutions, but as the assistant deputy minister has said before, we have one of the highest rates of contribution to post-secondary sector in the country in terms of government support versus tuition.

Ms. Bowes: — Moving on a bit now, can you describe how the provinces provide funding for capital improvements at the universities? Is it through loans or grants?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Those capital improvements are provided by grants from the government.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. What is the division of the capital budget among the two universities, Sask Polytechnic, and the regional colleges in 2024-25? And can you list for me all the capital projects over \$500,000 that you are funding, by university as well as Sask Polytechnic?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — You're asking how we attribute capital to those institutions?

Ms. Bowes: — Yes.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well I'll let the assistant deputy minister kind of make a few further comments on this, but essentially what happens is our institutions provide to us a list of their priorities. They provide business cases to the government, and our officials in the Ministry of Advanced Education assess those business plans and make a determination based on what we think is achievable in terms of budget allocation. And we do that based on those business cases, having particular regard to the fact that we want to try to balance to some extent the capital contributions to our major institutions.

So that's really how it's done. In terms of a list, I'll ask David to read it out to you.

Mr. Boehm: — So the major capital adjustments for '24-25, of the \$58.9 million, \$24.6 million goes towards post-secondary maintenance, preventative maintenance and renewal; 3.5 million will go towards the further expansion of the health training programs that were discussed earlier; \$8.7 million will go to electrical infrastructure upgrades at the University of Saskatchewan; \$7.8 million will be provided to support new domestic health training programs, the occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, and physician assistants programs at the University of Saskatchewan; \$6.3 million will be provided for cooling tower replacement at the University of Regina; \$6 million will be provided for planning and site development work for the Sask Polytechnic campus renewal project in Saskatoon; \$610,000 will be provided to the University of Regina to expand the student health centre; and finally, \$250,000 will be provided to North West College for planning around the possibility of a new North Battleford campus.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I might also just point out that in addition to the major capital expenditures, some of which the assistant deputy minister has read into the record, we work very closely with the Ministry of Health in terms of supporting the action plan that they have in Health. And so to the extent that the Ministry of Health wants to move forward with a particular program, we work closely with them in terms of determining what capital requirements are needed in order to support the health human resources action plan. So that's the other, kind of, side of it.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thanks. And just to confirm, that was a list of all of the expenditures over 500,000 that you provided?

Mr. Boehm: — That's correct, yes.

Ms. Bowes: — Thanks. How much capital or operating funding for studies is being provided to Sask Polytechnic for their proposed campus beside the University of Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — There's \$6 million in the budget to support the ongoing development of the campus project.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Can you break down for me what that 6 million in funding is for specifically?

Mr. Boehm: — So the project is being planned right now in sort of a development stage, and so most of those funds will go into planning and pre-procurement processes. Some initial design work will also take place in '24-25, and site preparation type

construction activities will also be funded with that amount.

Ms. Bowes: — Thanks. How much is the proposed campus estimated to cost in 2024 dollars? And how many years do you expect it will take to construct it?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We're not really able to determine the full cost of the whole campus. Once it's built out, of course, we're going to be doing this and we're going to be sequencing these. The first of the four buildings will be the trades and technology building, which I understand is hopefully going to be commissioned by 2029. So there's some significant work that needs to be done.

Certainly in terms of moving forward with further design work with respect to the other buildings, there's ongoing discussions going on with the ministry and with SaskBuilds and Procurement about that. So in terms of giving out a number of what the entire campus is going to cost once it's fully built out, that's impossible for us to be able to give that you.

But as you know, the government has committed \$200 million to begin work on the development of the campus. But as this sequences out, we'll have a better idea of what the overall cost is going to be as we move into the future. But our first priority is, of course, the trades and technology building, and then we'll move on from there.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And just for the second part of that question, how many years do you expect it will take in total to construct the new campus?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well we hope to, as I indicated, we hope to have the trades and technology building fully operational by 2029. It would be my hope that we could get that done sooner. But in the meantime, we'll be working on the planning and construction of the other facilities that are part of that campus. So that's really difficult to tell in terms of when that's all going to happen.

Our priorities certainly are in trades and technology and I don't need to tell you how important that is to the economy these days. Certainly from there, moving on to the health sciences part of the campus will be our next priority. But in terms of the timing of that really depends on a number of things.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And do you know at this stage when initial construction of the new campus will start?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Site preparation for the trades and technology building will begin this summer.

Ms. Bowes: — And who will be responsible for the construction of the campus? Will that be Sask Polytechnic, or is the intention to have SaskBuilds oversee the tendering and construction of the new campus?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — SaskBuilds and Procurement will be responsible for the construction, and they'll be the ultimate owner of those buildings.

Ms. Bowes: — Thank you. Moving on again to student aid. How many students did student aid assist in 2023-24? And how many

students are you expecting it will assist in 2024-25?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We'll be providing financial assistance to just over 20,000 eligible students with financial need in 2024-25 in non-repayable and repayable financial assistance. That's about \$110 million.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And can you please describe the various forms of student assistance available in Saskatchewan?

Mr. Boehm: — So the basic forms of assistance that are available to students that are wishing to pursue post-secondary education through our student loans program include grants, non-repayable grants; student loans of course; but also we have a number of other supports in the form of scholarships such as the Saskatchewan Advantage Scholarship; the Saskatchewan student grant; the student loan forgiveness program for nurses and nurse practitioners; the Saskatchewan student loan forgiveness program for veterinarians and veterinary technologists.

And of course once the student graduates and if they reside in Saskatchewan and work in Saskatchewan, they will be eligible for the graduate retention program as well.

Ms. Bowes: — Thanks. And how many student loans do you have under collection at the present time, and can you describe the collection process if payments are behind?

Mr. Wosminity: — Kirk Wosminity, executive director, student support services. Currently there's about just under 31,000 loans in repayment. We're integrated with the federal government through the National Student Loans Service Centre and they manage repayment and collection activities.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So there's no collection activities that are undertaken by the provincial government then?

Mr. Wosminity: — They're undertaken by the national student service centre, so they're the ones that handle all the communications of repayment for both the Canada and Saskatchewan student loans. So from the borrowers' perspective, it's kind of one loan. They make one payment and it gets divvied up between the two loan products.

They have active communication efforts. They offer assistance for the repayment assistance plan. If a student can't afford to make their payments, they may be able to encourage students to do that. They'll generally track a loan for at least 270 days, and if there is no payment after that then I think it's returned to government at that point, which is a very small portion.

I would like to say that the repayment rate for Saskatchewan student loans is about 90 per cent, which means 90 cents on every dollar is in good standing. Compare that to the early 2000s when it was 60 per cent. So having the National Student Loans Service Centre working on our behalf has provided a tremendous service, not only for the health and wellness of the portfolio but for the borrowers as well.

[16:45]

Ms. Bowes: — Thanks. And are you aware, do they use private collection agencies to collect loans? No?

Mr. Wosminity: — No, they do not.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Are you aware, what was the value of the loans that were written off in '23-24 and how much do you expect to be written off in '24-25?

Mr. Wosminity: — I'd just ask a point of clarification. When you asked for the total number of loans, were you talking about the total number of loans in repayment or were you looking for something different?

Ms. Bowes: — Yes, in repayment. Yes.

Mr. Wosminity: — That's what I thought, thank you.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — As far as your last question, we don't have that information with us today, but we undertake to deliver it. We can table it before the end of the week.

Ms. Bowes: — Thanks. My next question again about student aid. About how long does it take for an immigrant to qualify for Canadian student aid?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — As soon as they get their permanent residence or refugee status, they can make their application.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And can you tell me how many loans were provided to students at the University of Regina, the University of Saskatchewan, Sask Polytechnic, and to students outside Canada, broken down?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — You want them broken down between the three institutions?

Ms. Bowes: — Yes, and also for students outside Canada.

Mr. Wosminity: — So I don't have the specific data, but I can tell you that about 54 per cent of our loans, so of the 22,000 borrowers, are attending a Saskatchewan university, so they're the U of R [University of Regina], U of S [University of Saskatchewan]. We can get a more definitive number for you. About 20 per cent of our students study outside the province and around 3 per cent, 2 to 3 per cent, study outside the country.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Yes, so if you could table that information at the same time as the previous information that would be great . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . Okay.

Just going to flip back here. Just quickly coming back to the multi-year funding agreement, I understand a point of contention in collective bargaining in the K to 12 [kindergarten to grade 12] education sector is government's refusal to include a clause that the multi-year funding agreement will be followed and honoured. Will the minister agree to include such a clause in the new post-secondary multi-year funding agreement?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I think I'll just say that, you know, I think the approach of the government with respect to funding in the post-secondary sector has been very respectful. I think that we've honoured the terms of the four-year funding agreement. All these agreements and all arrangements with government are always subject to appropriation.

But that said, we don't see any need to put a clause into the agreement simply because of the fact that we've been respectful of the funding agreement. We're respectful of our institutions and the relationship we have with our institutions. So if your answer is will we include it, the answer would be no.

Ms. Bowes: — Your business plan refers to promoting collaboration among post-secondary institutions to implement sector-wide initiatives. What are you referring to here?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Well I'll ask my assistant deputy minister to comment on that. Let me just say this in terms of collaboration. We are very, very fortunate to have the leadership that we have at all our post-secondary institutions. I meet quite often with the leadership, with the presidents of the universities and Sask Polytechnic and a number of regional colleges, but particularly our three large institutions, and emphasize the importance of collaboration between our institutions. We have a number of examples and we could certainly speak to those. But I think one of the key take-aways from the conversations that we are having is the commitment from our institutions to collaborate.

I'll give you one example, and perhaps Mark you might want to comment on a couple of other ones. But you don't have to look very much farther than our new Sask Poly campus project in Saskatoon. One of the biggest supporters of that arrangement really is the University of Saskatchewan and the fact that they recognize the importance of co-locating a polytechnic with a U15, a research-intensive university and a research park, the importance and the synergies that can come from that. And a lot of the conversations that I have particularly with the president of the university and the president of Sask Polytechnic is to continue to emphasize that. They continue to have conversations.

Just a week and a half ago, I met with the dean of the College of Engineering and his council to talk about what further can be done between Sask Poly and the University of Saskatchewan, particularly the College of Engineering, on delivery of post-secondary education to students, some of whom who are at Sask Poly who can take courses at the university and vice versa. So how can we kind of bring those institutions together? And that's really I think one of the foremost examples of collaboration within the sector. There's many others and, Mark, I'm not sure if you'd like to comment on anything.

Mr. Wyatt: — Sure. The priorities that were identified through the multi-year funding agreement broke into a few different areas. One of them was to look for funding opportunities and another, expense reduction project. Looking for academic and administrative innovations and also COVID recovery were some of priorities that were identified through the multi-year funding agreement.

Approximately \$21 million assisted institutions with expense reduction projects, including administrative and staffing efficiencies; 20.5 million supported revenue-generating activities such as enrolment growth initiatives and development of programs or micro credentials; 10.5 went toward projects focused on recovery and transition from the COVID-19 pandemic; and 8 million supported academic and administrative innovations, collaborative efforts in the sector, and specific growth plan priorities.

And just as you look across, you know, the different initiatives, projects that were funded by institutions under those categories, at the University of Saskatchewan, for example, you would see a project related to the development of 15 micro credential programs. The Huskie athletic program was, I guess, in a lot of difficulty coming out of the pandemic so there was some funding to support them moving that forward.

A lot of the institutions looked at using funding to help with revenue generation and a major one there was international education. And so you will see institutions that helped to strengthen their international education capacity. Sask Poly, for example, increased their international enrolment capacity and support with a \$5.2 million investment that's helped to increase their international enrolment by over 1,300 between 2021, '22, '23.

So you know, as we move across the various institutions, we did require them to report against the funding that was provided and they've been successful in being able to use those targeted dollars provided in the first couple of years of the agreement, not just for projects and expenditures in those two years but in many cases they were initiatives that straddled the entire length of the agreement. In some cases those initiatives are still in progress.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I might just add one other thing. You'll know that the Premier signed a memorandum of understanding for the Global Institute for Energy, Mines and Society, which is a collaboration of all three institutions. And for that to be successful, it's going to require that collaboration. And we have a significant amount of faith in our institutions to follow through on that. So another example of how important collaboration is in the sector and many others too.

Ms. Bowes: — Thank you. Last year in estimates you had indicated, Minister, that you've been assured there would be no cuts to academic programs at the U of R. Yet ultimately the Lifelong Learning Centre in Regina was cancelled. While this was not technically an academic program, cancellation did significantly impact seniors who were very vocal on that cut. What is your response to that cut?

Mr. Wyatt: — With respect to the continuing education, some of the continuing education programs in Regina, my understanding was that they did discontinue some of the programming that was being offered. And at the time they signalled that it wasn't that they were eliminating those programs, but they did want to have an opportunity to review, to sort of do some evaluation and review. And my understanding is they've subsequently entered into, I believe, it's an MOU or some form of agreement with some of the community organizers, seniors, or senior organizations that have an interest in those programs and are in the process of beginning to reintroduce some of the programming that I think was of priority to those seniors organizations.

Ms. Bowes: — Do you know what percentage of the programming will be reintroduced?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We don't have that information. That would be a question better posed to the University of Regina.

Ms. Bowes: — Bouncing back to Sask Polytechnic, there

continue to be significant waiting lists for a number of programs at Sask Polytechnic.

[17:00]

Last year in estimates, Minister, you had committed to provide further information on these waiting lists; however no follow-up information was received. What information does the minister have about these waiting lists and the impact this budget will have on those waiting lists?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — When you requested that information last year . . . We don't have that at hand of course, and so we have to go to the institutions to get it. We have last year's information. We don't have this year's information. So we're happy to table the information that I undertook to table last year to you.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thank you.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — But I think it's fair to say that, you know, a lot of the programs that Sask Polytechnic has are significantly in demand and so there is a wait-list for a number of the programs that Sask Polytechnic delivers. It's really kind of one of the reasons why we're advancing the development of a new facility in Saskatoon, especially on the trades and technology side, initially at least, anyway, to help relieve some of that pressure.

A lot of the wait-list depends on availability of space, availability of instructors, and particularly space, whether there's clinical placements that are required afterwards and how many those are. So the wait-list isn't necessarily dependent on any one particular factor, but on a number of different factors, depending on which they are.

And so I think the fact that we've recognized the need — especially in the trades and technology initially — to address some of that with the development of the new campus is, I think, indicative of it. But there's many reasons why there are people on a wait-list, and not necessarily space and not necessarily trainers to do that work. Some of it depends on many other things. But certainly their programs are significantly in demand, which I think recognizes the fact that they're significantly in demand in the economy.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Yeah, I would appreciate that information if you can table it.

What is the current full-time equivalent count for the ministry, and how does that compare to last year?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — There's been no change in the full-time equivalents at the Ministry of Advanced Education since last year.

Ms. Bowes: — And how many in-scope versus out-of-scope employees are there in the ministry, and how does that compare to five years ago?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — The out-of-scope employees in the Ministry of Advanced Education in '19-20, in the '19-2020 budget year, was 47.1. Today it's 45.9. For the same, in 2019-20, the in-scope employees was 75.8 and today it's 67. The total number of employees decreased from 123 to 113 over that same

period of time.

Ms. Bowes: — Thanks. How many communications staff do you have in the ministry?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Six.

Ms. Bowes: — What were your total communications costs for '23-24?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — As of February 29th, it's \$119,628 for communication costs.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And for the minister's office, how many staff work in the minister's office?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Four. I have a chief of staff, a ministerial assistant, and two administrative assistants.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And has the number of staff in your office increased over the past five years?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — It's relatively consistent.

Ms. Bowes: — What are the salaries and operating costs for the minister's office?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Total salaries for '23-24 for the minister's office is \$337,000. Just give me half a second. Yeah, the budget for staff in my office is \$337,000.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And the operating costs?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — It's \$117,000.

Ms. Bowes: — Thank you. How many executive directors and ADMs [assistant deputy minister] do you have? And how does this compare with five years ago? I'm not sure, did you say two ADMs?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Three ADMs.

Ms. Bowes: — Three.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Two ADMs, I'm sorry.

Ms. Bowes: — And executive directors?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We have eight executive directors and two ADMs, and there's been no change in the last number of years.

Ms. Bowes: — Thanks. What turnover have you experienced amongst ADMs and DMs [deputy minister] over the past five years?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I'm not sure if this'll answer your question, but we have had some turnaround. Certainly executive directors and ADMs move and change within the public service, and there has been some turnover over the last number of years certainly.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Can you say the number of ADMs and DMs that have moved out in the past five years?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I don't have that information. We would be spending some time going through, coming up with names and things, so I don't have that information in front of me.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And of the ones you are aware of, were vacancies advertised and competitions held for new ADMs and DMs?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I don't have that information. That would be information, I think, that I would have to get from the Public Service Commission.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. I'm up with them tomorrow so perhaps I can inquire then. Were any political staff moved into the ministry over the past five years?

[17:15]

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We don't track that, but not to my knowledge has anybody moved into the ministry from . . . We don't track that, but my recollection and the recollection of my table colleagues is that hasn't happened yet.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And how many staff were terminated in each of the past five years?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — None to the best of our knowledge.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Ms. Chair, could I request a brief break to use the facilities?

The Chair: — Five-minute recess? We'll hold a five-minute recess.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

The Chair: — Minister, are you ready to resume?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Yes.

Ms. Bowes: — I note there has been a decline in funding for the ministry operational support within student supports, down from 2.2 million to 1.6 million. What accounts for the decline and what are the implications?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Saskatchewan grant for education savings, which was discontinued.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And can you let the committee know the reason for the discontinuation of that grant?

Mr. Boehm: — The program was originally introduced to help drive up participation rates of parents and others in the registered education savings program plan, a federal program, and the program achieved that goal of driving up participation rates. So you know, by about the fourth or fifth year it was decided that the program could be wound down because it had achieved its goal.

Ms. Bowes: — So are you and will you still be tracking participation rates?

Mr. Boehm: — We certainly can be tracking participation rates.

Essentially the reduction, though, would have been the funds that would have been going into the program, which will be allocated elsewhere, but also the funding that we were providing to the federal government to administer the Education Savings Grant on our behalf.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Moving on again, I think, you know, it's positive to see educational attainment increasing for the provincial population in general as well as with the Métis population. In your annual report, you do acknowledge that there is still improvement needed to match the attainment rate of the Indigenous population with the attainment rate of the overall provincial population. However, I note that First Nations rates have declined since 2020, unlike the non-Indigenous and Métis populations. Do you have an explanation for this decline?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We know that there was a reduction in First Nations participation as a result of COVID, and while those numbers are tending to increase, they haven't got to the point that we had pre-pandemic. We know that a lot of First Nations tended to stay away from post-secondary education, so that was really, I think, the driving force behind those, that tailing off.

There are a number of programs that are in the budget and continuing with the Ministry of Advanced Education to continue to enhance that. And as I mentioned in my opening remarks, there's \$19.7 million to support Indigenous student success in the budget because we recognize the importance of providing that programming through a number of different institutions for First Nations education.

I mentioned First Nations University, SIIT [Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies], Gabriel Dumont, the Dumont Technical Institute, Northlands, and Sask Polytechnic. So this is a focus for us, and in my conversations with leadership at a number of those institutions, continue to work on strategies to increase First Nations participation in post-secondary education in the hopes that those numbers will recover.

Ms. Bowes: — And so how did you arrive at that figure of 19.7 million? How do you feel that that will address the situation?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — That number is a roll-up of all the programs that we provide in there. Certainly more work to do in this area and that's one of the significant conversations that ministry staff and that I have with our leadership at those institutions. So again, a number of things that we're doing within the post-secondary sector to enhance that through our programming, but the conversations in terms of additional programming and additional support, they certainly continue.

And when we recognize that there's a program that would be advantageous to advancing post-secondary educational opportunities, those are things that we had conversations about and that I have conversations about with my . . . [inaudible] . . . colleagues in a way as we move forward to kind of building our budget. But that's a roll-up of all our programs.

Ms. Bowes: — And would you be able to go through the programs in detail just to let us know about all those individual programs included?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Sure. This is going to take a while, but I'll read them into the record. So in '24-25, the Ministry of Advanced Education targeted funding for two specific initiatives to support Indigenous student success.

Sask Polytechnic received \$581,000 for its Indigenous student success strategy. That's to address barriers to student completion. We've supported that program as a government since 2011-2012.

SIIT received 360,000 for its student support services model to assist and advance students from recruitment to employment. The government has provided that annual funding since '14-15 in response to the findings of the joint task force on improving education and employment outcomes for First Nations and Métis people.

FNU [First Nations University] is working with the ministry to expand Indigenous language teacher education programs in the province. And I mentioned a couple of those in my opening remarks.

In this academic year, we've committed to 50 per cent of the cost to deliver new cohorts at the Cree teacher education programs at Waterhen Lake and through the Dene teacher education program at Hatchet Lake.

[17:30]

In '24-25 we provided \$65,000 in partnership with FNU and the Clearwater Dene Nation and Northern Lights to deliver a second cohort of the Dene teacher education program. We're providing 50 per cent of the funding required over four years to support the program. DTEP [Dene teacher education program], as you may know, is a four-year Bachelor of Education program focused on Dene language instruction and First Nations ways of learning. We had 18 enrolled in the program as of September of '23.

In '24-25 Gabriel Dumont is receiving \$3.6 million for its Saskatchewan urban native teacher education program, SUNTEP. In '22-23 there was 219 students who were enrolled in that program in Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert and 41 graduated with a Bachelor of Education.

In again '24-25, First Nations University will receive that \$50,000 which I mentioned earlier is a commitment to establish three new scholarships for students studying Indigenous languages. In '24-25 Mitacs, which I also mentioned in my opening comments, will receive \$150,000 for the Indigenous pathways internship program to help leverage Indigenous innovation in the country. That can enable up to 15 Indigenous student internships that will assist Indigenous businesses and organizations to achieve their goals.

In February of this year First Nations University, Gabriel Dumont, and SIIT in partnership with the ministry hosted the Saskatchewan Indigenous Post-Secondary Education Forum at Wanuskewin Heritage Park, and that theme was a gathering together of First Nations leaders to collaborate on improving Indigenous post-secondary education. So those are some of the highlights.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thank you. I just wanted to jump back quickly to the student loan discussion. What is the government

forecasting for revenues from interest on student loans this year? And what are the projections going forward for revenue from student loan interest?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — The interest on student loans that's budgeted in this budget is \$20.4 million.

Ms. Bowes: — And do you have projections going forward for revenue from this interest?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — That's what's budgeted in this year's budget. So I wouldn't speculate on what the interest will be in next year's budget, depending on the amount of student loans, depending on a number of things.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, just moving on again. How many doctors are enrolled in the University of Saskatchewan's medical school at the present time in all levels of the program, including residents?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — There's 108 undergraduate medical seats and 140 postgraduate resident seats.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thank you. And how many of these doctors are Saskatchewan residents, charged the regular tuition rates? And how many of these doctors are international students and charged the international student rates?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We're not aware of any international students currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at the College of Medicine. To the best of our knowledge, we don't believe there is one.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And what is the annual tuition for a Saskatchewan resident attending the medical school at the U of S?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — The number is 20,246.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And what is the annual tuition for an international student attending the medical school at U of S?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Not aware of any international students currently attending. I'm not aware that there are any international students there, to the best of our knowledge.

Ms. Bowes: — Right. But are you aware of the tuition rates for international students at the medical school?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — At the medical school?

Ms. Bowes: — Like what the rate is.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We don't have that information. It would only be available to us based on enrolment of an international student at the college. That's not information that we have.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. For pharmacy, how many students are enrolled in the U of S's pharmacy school at the present time, in all levels of the program?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — You want that number, the College of Pharmacy and Nutrition for the university in all four years, the

total number? I know there's been an increase in the number over a couple of years, so we don't have that number, but we'll get that to you.

Ms. Bowes: — Do you have any numbers on the tuition rates for the school of pharmacy?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — It's 19,895.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, and for international students?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We don't have that number. It appears to be the same for international students.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thank you. Just moving on again here. Statistics Canada has recently released results of the national graduates survey for the class of 2020. The results for Saskatchewan are disappointing.

Saskatchewan has supposedly seen record employment growth and overall improvements to the quality of life for people in this province. If that were the case, then how is it that Saskatchewan is among the top three worst jurisdictions in Canada, showing the largest decline in median salaries for post-secondary graduates three years after graduation?

[17:45]

Mr. Veitch: — Thanks, Madam Chair. Lindell Veitch, executive director, strategy, planning, sector engagement. So the Ministry of Advanced Education every five years does its own graduate follow-up survey in partnership with the post-secondary sector. In our latest survey, which surveyed graduates in the year 2019 two years after they graduated, they made an average income of \$62,812. So very positive income. Combined with that, graduates in Saskatchewan also reported 80 per cent employment rates.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. So have you seen the results of the national graduates survey? And are you saying that you would differ with those results?

Mr. Veitch: — I can't comment on that survey. I just have the results of Saskatchewan's survey in front of me.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, well I would encourage the minister to review those survey results on that topic. The results from the national graduates survey show that student debt has not been increasing despite steady increases in tuition. Student debt has not risen due to students working while going to school and receiving non-repayable assistance, largely provided by the federal government, which is all good news.

Debt from student financial assistance has also been offset by other generous programs to lower interest costs, and the repayment assistance program to help student loan borrowers repay their loans if their income-to-student-debt ratio meets the eligibility parameters, which is also good news.

However the Canada-Saskatchewan integrated student loans program has seen increases in loan maximums that can help students in the short term but not in the long term when it comes time to repay those loans. In addition, the very generous doubling of Canada study grants that were introduced by the federal

government through the pandemic are now gone.

What has the Ministry of Advanced Education done to offset the loss of substantial federal grants to keep student debt levels from significantly rising, given what we know about graduate income?

Mr. Wosminity: — Thank you for the question. So it is a bit complicated, but the federal government had promised to increase their grants by 40 per cent prior to the pandemic. So they were going to go from on average \$3,000 per low-income learner to \$4,800. And then they doubled them during the pandemic. Then last year they rolled them back to what they originally were going to do and increased them to 4,800. And I heard today in the budget, that is remaining. They have also increased their student loan maximum weekly to \$300 per week, again a figure that hasn't changed in many, many years.

What we do in Saskatchewan in terms of grant funding . . . The federal grant is only for students in multi-year programs at or below the undergraduate degree level. We provide our grants — up to \$1,750 in low-income grants, Sask Advantage Scholarship — to all students, whether they're in a one-year program, a multi-year program, graduate, postgraduate program. So we just introduced a new grant for students with dependent children. So it's an extra \$950 per academic year per child, which should go a long ways in making education more affordable. And that extra money isn't repayable, so they don't have to repay it.

Ms. Bowes: — I'm glad you mentioned that. I was wondering, could you provide just a bit more, just a bit of an expansion on that new program? I understand there's exceptions, for instance, with students who have, I believe, children with a permanent disability. Is there anything further that you can share about . . .

Mr. Wosminity: — Yeah, if you have a dependent child 12 years of age or younger you can qualify for the grant as long as you're a low-income learner. And our data would suggest that virtually every student with a dependent child, particularly single parents, qualify for this grant. It would be about 4,200 students who will qualify for this grant in the upcoming year. And if you have a child that's between 12 and 18 and they have a permanent disability, then we would certainly include them in eligibility for the program.

Ms. Bowes: — And did you model this on any other jurisdiction or is it totally original to this province?

Mr. Wosminity: — This particular grant is somewhat original, yes. It was based on the fact that our data would suggest that the students with dependent children have high unmet need, meaning even though they get the maximum funding, they still, you know, they still need more money or likely need more assistance. So we had an opportunity to approach the minister and that's where this program came from.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thank you. I'm going to move on, just in my last few remaining minutes here, to a few different questions around lawsuits and litigation. Are there any lawsuits and litigation that's ongoing for the ministry, and if so what are they?

Mr. Wyatt: — There is no ongoing litigation with the ministry.

Ms. Bowes: — And I think probably the last topic I'll have time

for here, in terms of reconciliation, specifically what work has been done to implement related TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] Commission Calls to Action within this ministry? I should add to that, what plans are there in the current budget year?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We've provided a number of examples in terms of funding Indigenous language education: a further cohort for the Dene teacher education program in northern Saskatchewan. There's a number of things that we've done, including funding a number of scholarships at First Nations University for language education. So there's a number of things that we're doing to continue to advance. And I should say that this is a key initiative of our ministry.

We have a senior Indigenous advisor at the Ministry of Education that provides ongoing advice. I mentioned in an earlier answer around the symposium that we held with the leadership of First Nations institutions just a couple of weeks ago. So those are some significant examples. We continue to focus on this. We know how important it is, especially in terms of training First Nations youth, engaging them in the economy. So we understand that. That's why we focus on this with our First Nations institutions.

Ms. Bowes: — Thank you. And do you have any specific policies that would sort of indicate when the ministry would consult with the senior Indigenous advisor?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Our Indigenous advisor's embedded right in the deputy minister's office, so she participates in pretty much every conversation that happens around the deputy minister's table with respect to Indigenous education. So we are very, very thankful to have her in the ministry because, as I said, she's embedded in the deputy minister's office, which I think gives you a pretty good indication of how seriously we take this.

The Chair: — Just under two minutes remaining.

Ms. Bowes: — Sorry, I have four to. Are we concluding at six, Ms. Chair?

The Chair: — We can go to 6:05 because we had the break.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. Thank you for that. A few more questions then. The graduate retention program is the last of its kind in Canada. To my knowledge, provinces that have previously had a graduate retention program have done away with their programs. Since the changes to the graduation retention program in 2015 to a less generous, non-refundable tax credit, what is the utilization of the program by the type of tuition rebate to graduates remaining in the province and filing their income tax?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — Okay, I can get this right. For in-province graduates, the total since we've had our program in place — maybe we'll go over that — is 167,938 in the certificate programs, which resulted in a maximum rebate of \$1.633 billion. Out-of-province graduates, there was 31,165, which resulted in a maximum rebate of three hundred and thirty thousand nine hundred and ninety-two six hundred dollars, for a total of 199,103 certificates with a maximum rebate of \$1.964 billion.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay. And sorry, that last was for . . . The first you said was for certificate programs, and the last one that you

had mentioned . . .

Mr. Boehm: — So in terms of the breakdown by the types of programs, so 41 per cent are a four-year undergraduate degree, 40 per cent are a one-year certificate, 15 per cent are a two-year diploma, and 4 per cent are a three-year undergraduate degree.

Ms. Bowes: — Thank you. If the graduate retention program is to be a competitive advantage for Saskatchewan employers to attract and retain graduates, why has there been no expansion to the program, for instance including postgraduates, or an increase to the amount of the tuition rebate, particularly when Saskatchewan is competing for highly skilled workers such as health care professionals and journeypersons?

[18:00]

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — When we're analyzing these programs, we always look at them based on the priorities of the ministry. Obviously there's a lot of things that you'd like to do which you can't because of other priorities within the ministry. So that's principally the reason.

Mr. Boehm: — And when it comes to graduate programs, in all cases the student will also have an undergraduate degree. And should they be here in Saskatchewan or come from elsewhere to Saskatchewan, depending on when that undergraduate degree was completed, they could access the program in their undergraduate degree.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, thank you. I know we've discussed this in past estimates, but if the aim of this program is graduate retention, and we have some of the lowest, if not the lowest rates of graduate retention across the country, what is your ministry doing to evaluate the efficacy of this program in terms of graduate retention and not just dollars paid out?

Mr. Boehm: — So according to the graduate follow-up survey that the ministry does, and based on the graduates surveyed two years after 2019-20, 87 per cent stay in the province. And that would be a reflection of the impact of the program in terms of retaining those individuals in Saskatchewan.

Ms. Bowes: — Is this a survey that is conducted annually?

Mr. Boehm: — It's conducted every five years.

Ms. Bowes: — Okay, and so I understand that, you know, in at least one of the past questions this survey was referenced, but I mean, we see differing numbers coming from Stats Canada which I would argue is a much more objective source than a survey. So how do you explain the discrepancy between your survey results, for instance, and the numbers from StatsCan?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — We do work with all the post-secondary institutions to validate the results, so we have a significant degree of confidence in the numbers that have been provided.

I wanted to just answer one other question that you had asked earlier. You had asked about the College of Pharmacy and Nutrition. I just wanted to go through those because I had indicated I would give you these numbers. Here's the enrolment by year: in year one, there's 88 students; in year two, there's 88;

in year three, there's 87; and in year four, there's 83. So in answer to the question that you had posed a little bit earlier.

Ms. Bowes: — Thank you.

The Chair: — Having reached our agreed-upon time for consideration of Advanced Education, we will adjourn consideration of these estimates. Minister, do you have any closing comments?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: — I just want to thank you, Madam Chair, for the work here today, the members of the committee, Ms. Bowes for her respectful comments. I also wanted to thank Hansard for being here, and I specifically wanted to thank my officials from the Ministry of Advanced Education. I think I say this every time I'm here, but they make me look good every day and again they've made me look good again today, and my chief of staff who's here, who's been quite supportive. So thank you very, very much, committee, and really thank you to all our officials for being here today.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. Ms. Bowes, do you have any closing comments?

Ms. Bowes: — Thank you, Ms. Chair. Also I would say the same. Thanks to you, Minister. I appreciate the respectful dialogue and the fielding of many questions. And also to your officials, I recognize how much work goes into preparing for these estimates. Committees really appreciate your expertise and all the information that you make available to us in this process.

Also, shout-out to Hansard, and I appreciate the input tonight on the process. Thank you very much.

The Chair: — Thank you, ministers and officials, committee members, and thank you to Legislative Assembly staff. This committee stands recessed until 7 p.m.

[The committee recessed from 18:06 until 19:00.]

General Revenue Fund Social Services Vote 36

Subvote (SS01)

The Chair: — Good evening, everyone. We will now move on to the consideration of estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for vote 36, Social Services, central management and services, subvote (SS01).

Minister Makowsky is here with his officials. I would ask that the officials please state their names before speaking and please do not touch the microphones. The Hansard operator will turn on your microphone when you are speaking to the committee.

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

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Well thank you, Madam Chair. I won't single out all officials; they are almost exactly as they appeared last evening. So I will just make a few comments in terms of where we left off yesterday. From my memory at least, I believe

the committee wanted to go over the income assistance side of things. Officials have, I think, most of that information that was asked for.

I'd start by saying there are some good announcements I think in this budget. I talked about it briefly in my opening comments yesterday. Just quickly go over the income assistance side. I believe that's what the committee was looking for.

In terms of the SIS [Saskatchewan income support] and SAID [Saskatchewan assured income for disability] program, there's increases there for individuals and families who are on those, our two core income assistance caseloads. There is an increased earned income exemption available for singles.

And then those who have families and earn more than \$500 a month, that's the threshold where SAID . . . there would be clawbacks. I think it ties in fairly nicely with the employment incentive. And so we talked about that, a \$17 million increase to help with the costs of families and they're hopefully being able to find and sustain work.

And so on the income assistance, the two core programs, up by 3 per cent. Depending on your circumstance, where you live, whether you get the health basic benefit, the shelter benefit, it could be a different number for each individual. But the third year in a row we've been able to increase those rates.

Mobile outreach services, there's funding for 10 FTEs [full-time equivalent] to increase that good work where we have caseworkers on site in CBOs [community-based organization] throughout the province of Saskatchewan.

Expanded trusteeship money management support, in addition to direct pay — which just deals with basically the shelter benefit on our core income assistance programs — that's one option for people who are having their challenges meeting their obligations financially, for the most part. But trusteeship I think is a little bit better. It's more of an education thing, and it looks at the whole-of-income approach. Individuals may qualify for other areas of support, particularly from the federal government.

And so those are some of the things that we've been able to bring forward. I'd talk about the personal care home benefit that was an increase to help cover those costs for folks that need help in a private care community.

There's some smaller things on the SAID class of children receiving a higher annual benefit to cover the expenses for school supplies, and a new benefit introduced on the SIS side for identification. That's something that has been brought forward as a barrier or hurdle for individuals receiving income assistance. So we hope and, as we always do, work with our community-based organizations to work with clients, obviously, but this may be one little gap that hopefully we're able to help with. Again, something I've heard in my conversations with people in this area.

So I would turn it over to officials for the . . . I believe it was four or five areas that the member had asked information for at the end of yesterday's deliberations.

Mr. Exner: — Good evening, everyone. Thank you, Minister.

My name is Devon Exner. I'm assistant deputy minister, income assistance. The first question was in regards to the number of SIS and SAID households and beneficiaries that are currently on the programs. So to your question about households on SIS and SAID and the number of beneficiaries, as of February 2024 for SIS there were 19,083 households and 35,070 beneficiaries. For SAID, there were 18,165 households and 22,548 beneficiaries.

The next question was around dependency rate. The income assistance dependency rate is a long-standing metric that represents the proportion of the population age 0 to 64 that are eligible for Saskatchewan health coverage and not residing on a Saskatchewan First Nation and also receiving Saskatchewan income support, or SIS, benefits, or the Saskatchewan assured income for disability benefits known as SAID.

Last year we provided you with the dependency rates from 1990-91 all the way through to '22-23. We do not have the full year for '23-24 statistics just yet, but from April of 2023 to January of 2024, the dependency rate was 5.6. So with that I'll turn it over to ADM Eberhardt.

Ms. Eberhardt: — Good evening. Tobie Eberhardt, assistant deputy minister for child and family programs. I believe the next question was an update on our Linkin case management system for the year. So in 2024-25 our budget for Linkin is 2.846 million. And now I'll hand it back to Devon.

Mr. Exner: — So in response to the costs incurred for MiCase, in '23-24 maintenance costs for MiCase, including licensing, is projected to be 2.48 million, and the budget for '24-25 for maintenance including licensing for MiCase is \$3.508 million. With that, I'll turn it over to Deputy Minister Kratzig.

Ms. Kratzig: — Thank you. Kimberly Kratzig, deputy minister. You had asked a question about the number of people leaving the ministry over the past couple of years. In 2021-22 — and this includes retirements — 169 individuals, permanent full-time individuals left the ministry. In 2022-23, 160 individuals left the ministry, and I do not yet have complete data for '23-24. With that, I will turn it back to Mr. Exner to discuss the last two questions that you asked.

Mr. Exner: — This question was around IA [income assistance] cases and closures, so the total number of SIS files closed was 9,681 from April of 2023 to January of 2024 and 2,598 for SAID for the same time frame. We do not have information available for '20-21 and '22-23 as requested.

Cases can be closed for various reasons such as the person finding employment, becoming eligible for other sources of income, and other changes in their circumstances. The ministry does track why people leave core income assistance programs when clients inform the ministry of that reason, but clients do not always let the ministry know why they no longer require income assistance.

And the last question was around applications. I can specifically focus on SAID. So as there were different phases of SAID eligibility processes, there is not a simple response to how many applications have been received for the program. Ministry staff work very closely with all clients on a case-by-case basis to ensure that clients are accessing the program that best meets their

needs.

Individuals applying must meet income assistance eligibility requirements. Some examples of this would be, applicants must be at least 18 years of age and reside in Saskatchewan. Then there's a series of questions that applicants are asked around their financial eligibility. If an individual meets the basic and financial eligibility requirements, a medical form is completed to confirm they have an enduring disability, so that would be part of the SAID application.

The medical form must be completed by a medical professional and they must indicate that the disability is permanent. Once the completed medical — confirming the disability is permanent — is received by the ministry, the applicant is referred for an assessment of the impact of their disability using the disability impact assessment.

The disability impact assessment was developed in collaboration with the disability community. These assessments are conducted by contracted assessors through SaskAbilities. The SAID disability impact assessment tool assesses functional abilities, limitations, and supports required to perform daily living activities.

It's important to note that there are applicants who are not required to go through the medical form requirement or the disability impact assessment. These applicants include individuals that are eligible for the Canada Pension Plan disability, applicants who have been assessed as requiring a level 2 care and reside in a facility such as disability programs approved private service homes, mental health approved homes, and special-care homes. It also includes applicants who were previously assessed as being eligible for SAID.

A significant improvement was made to the SAID program in February 2023. The online application was extended to individuals and families applying to SAID. As many of you know, individuals could apply for SIS online dating back to July of 2019. Individuals can continue to phone or attend a local office to complete an application as well. With the launch of the online application option for SAID, individuals that need income support can now apply at any time from their home or with support from a community-based organization as well. The online system also gives new clients access to an online dashboard where they can easily upload their documents or update their personal information such as updating their address.

As the online application was made available to all applicants for income assistance in February of 2023, we do not have the data requested. But we can report that since this change up to and including February of 2024 approximately 21,000 initial applications have been received. Thank you.

The Chair: — Ms. Conway.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Chair. Couple of follow-up questions. Sorry if I wasn't clear. I'm hoping also for the global updated numbers on both Linkin and I'm not sure if that was provided on MiCase, but I didn't hear it if it was. Not just the budgeted amount but what has been spent total up to date.

And then, Mr. Exner, I'm sure I did get that dependency rate for

'22-23, but if you have it in front of you, could you provide it again because I couldn't find that.

And yeah, those are my only follow-up questions.

[19:15]

Ms. Kratzig: — In response to your question about the dependency rate for '22-23, it's 5.5 per cent.

Ms. Eberhardt: — The total cost of Linkin since development began in 2008, including the forecasted amounts for the '23-24 year, is 81.9 million.

Mr. Exner: — Regarding your question around MiCase expenditures, so the ministry has made significant progress in programs and services to ensure that they're simple, client friendly, transparent, and sustainable.

Income assistance. As you know, we launched the Saskatchewan income support program back in 2019 and supported clients to transition from the Saskatchewan assistance program and the transitional employment allowance. As part of that we developed the platform called MiCase which is the foundational platform or information technology system that would be leveraged and used for future income assistance improvements.

So as part of that, last year we did report that to implement the SIS program and transition the support of the Saskatchewan assistance program and transitional employment allowance clients, the cost for that was approximately \$24 million.

Since that time we have also established the education and training incentive, implemented online applications and self-service features for the Saskatchewan income for disability clients, as I had mentioned earlier, and launched the Saskatchewan employment incentive. All of those programs we leveraged what we had already built through the MiCase platform to support the Saskatchewan income support program, to ensure that we were utilizing best practices around one common system to serve and support our clients.

So with, you know, an emphasis on continuous improvement, we continue to work to ensure the clients are able to meet their basic needs. Obviously we're making many payments through that system. Financial requirements are being met and served.

So with that, as those improvements were all added including the 24 million, so that would be included in this overarching number, the total spend for MiCase is \$45 million.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Minister, I just want to put on the record. I went back and checked *Hansard* from last night. I was very clear about my asks including the global expenditures for Linkin and MiCase. I understand finding things sometimes takes time but we're now at 7:30. I'm a quarter of the way through my time tonight. And I only raise this . . . Of course you have discretion to answer the questions how you see fit as Madam Chair pointed out last night, but this is a very large budget; it encompasses a lot. I hear a lot from stakeholders. They rely on me to scrutinize this budget.

So I'm going to be very . . . I'm doing my best to ask concise

questions, and I would appreciate it if you could provide as concise answers as possible. And if I don't get through what I'd like to, at the end I'll just put some of it on the record, and you can decide whether or not you want to answer some of those questions at a future point. With that I'll move on.

Last year I asked about the average utility rates paid through SAID households because of course SIS clients are expected to cover their own utilities now out of their meagre rates, but SAID recipients still have their utilities paid directly by the Ministry of Social Services. At that time average power rates were \$126 give or take; heat was \$102 give or take; water was \$127 give or take. It's about \$350 and change.

I also asked whether the ministry expects SIS recipients to pay for their utilities out of their shelter amount or their living amount. And the answer I got was, you know, they can choose but the thinking is it comes out of their shelter benefit. The current shelter benefit for a single person is \$630. When you remove those average utilities, just based on last year that's \$355, how do you expect people on the SIS program to find a rental location on the private market for this amount of money?

And I want you to speak specifically to the case of single individuals on SIS. So I don't want you to introduce scenarios where people are getting the child tax benefit. I want you to speak specifically to single individuals because we know they are, especially single males, are at a higher risk of suffering from homelessness and have trouble accessing supports. Could you speak to how you expect individuals on the SIS program to survive, given your own ministry numbers around the cost of living and the cost of utilities?

[19:30]

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So just in terms of the question, for a single individual here in Saskatchewan — and of course the benefit would be slightly different depending where you're located — on the whole-of-income approach it'd be for a single in, I believe, Regina and Saskatoon, yes, \$1,128.

We talked about the income exemptions that have been part of this budget, but in previous. And I believe the design of the SIS program, it was to allow some income exemptions before there were any clawbacks. And so that was a change and has been increased this year.

In terms of just — sorry, I should have said this at the beginning — some general comments from me. I'd turn it over to Mr. Exner for any added areas he'd like to talk about. But since the SIS program became a program or online, I guess you could say, in the middle of 2019, I believe, there's been a 26 per cent increase to those rates. And I mentioned there has been in the last three years for sure, including this budget which was a 3 per cent increase.

And I think we heard just today, Madam Chair and committee members, that Saskatchewan has one of the lowest inflation rates in Canada at 1.5 per cent, I believe. It was previously 1.9, and I think it depends on maybe what jurisdiction within Saskatchewan. So I stand to be corrected on that. I know we have some of the lowest utility rates right across Canada.

And some of the members will know there's an independent institution, I guess you'd say, or a body that looks at this right across the country. It's the Maytree, and there's a Maytree report that comes out every year. And so the province of Saskatchewan fares fairly well in that area. Combine that with one of the most affordable places to live here in Regina, and that's again all those things combined, housing and tax rates and those sorts of things. So that's a general statement.

But in terms of keeping up with inflation, there has been some investments. Because of a strong economy, we're able to help some of our most vulnerable folks out there. Certainly understand that these programs are meant to fill individuals' basic needs. They are income of last resort. That's been sort of the situation for many years under many different governments, and believe somewhat the same sentiment right across the country.

I think I pointed out yesterday in terms of the Sask Housing that that's an option certainly as well, and that is most . . . a great majority of those units are rent geared to income. And again those rates, those rental rates haven't increased in the province in several years. So the ministry and the government certainly recognizes challenges out there — understand that — but looking at the total picture and over time, I think the government has stepped forward with some . . . Whether it's new programming or increases to those programs, that has taken place.

We have to keep in mind affordability and sustainability in the budgets as we go forward so these programs are protected over the long term and are able to meet individuals' needs as best we can, as best as individuals can. But I think that was the part I wanted to say. I could turn it over to Mr. Exner if I have missed anything. I probably did.

Mr. Exner: — Thank you, Minister. In addition to the benefit increases that the minister had walked through, there are additional benefits that are available to SIS clients. So there is \$150 stabilization benefit to support people that are hard to house.

As we mentioned earlier, there is the education and training incentive, so for those that may be interested in going back for basic education or skills training opportunities. Obviously we work very closely with our clients to develop case plans and support them to accomplish their goals and help to set those goals. So part of that is potentially a referral over to Immigration and Career Training. They provide labour market services to help people connect to the labour market, focus in on the clients' needs and supports to help them get a job.

Along with that, individuals do . . . we do have conversations with them. So there are room-and-board options that they may have at their disposal. If not, they can choose to share. And one of the things about the SIS program compared to some of the previous programs is when you choose to share accommodations, you still receive your complete, entire shelter benefit. It is not clawed back or cut in half if you're sharing with one person or maybe in three if you happen to be sharing with two others.

So those are all conversations that occur with clients. So another part of that is during our individualized planning meetings with clients, we do have a budget calculator where we walk through with clients about what their total needs are, what income sources

they have available to them, which would include income assistance benefits. It could also be federal incentives or other programs that are available to them. And then looking at their needs, so what are they spending their money on, then trying to work with them to support them to make better choices.

As the minister did state, we do have the ability to do direct payments, so that was brought in, in 2021. And we also have increased our trusteeship spaces.

So in all of those conversations, of course, we serve 18,000 different clients or households. So those are all very, you know, done on a case-by-case basis, and we look for every opportunity to support those clients to ensure that they are able to have stable housing which includes referrals over to social housing as well.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, I don't think I heard an update to the average utility amounts paid per month for power, energy, and water for SAID households. Do you have that number today for the '23-24 year?

If it's going to take you more than three minutes to find it, can you commit to providing it at a later point?

Mr. Exner: — What I have available is for '23-24. I just want to . . . Is that the number you were looking for?

Ms. Conway: — Yeah, the updated number. I think that . . . yes.

Mr. Exner: — In '23-24, April to January we paid an average cost of about \$132 per month for power. This is an increase of \$5 from '22-23. In '23-24 we paid an average cost of about \$90 per month for energy. This is a decline of \$13 from '22-23. In '23-24 we paid an average cost of about \$136 for water. This is an increase of \$8 from '22-23.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Mr. Exner. When the budget was first presented, the numbers that we were briefed on was that SIS recipients would get an extra \$30 a month, and that that represented \$7.4 million in the budget, and that SAID recipients would each get an extra \$55 per month, and that represented a number amount of \$6.3 million. I've crunched the numbers based on the beneficiaries that Mr. Exner provided and it falls well . . . The numbers allotted, the money allotted for that increase falls well short of what it would cost to give each beneficiary on those programs that increase. Can you speak to that?

In the case of the SIS program, if this money was just going to households, that number would hold water. If this is based on households though, even the SAID number doesn't add up. So I'm just wondering. It strikes me that those numbers fall short. So can you speak to that? And it was a bit confusing how I asked the question, so if you want me to repeat it if it wasn't clear, I can.

[19:45]

Mr. Exner: — I'll try to clarify that. So the numbers that you had quoted coming out of budget briefing, it's a 3 per cent increase. And of course, that occurs on a case-by-case basis. And that is applied to the adult basic benefit or the shelter benefit. On the SAID side, it is the living income benefit.

So the numbers that we have as part of our budget are up to \$90 per month for SIS clients and up to \$55 a month for SAID clients. Of course, SAID clients do receive actual payments for their utilities, so the actual cost. So that is taken into account.

The budget is not just simply 3 per cent more. There's a number of factors that go into determining the income assistance budget. So we do our best to forecast and predict how many families we're serving this year which are generally more expensive than singles, and what that may look like, and the trends around people coming onto income assistance and leaving income assistance. So it's not a straight kind of 3 per cent lift that you would see on the budget.

Clients will be receiving a 3 per cent increase on their shelter, ABB [adult basic benefit]. They will also be receiving on SIS the \$30 utility benefit if they're living in the North. And then on SAID, clients will be receiving a 3 per cent lift on their living income benefit.

Ms. Conway: — Do you have any documentation to show this breakdown? It's very confusing. Are you saying also that SAID recipients who have their utilities paid directly, the lift that they're getting may go to their utilities, which are over and above their basic amounts that they get monthly? Like I just don't understand. Is there any documentation or clarification that you can table at this time?

Minister, it was very much framed to the media and in here as 55 or \$50 a month additional, and I thought \$30 a month additional for SIS. I'm hearing now that that's not clear, that that's not the case. Do you have any projections about what that 3 per cent increase will look like? Anything at all, any meat on the bone, because these number just simply aren't adding up in my mind.

[20:00]

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Thanks, Chair. So I'll start off — I think I somewhat understand the question from the member — and pass it on to Mr. Exner.

So I wasn't at your briefing or what you got from it or what you thought or whatever, but again, I think as Mr. Exner had pointed out right from the Social Services . . . the draft of the budget, monthly income assistance benefits will rise by 3 per cent for SIS and SAID clients. And that means the adult basic benefit and child's benefit will each increase by 3 per cent representing an increase of up to \$60 per household per month.

In addition to that, there's a small amount of people, particularly in northern Saskatchewan, that receive the alternate heating benefit. For those households that use alternative heat source such as wood, electricity, or propane, that will increase \$30 per month.

On the SAID side of things, it will increase by 3 per cent, representing an increase of up to \$55 per household per month starting in '24.

So that was what is the information that was released to the public, I guess shortly after the budget. And so that was publicly available at some point from Social Services and of course the Ministry of Finance . . .

Ms. Conway: — Minister?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Through the budget process. Mr. Exner, is there, just in terms of the projections and the . . . how the global numbers came?

Mr. Exner: — Yes. As the minister identified, the 3 per cent, again, that is calculated on a case-by-case basis. So with SAID, there is a living income benefit. So 3 per cent will be applied to the overarching benefit. All of the rates will be posted on the website. The rate increase is going into effect May 1st and clients will be notified of their benefit increases in SIS and SAID, and it will accommodate the rates that the minister provided. And we do believe that it does balance to the budget numbers that have been projected to support not only the rate increases but the evolution of the caseload and the demographics of the people that we serve over the course of the coming year.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. So presumably the 7.4 million for the SIS program and the 6.3 million for the SAID program were not taken out of thin air. That's what I'm getting at. What are the projections? How did you arrive at that amount? Can you provide any meat on the bone for me here tonight? How did you get there? Just break it down for me. That's all I'm asking.

Mr. Exner: — Thank you. I don't have the information with us kind of at that level. So every year, you know, at the start of the fiscal year we're starting to think about the next fiscal year. We are looking at caseload trends, the number of people that are on income assistance, family size, utilization of the different benefits that are available to those individuals and what has occurred over the past few years. So it is really based on, you know . . . The calculation is based on the trends that we're seeing with the projected number of people that we expect to serve over the course of the coming year.

That number is refined as we continue to work through the budgetary cycle as we prepare that information. And so with that, the information that we've provided in the news release and all of our budget materials and public announcements, the budget does align with the increases that are being stated.

Ms. Conway: — How do you know if they align if you can't provide a breakdown? I don't understand that. Number of beneficiaries? Who you expect to get what? Like it does sound like . . . These are numbers you've put in your budget speech. I'm just asking you to break them down. There's literally . . . You can't provide me anything? Is that what you're saying?

Minister, just to clarify, these are your numbers, not mine. So can you provide a breakdown of who you expect will get what? How many people on such-and-such program are expected to get X amount? How you arrived at these numbers which you put in your budget speech, which you put in your budget? I'm just asking you to defend these numbers in a basic way.

Mr. Exner: — I'll try to add some additional detail to answer your question. It may not be quite as specific as you're looking for, but it'll give you a general sense around the increases.

So in May 2024, SAID clients will receive a 3 per cent increase to their monthly benefits. So that's over 18,000 households. The living income benefit currently ranges from \$961 to \$1,789

depending on family size and location of the client, and it will range from \$991 to \$1,844 after the increase. This benefit increase will apply to approximately 12,500 households.

[20:15]

The modified living benefit for a one-adult household will increase from \$835 to \$865 and for two-adult households will increase from \$1,340 to \$1,385. The benefit increase will apply to approximately 1,300 SAID households.

The personal living benefit will increase from \$295 a month to 305. The benefit increase will apply to approximately 4,500 SAID households.

The special income benefit will increase from \$405 to \$420. The benefit increase will apply to less than 100 SAID households.

On SIS, everyone on SIS will be receiving a 3 per cent increase to their adult basic benefits. The increases to the ABB are from 345 to 355 per month for clients living outside of the northern administrative district and from 410 to 425 per month for clients living in the northern administrative district.

SIS shelter benefits will increase by 3 per cent as well. The benefit is provided to SIS clients that will pay for shelter costs, which is about 82 per cent of our SIS households. The increased shelter rates per month will be in Regina or Saskatoon for single individuals, \$650; the remainder of the province, \$590. In Regina or Saskatoon, couples without children, \$830; the remainder of the province, \$720. In Regina or Saskatoon, families with one to two children, \$1,065; the remainder of the province, \$820. In Regina or Saskatoon, families with three or more children will be \$1,245, and the remainder of the province \$925.

As mentioned earlier, the alternative heating benefit is also available to SIS clients to pay for a home heating source other than natural gas such as wood, electricity, or propane. The rate will increase from 160 to \$190 per month, which will benefit more than 700 SIS households, primarily those in northern and rural areas.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. That is some of the information I was looking for. Did take about 30 minutes to get there though.

Minister, I have some questions about CLSD [community living service delivery]. But before I ask those questions, what I hear a lot from people on the SIS and SAID program is how does the ministry arrive at the rates that they arrive at? Can you explain to me in three to five sentences how do you arrive at those benefits? How do you get there?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So I think the ministry looks at several things that I'll outline here. Some of the things I've already talked about, as a matter of fact. So you look at things like the Maytree report and where we may rank with other jurisdictions. Maybe other jurisdictions are doing something else you can look at. You can look at the general inflation rate within your province, the CPI [consumer price index] that includes those rental costs, utility costs, those sorts of things, the whole of income.

Again, it's not just the provincial side of things, but there's other

areas where there may be different measures from different areas. So those things are considered. And as a result again of a strong economy here in Saskatchewan, over the last several years we've been able to increase, as I said before, SIS rates by 26 per cent ahead of that CPI measure. Since SIS came along, the increase, including this year, has been \$237 on top of what was in place for the average person on SAP [Saskatchewan assistance program] and TEA [transitional employment allowance], the older program.

On the SAID side, 63 per cent increase since that program came online. And again it was this government that separated out those with disabilities with those on the other income assistance program. And the CPI has gone up by 40 per cent, so 63 per cent on the increase on the SAID side, and then the CPI is 40 per cent. And again, I think, just in a general sense, that's what the ministry looks at, but then how each ministry's budget fits within the entire overall budget across government. And I think I've said before, you know, it has to be sustainable going into the future. So have to find that balance with that side of things but also how it fits in with greater government expenditures.

So you have to be careful and I think . . . I don't know if you're keeping track, Madam Chair, but I attempted to do that in just one sentence, so look for you to, for a ruling on that if required.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, just before you hand it over to your official, that 26 per cent number, would you commit right now to tabling a justification for that 26 per cent number? You claim that the SIS rates have increased by 26 per cent. Can you commit today to providing me a breakdown and some proof for that number at a later time, not tonight?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I can read you the information. The SIS program came online in July of 2019 and the average cost per case of the old program was \$909, and so 237 on top of that should equal out to 26 per cent.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry, that's for, like a single individual started out at . . . Sorry, that's the average?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Just the average cost of a SIS case overall.

Ms. Conway: — Cost, like benefits?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Not broken down by individual or family.

Ms. Conway: — Okay. Is there anything that Mr. Exner wanted to add before I move on? No? Okay.

I guess, Minister, do you — sorry, I did have one more question — do you acknowledge that the SIS program is driving homelessness in Saskatchewan, is contributing to it?

[20:30]

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — So I think, Madam Chair, the question was, does SIS cause homelessness. I would say that that's a massive oversimplification of things. I would say no.

We understand that there are very complex situation and cases

out there. I think some of the major drivers of homelessness is addictions and mental health that can't simply be solved by an income assistance program for sure. You know, if that was the case, I would say the homelessness situation would be exclusive to Saskatchewan, and I think anybody who watches any sort of news, or has any sort of connection to outside this province knows that is obviously not close to the case.

So I've certainly heard from individuals that, in talking to folks concerned about the direct deposit, how that may have changed the situation. I know there was challenges prior to the SIS program here in Saskatchewan as well. It wasn't certainly an overnight thing, that homelessness just started right after the SIS program.

So direct deposit is available; I've said that I think earlier in the estimates here. But also in this budget we've increased trusteeship. The ministry has increased trusteeship in the last budget as well as this budget.

So I could go on and on and talk about all the programs. I've already spent time on those, on those things, the employment incentive. There are many homeless initiatives that we worked on, a provincial approach to homelessness. And we've talked about the shelter system and trying to get individuals back on a good path. So we continue to work with CBO partners on these many challenges, again not unique to Saskatchewan.

So to say it's just one program, and if we just change that things would change overnight, I think that is wildly speculative and quite simplistic. To that, acknowledging certainly there's more to do, I'm always listening. I think the ministry is always listening, and that has resulted in some of the investments we've been able to do in this budget, ID [identification] for example. We talked about that.

So can always do better. We'll continue to work with our partners, but that statement that the member brought forward I think is quite overly simplistic with the challenges that we're facing.

Ms. Conway: — Thanks, Minister. So I didn't say one program causes it or that taking away SIS would change homelessness overnight. I didn't even say that SIS causes homelessness. I said, "contributes." Like referring to the words I used, that SIS contributes to homelessness, would that change your answer?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Well no, I don't think so. I think it's a complex situation and a situation of homelessness not unique to Saskatchewan. But we're trying every day to help individuals get the help they need through a variety of supports out there.

So again, one program in one province I don't think is the total answer. You know, I would say the income assistance that we're able to provide in Saskatchewan certainly helps the situation. Obviously if there was no such programs anywhere, if there was no investments that we've been able to make because of a strong economy, I would say things would be much, much worse if we didn't have CBOs willing to take on some of these challenges.

So you know, I think I'd like to correct myself. I think I said, "direct deposit"; I meant, "direct pay." And so I apologize for that. I got the two mixed up. So I think I'm done with my answer.

Ms. Conway: — Thanks, Minister. I'm going to move to the CLSD area. We have 25 minutes left. And one of the things that as critic in this area I've been hearing . . . Actually I had a massive increase in people reaching out to our office around this area. So I think what I'm going to do is list some questions into the record, and I'm wondering if you would commit, after hearing these questions, to either telling me that you don't track that particular information or commit to providing these numbers tonight or at a later point. Is that agreeable?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — We'll see what the questions are and if we can answer them. Yes.

Ms. Conway: — Estimated number of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Saskatchewan; two, the number of individuals with IDD [intellectual and developmental disability], just an abbreviation there, supported in group homes in Saskatchewan; the average wait times for group home placements; the number of individuals on the CLSD group home wait-list; the number of group homes with vacancies; and the number of individuals that are supported through the self-directed funding model.

These are a little bit more specific. I'm wondering if you track the rates of ER [emergency room] visits for individuals with IDD supported by group homes in Saskatchewan. I'm wondering if you track the rates of hospitalizations for individuals with IDD supported by group homes in Saskatchewan. I'm wondering if you track the rates of 30-day repeat hospitalizations for individuals with IDD supported by group homes in Saskatchewan. I'm wondering if you track the rates of ALC [alternative level of care] designation for individuals with IDD supported by group homes in Saskatchewan.

We can start there or I can keep going. I have about eight other items that I've been asked to ask about.

Staff turnover rates for group homes in Saskatchewan, do you track that? Mortality rates of individuals with IDD after transitioning to group homes. Medication errors in group homes in Saskatchewan, do you track that? Protocols around medication errors, do you track that?

Protocols for handling accusations of abuse or neglect. Standard requirements and health policies for group homes in Saskatchewan. Health data comparing group homes that have nurses involved and those that don't, do you compare that at all? And finally, do you track discharges from agencies and the rationale for those discharges?

Minister, ideally what I'd get on this is either like a commitment to provide this at a later time or just an indication that you don't track it, if you don't track it.

Mr. Kilbride: — Joel Kilbride, assistant deputy minister of disability programs. I don't think I caught everything that you asked for. There was quite a few there, but just a few things that we do have.

You asked about the number of people in group homes. Currently we have 1,318 people in group homes. Group homes with nursing staff, we have six group homes that have nursing staff, and then two additional group homes with mental health nurses, and then

one day program. And then the number of people on self-directed funding is 50.

Other things that we do track but we don't have with us here today are mortality rates, medication errors, and hospitalizations. And then there are several other things that you asked for that we actually just don't track, or we didn't capture.

So some of the things that you asked for that we wrote down that we know that we don't track include rates of ER visits, is that 30-day repeat hospitalization stays, ALC patients, and discharges from agencies, as well as staff turnover in community-based organizations.

Ms. Conway: — You mentioned the facilities with nurses. Do you have any comparative data between outcomes for homes that have nursing staff and those that don't? If you're going to go away again, can you provide the number on the wait-list and then can you just commit — because we have nine minutes left — any outstanding items that you didn't catch? Can you commit, Minister, to following up with me and just seeing if those items aren't tracked, but if you do have that data, to provide it at a later point?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I don't think folks . . . not completely sure we got the entire list. You ran those off pretty quickly, so the ones that Mr. Kilbride talked about and your number that you want, could you repeat the ones that weren't addressed by Mr. Kilbride.

Ms. Conway: — I'm just saying, like it'll be on *Hansard*, so we can do that at a later point because we have nine minutes left if you're okay with it. I don't know if you have the number on the wait-list, though. That would be nice to just hear if you have it.

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — We'll see if we got it.

Mr. Kilbride: — I just wanted to give you a bit of context about our services. So disability programs has 290 group homes currently, and across the system outside of even our group home services we are serving over 6,300 clients. We've added 174 group homes for CLSD since 2007.

And so what the ministry does is we plan for services to meet the needs of our clients and we work to serve those clients with the most urgent needs with the resources that we have available. And so we're always evaluating the needs of our clients to identify who's the highest priority for service and who might be at risk without a service. So all of our clients have some level of support and we ensure that our clients are safely supported.

So some individuals might be looking for a group home placement, and if that's not available say in the community of their choice, we might provide something else for them in terms of service. So that could be a day program, respite services. We also offer flexible funding and self-directed funding, so there's other options while people are waiting for service.

And so we actively prioritize the needs of individuals to ensure that those that are most needing service receive it first, and first consideration when prioritizing service is really the urgency of need. But other factors have to be considered as well, such as availability and appropriateness of existing services, suitability

with others in the home, services under development, environmental fit, level of risk, valued outcomes for the individual, and geographical location, and of course level of support needed.

So again, our clients are supported and we'll continue to work with individuals and their families to develop services as needed based on the greatest priority.

Ms. Conway: — I didn't hear a number for that wait-list, or as I believe the CLSD calls it, the emerging wait-list. But for a lot of these folks these aren't emerging needs. These are needs they have today, families and individuals languishing today. How many people have gone through a CLSD application, have been referred to an agency, and are on a wait-list?

[21:00]

Mr. Kilbride: — Yeah, so we actually don't have the number for you. The ministry doesn't track in that way centrally. A number of people do apply to community-based organizations, sort of several group homes or day programs, and they get on lists. And so they might be on various lists at the same time waiting for service but the ministry isn't tracking that centrally.

Ms. Conway: — Can you provide anything you do track in this area? If it doesn't track in that way, is there something you do track and can you undertake to provide it?

The Chair: — We have reached the agreed-upon time. Do you wish to answer, Minister?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — I think since the time situation, I think I will suggest that the ministry look back at *Hansard* to see what is available and what can be provided, and we'll go from there as to what information CLSD has based on the various and multiple questions from the committee.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. Having reached our agreed-upon time for consideration of Social Services, we will adjourn consideration of these estimates. Minister, do you have any closing comments?

Hon. Mr. Makowsky: — Well again I echo what I said last night, I believe it was. Thank you so much for the officials, the hard work they do to prepare for this, but prepare every day. They do a lot of work, a lot of work and work with complex and multiple people across our province and try and make things a little bit better. I think this budget supported that work by our wonderful public service, and we thank them. I thank them and the CBOs we work with closely each and every day. And thanks to the committee for your questions and attention. Thank you.

The Chair: — Ms. Conway, do you have any closing comments?

Ms. Conway: — Yes, Chair. Just by way of closing comment, this is a \$1.5 billion budget. It's an important budget. There's a lot at stake. I feel like some of the considerable delays around answers hampered my ability to scrutinize it as much as I would have like to, but of course this doesn't take away from the hard work that officials did in preparing for estimates.

I will be following up with the minister by way of letter to cover

off some of the areas that I wasn't able to touch on. And there's just six I'd like to put into the record with your allowance. That's questions around concerns around the accessibility advisory committee; the CBO sector; the human resources strategy to bring caring professionals on to a level playing field; child care subsidy, multi-year funding; lease issues with SHC [Saskatchewan Housing Corporation] properties used by CLSD; as well as what I've heard — this is something I will follow up with the minister on — a rumour that group homes are no longer going to have that four-person cap, but may now expand to five to seven people.

I had questions about these areas as well as many others, but these are perhaps some of the more important and I'll be following up with the minister by way of letter. I do hope that he will provide as fulsome answers as possible on these items given that this is a large chunk of money and what is at stake for the people of Saskatchewan here. Thank you.

The Chair: — I too would like to thank the minister and all the officials for all your hard work, the Legislative Assembly staff who are here with us this evening, and the committee members who were here tonight. Thank you and have a good evening.

That concludes our business for today. I would ask a member to move we adjourn the committee. Mr. Friesen has moved. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — This committee stands adjourned until Tuesday, April 23rd, 2024 at 3:30 p.m.

[The committee adjourned at 21:05.]